

Annual Church Profile gauges health of denomination

BRENTWOOD, Tenn. (Special and local reports) – An analysis of the latest Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) Annual Church Profile (ACP) by Lifeway Research shows the convention is made up of mostly smaller churches dotting the southern United States.



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“The trends revealed in this analysis confirm that Southern Baptists must prioritize church planting in our effort to reach people for Christ,” said Kevin Ezell, president of Southern Baptists’ North American Mission Board in Alpharetta, Ga.

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Scott McConnell, executive director of Lifeway Research, noted that the SBC – the largest Protestant denomination in the U.S. – is growing in the least Protestant region. “While it’s easiest to achieve high percentage growth in areas with fewer Southern Baptists to begin with, the growth is a sharp contrast to numerical declines throughout much of the country,” he said.

Putting the ‘Southern’ in Southern Baptist

The ACP reflects that SBC churches are overwhelmingly in the South (78%). Far fewer of the total SBC church count are in the Midwest (10%), West (nine percent), Northeast (three percent) or U.S. territories (less than one percent).

Forty-five percent of SBC churches are in suburban areas with a population of at least 2,500 but less than 50,000. The remaining percentages are split between urban areas (28%) with at least 50,000 in population and rural places with less than 2,500 (27%).

Churches in the Northeast and West are more likely than those in the other regions to be in urban areas, while churches in the Midwest and South are mostly in rural and suburban places.

Newer churches growing faster

Most Southern Baptist churches have been founded since 1950 (52%), including 23% that were started since 2000. Another 21% began between 1900 and 1949, while 27% trace their founding before the 20th century.

The newest group of churches, those founded since 2000, make up an increasingly larger percentage of all Southern Baptist churches, climbing from 19% of churches in 2017 to 23% in 2022.

“Southern Baptists are the most prolific starters of new

churches, but older churches continue to [close up] at a slightly faster pace,” said McConnell.

Attendance

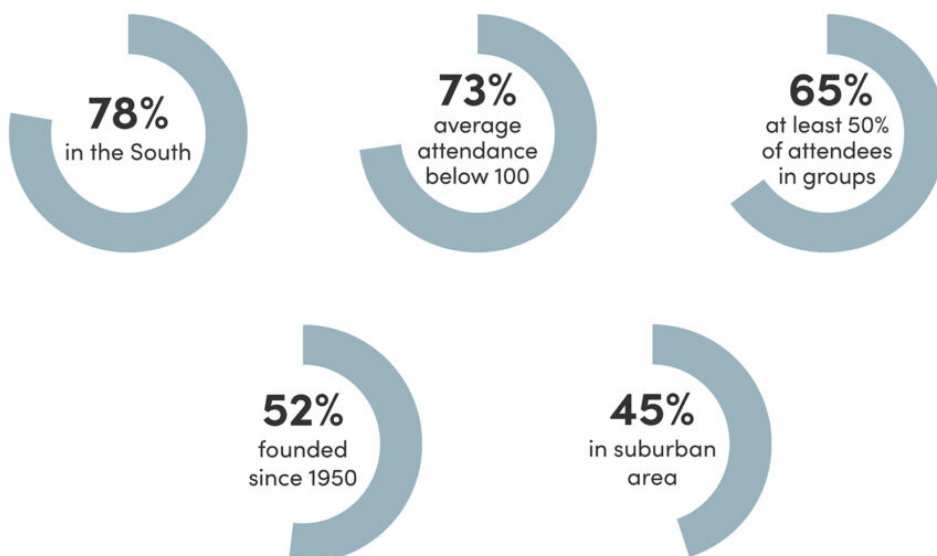
Seventy-three percent of SBC churches have an average worship service attendance below 100, including 46% that have fewer than 50 for a typical service. Nineteen percent are between 100 and 249, while five percent average between 250 and 499.

Three percent usually have at least 500 for their weekend worship service. Churches in the Northeast (53%), Midwest (55%) and West (53%) are more likely than those in the South (43%) to have an average worship service of fewer than 50 attendees.

The SBC is increasingly becoming comprised of the smallest churches, according to the latest ACP. From 2017 to 2022, the percentage of Southern Baptist churches that were below 50 in worship attendance grew from 36% to 45% of the convention.

What does a typical Southern Baptist church look like?

Analysis by Lifeway Research of the Southern Baptist Convention's Annual Church Profile



Sunday School/small group

Thirty-five percent of SBC churches have fewer than 50% of those who gather for worship also participating in a Sunday School/small group. Almost two in five churches say their participation rate runs between 50% to 74%.

Slightly less than one in five report 75% to less than 100% are involved in a Sunday School/small group. Around one in 10 have 100% or more involvement.

The smallest churches, those with fewer than 50 in attendance for a worship service, are the most likely to have 25% or less of their congregation involved in Sunday School/small groups (21%). They are also among the most likely to have at least 100% participating (10%).

