

Church membership trends unchanged

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NEW YORK (ABP) — Pentecostals, Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses gained ground, mainline churches continued to decline and growth in the largest two denominations — Roman Catholics and Southern Baptists — remained stagnant, according to new statistics compiled by the National Council of Churches.

The *2011 Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches* contains few surprises, with growing churches continuing to grow and churches that have been declining continuing to lose members, [said](#) Eileen Linder, editor of the annual report card ranking growth in the largest 25 religious bodies.

"The direction of membership remains very stable," Linder wrote. "That is, churches which have been increasing in membership in recent years continue to grow and likewise, those churches which have been declining in recent years continue to decline."

The 79th annual edition of the *Yearbook* noted that rates of both growth and decline have slowed in recent years.

The Catholic Church, the nation's largest denomination with 68 million members, grew by about one half of 1 percent, while the Southern Baptist Convention, the second-largest, declined by .4 percent, to 16.1 million members.

This is the third straight year the *Yearbook* has noted a loss in membership for Southern Baptists, which until recently reported decades of uninterrupted growth.

Membership figures reported in the 2011 *Yearbook* were collected by churches in 2009 and reported to the NCC in 2010. The SBC's membership totals are compiled by LifeWay Christian Resources. Churches report vital statistics through Baptist state conventions that are compiled by the denomination's publishing house. Reports for 2010 are being compiled. Typically they come out in April.

Not all faith groups are as intentional about numbers. Historically African-American groups like the 5 million-member National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Inc.; 3.5 million-member National Baptist Convention of America, Inc.; and 2.5 million-member National Missionary Baptist Convention of America, estimate membership instead of doing actual head counts. Each of those groups reported no change this year.

The Progressive National Baptist Convention, by contrast, declined from 2.5 million to just over 1 million members, due to a new methodology in counting membership. Last year the PNBC was tied for the 11th largest denomination. In the new ranking it is No. 25.

American Baptist Churches USA, one of a number of mainline churches that has been losing members for a number of years, declined 1.5 percent to 1.3 million members.

Southern Baptists count only professed and baptized believers as members, compared to groups like Catholics who number communicants from infancy. About one-third of Southern Baptists included in the count of total membership are "non-resident" members, who joined a local Baptist church but moved away and never transferred their membership. Southern Baptists don't count inactive members, people who belong to a church but never attend, but about a third of the total membership is in church on a given Sunday.

Not all charismatic/Pentecostal groups are equally faithful in reporting new

data, but from those that do it appears that such groups continue to advance. The Assemblies of God, for example, increased a half-percent to more than 2.9 million members.

The *Yearbook* does not count non-denominational churches, which reportedly are the second-largest group of Protestant churches in America and the fastest growing.

-Bob Allen is senior writer for Associated Baptist Press.