

Baptists celebrate past with an eye to the future

January 9, 2009

In 400 years, the Baptist movement has grown to 200,000 churches with more than 50 million members in countries around the world.

But even though Baptists globally continue to show statistical growth, the largest Baptist group in the United States—the Southern Baptist Convention—has reported declining membership, following a trend other U.S. denominations began reporting two decades earlier.

“Some have said this is the first membership decline ever. That is not true,” said Southern Baptist statistician Ed Stetzer of LifeWay Research. “However, I believe this time is different. I believe that, unless we have a significant intervention, we have peaked, at least in regards to membership.”

Citing percentages of growth since 1950, Stetzer observed: “Our year-to-year growth has been in a constant trended decline, not for one year, but for decades. This is ... a 50-year trend.”

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Researchers cite several cultural and religious factors that play into the decline. Philip Jenkins asserted in *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* that the Immigration Reform Act of 1965 was a major event overlooked by most researchers.

“As recently as 1970, Asian and Hispanic Americans accounted for only 8 percent of total births in the United States, but today, that figure has increased to more than 25 percent,” Jenkins wrote.

“One reason for this transformation is that Latinos are generally much younger than longer-established populations. The national census of 2000 showed that the median age for Hispanics was about 26, younger than that of any other ethnic group, and far lower than the median age for Anglo-whites, which stood at a venerable 38.5. By mid-century, 100 million Americans will claim Mexican origin.”

Slow to respond

Rather than seize the demographic change as a missions opportunity, as a whole, Anglo Baptists have been slow to respond, some observers say.

To add further to the decline, while Baptists were not reaching the growth groups in the United States, their own birthrates were falling.

Baptist researcher Curt Watke, executive director of the Intercultural Institute for Contextual Ministry, points to the aging of the Baptist population and the related decline in Anglo birthrate as cultural factors affecting growth in white Baptist churches.

Another factor, discussed widely among bloggers, suggests Baptists under 40 are disengaging themselves from denominational life and finding other affiliations more fulfilling.

Last year, former SBC President Frank Page received much notice and

some criticism for saying, “If we don’t start paying attention to the realities ... by the year 2030, we will be proud to have 20,000 rather than 44,000 Southern Baptist churches.”

Current evidence suggests decline will be long-term without spiritual intervention. Programmatic approaches have failed. According to a recent report in USA Today, the Southern Baptist North American Mission Board spent \$343,700 on a strategy called ‘What Now’ before pulling the plug.

“Another campaign, called ‘Who Cares,’ also fizzled,” the newspaper reported. NAMB leaders hope their new evangelism effort, God’s Plan for Sharing, or GPS, fares better.

A bright global future

But while future growth among Baptists in the United States is questionable, globally the future looks bright.

According to Baptist World Alliance figures, with Southern Baptist Convention statistics added for the United States, Baptists around the world have grown in number by 49 percent from 1990 to 2008. Baptists in Africa led all others in growth, increasing by 327 percent in that period.

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His assertions are being validated by Baptist growth in developing nations, particularly in Africa.

According to Jenkins, the Christianity of the future will incorporate some of the customs and practices of the regional population but will be biblically conservative, taking literally much that Westerners ignore.

“The denominations that are triumphing all across the global South are stalwartly traditional or even reactionary by the standards of the

economically advanced nations. The churches that have made most dramatic progress in the global South have either been Roman Catholic, of a traditional and fideistic kind, or radical Protestant sects, evangelical or Pentecostal,” Jenkins said.

“These newer churches preach deep personal faith and communal orthodoxy, mysticism and Puritanism, all founded on clear scriptural authority. They preach messages that, to a Westerner, appear simplistically charismatic, visionary and apocalyptic.

“In this thought-world, prophecy is an everyday reality, while faith-healing, exorcism and dream-visions are all basic components of religious sensibility. For better or worse, the dominant churches of the future could have much in common with those of medieval or early modern European times. On present evidence, a Southernized Christian future should be distinctly conservative.”

Looking to the future

As Baptists plan their 400th anniversary celebrations, Bob Dale, author and recently retired associate executive director of the Baptist General Association of Virginia, suggests they think ahead to the kind of celebration they want to have a generation from now.

Casting an eye to the future, Dale asks:

- *Will Baptists learn to become true partners of indigenous leaders—globally and in the United States? Will they develop humility enough to learn from Third World churches?*
- *Can Baptists change their win-lose Western mindset to a more Eastern challenge-response cooperative mindset?*
- *Will Baptists in the West move beyond culture prejudices and see*

Baptist cousins in developing nations as equals?

- *Will Baptists learn to read the Bible from its original Eastern roots rather than through the prisms of Western assumptions?*
- *Will Baptists learn to relate to world religions in a global world?*
- *Will state conventions and associations become less absorbed with regional issues and more focused on world-change, looking for the global dimensions of local concerns?*
- *How soon will Baptists in the United States consider it shortsighted and foolish to speak only one language and be familiar with only one culture?*
- *Can Baptist find ways to minister from the bigger cultural middle and let go of those on the narrower fringes who persist in fighting?*
- *What if Baptists in the United States continue to focus on their needs and persist in the attitude: "As for me and my house, we will serve me and my house?"*