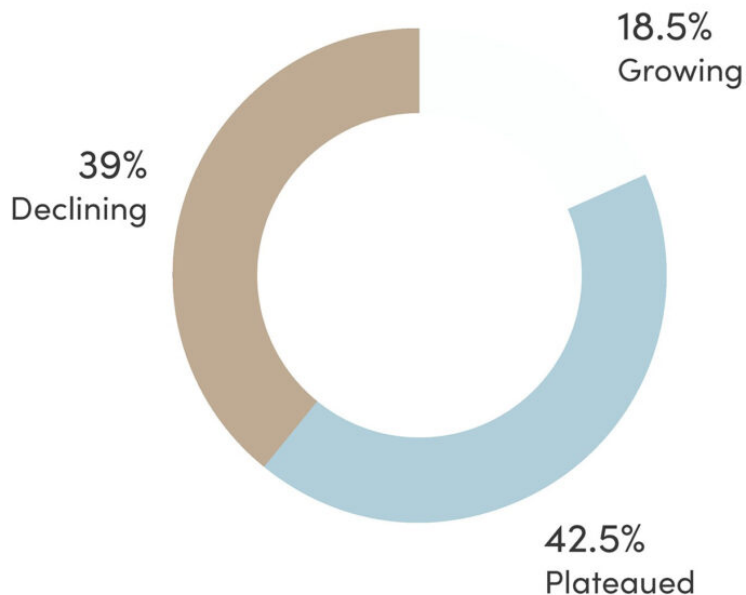
An increasing number of Southern Baptist churches have few Sunday School/small group participants. From 2017-2022, the percentage of churches that had fewer than 25% of their worship service attendees involved in a Sunday School/small group jumped from five percent to 16% – a 219% increase.

“Declines in Sunday School and small group participation [are] not short-term problem[s]. It also does not bode well for the future,” said McConnell. “Having a higher percentage of your attendees attending small groups each week is one of four measures that predict higher worship attendance five years down the road.”

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6 in 10 Southern Baptist churches are either growing or have plateaued

Analysis by Lifeway Research of the Southern Baptist Convention's Annual Church Profile



Notes: Growing means at least 10% growth in total membership since 2017, declining means at least a 10% drop, and plateaued are those in between.

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The regions with the smallest declines were Mid-Atlantic (New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania) which fell five percent, and the East South Central (Alabama, Kentucky, Mississippi, and Tennessee) which dropped seven percent.

Every other area of the country had a double-digit percentage decrease over the past five years, with the largest decline happening in the Pacific region (Alaska, California, Hawaii, Oregon, and Washington) which fell 22%.

“California churches had particularly low [church-by-church] reporting on the ACP in 2022, making their numbers less reliable,” McConnell said.

Grouping churches

Grouping churches according to their percentage change in membership since 2017 gives a picture of which types of churches are most likely to be growing and which must overcome surrounding trends.

Those who saw an increase in total membership of 10% or more are classified as growing, a decrease of 10% or more are considered declining, and those in between are plateaued. Overall, 18.5% of Southern Baptist churches are growing while 42.5% are plateaued and 39% are declining.

Newer Southern Baptist churches are more than twice as likely to have grown than churches started before the 21st century. Forty-two percent of those founded since 2000 are growing churches.

The younger the start date grouping into which a church falls, the less likely those churches are to be plateaued, ranging from 52% of those founded before 1900 to 22% of those founded since 2000.

Churches founded in the 20th century are the most likely to be declining, with 45% of those started between 1950 and 1999 and 39% of those that began between 1900 and 1949.

Newest churches stats

Specific analysis was conducted on churches started within the past five years. At least two-thirds of Southern Baptist churches founded in those years are either plateaued or growing.

Within the 2017-2021 time frame, the longer a church has existed the more likely it is to be a growing congregation. For those founded in 2021, 33% experienced at least 10% growth by 2022, while 67% of churches planted in 2017 are currently growing.

Most growth

The largest churches are the most likely to have grown. Twenty-six percent of churches with an average attendance of 500 or more report a membership increase of more than 10% in the past five years. Those churches are also among the least likely to have declined (35%).

Churches in larger population areas do not automatically equal growth. Southern Baptist churches in urban areas are the most likely to have grown since 2017 (22%), but those churches are also the most likely to have declined (46%).

In fact, the likelihood of a church growing or declining increases when shifting from a smaller population grouping to a larger one. While rural churches are the least likely to have grown (16%), they are also the least likely to have declined (35%).

Similar extremes are also found in the different regions of the country. Southern Baptist churches in the Northeast (36%) and the West (29%) are the most likely to have grown, but they are also the most likely to have declined (46% and 47% respectively).

Churches in the South (45%) and Midwest (40%) are the most likely to have plateaued.

Future challenges

“It is increasingly difficult for a church to see growth today,” said McConnell. “Southern Baptists have never had more declining churches and fewer growing churches than we see today.

“As the majority of churches decline, they have fewer resources to invest in ministry – but the God who gave past growth is no less capable today.”

To view the ACP Church Statistics report, [click here](#). To view

the ACP Church Performance report, [click here](#).

Editor's note: This analysis is based on data reported on the Annual Church Profile (ACP) in 2022 and 2017. The ACP is an annual statistical census of Southern Baptist congregations conducted cooperatively by local associations, state conventions, and Lifeway Christian Resources. Not all SBC churches and associations participate in the ACP reports.