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Southern Baptist membership, baptisms decline in 2007

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The Associated Press
Friday, April 25, 2008; 5:28 AM

NASHVILLE, Tenn. -- The number of people baptized in Southern Baptist churches fell for the third straight year in 2007 to the denomination's lowest level since 1987, and membership dipped slightly as well.

The president of the Southern Baptist Convention blamed the decline in part on a perception that its followers are "mean-spirited, hurtful and angry."

Baptisms last year dropped nearly 5.5 percent to 345,941, compared with 364,826 in 2006, according to an annual report released Wednesday by LifeWay Christian Resources, the convention's publishing arm.

Total membership was 16,266,920 last year, down nearly 40,000 from 2006.

The dropping number of followers in the nation's largest Protestant denomination reflects a trend in other mainline Protestant churches, while non-denominational churches are gaining and the ranks of the unaffiliated are growing.

But for a denomination that places winning converts at the heart of its mission, the continued slide is troubling and disappointing, said the Rev. Frank Page, the convention's president.

Part of the blame can be placed on a notion that Baptists have been known too much in recent years for "what we're against" than "what we're for," Page said.

"Our culture is increasingly antagonistic and sometimes adverse to a conversation about a faith in Christ," he said. "Sometimes that's our fault because we have not always presented a winsome Christian life that would engender trust and a desire on the part of many people to engage in a conversation on the Gospel.

"All Southern Baptists should recommit to a life of loving people and ministering to people without strings attached so people will be more open to hearing the Gospel message."

The Nashville-based Southern Baptist Convention adheres strictly to conservative beliefs, including the inerrancy of the Bible. The denomination is second in size in the United States only to the Roman Catholic Church.

In the past 50 years, the number of annual baptisms per church member _ a key indicator of church growth _ has dropped sharply. Southern Baptists baptized one person for every 19 church members in 1950, a ratio that dropped to 1 baptism for every 47 church members in 2007, according to the report.

Baptism is a public act administered by a church in which followers are immersed in water, symbolizing believers' identification with Jesus.

To counter the decline in baptisms, former SBC president Bobby Welch led an ambitious effort to baptize 1 million people in the year beginning Oct. 30, 2005. Church records show there were 371,850 baptisms in all of 2005.

The denomination's baptisms peaked in 1972 at 445,725, based on statistics Lifeway has collected from Southern Baptist churches since 1922.

While baptisms and membership were down in 2007, the number of Southern Baptist churches grew by 1.1 percent to 44,696 and worship attendance increased slightly to 6.15 million, according to the report.

David Key, director of Baptist studies at Emory University's Candler School of Theology, attributes the declining numbers on Baptist parents having fewer children than in years past. He also believes Baptist leaders haven't been aggressive enough in attracting nonwhite members.

"It's not just about parents not having enough children, but we also haven't adjusted our youth programs to target multicultural youth," he said. "It's still a very white Southern experience as opposed to incorporating African-Americans, Hispanics and Asians."

On the Net:

Southern Baptist Convention: <http://www.sbc.net>

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