

Southern Baptist baptisms and attendance grow, membership decline slows

BRENTWOOD, Tenn. (BP) – Baptisms, worship service attendance and small group participation all grew in 2023 among congregations affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention, while the recent decline in total membership among congregations slowed.

The Annual Church Profile (ACP) compiled by Lifeway Christian Resources in cooperation with Baptist state conventions details the annual numerical changes for the Southern Baptist Convention. Membership declined for the 17th straight year, dropping below 13 million for the first time since the mid-1970s. However, the less than 2 percent decline was the smallest in recent years.

Additionally, Southern Baptist-affiliated congregations experienced increases in baptisms, average weekly worship attendance and average small group attendance. Total baptisms climbed to nearly 227,000. In-person weekly worship service average attendance topped 4 million for the first time in three years, while in-person small group average attendance reached nearly 2.5 million. Average online worship service participation also increased.

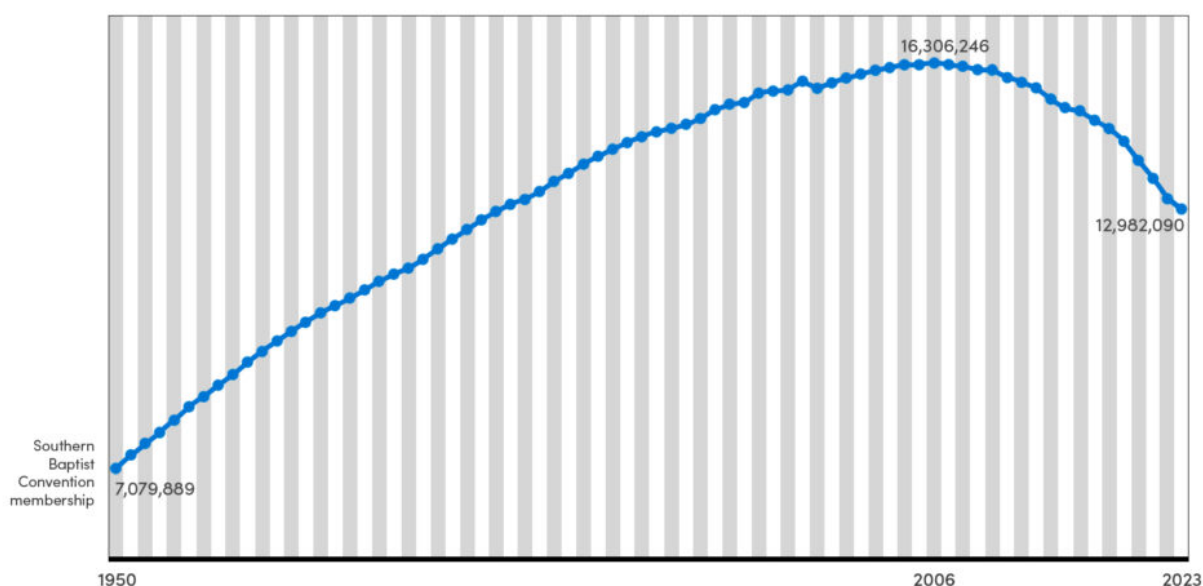
“Southern Baptists are a force for good. We are sharing the Gospel with more people, gathering for worship and Bible study in increasing numbers, giving billions to support churches serving communities across our country and sending millions to support mission enterprises around the world,” said Jeff Iorg, president-elect of the SBC Executive Committee. “While we often address our shortcomings, it’s also good to pause and celebrate the global good Southern Baptists are

accomplishing.”

The total number of churches affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention decreased by 292, less than 1 percent, to 46,906. The number of church-type missions declined by 170 to 2,474, but the number of additional campuses reported by multisite churches grew by 95 to 680. Meanwhile, among states that collect financial information, undesignated receipts grew slightly, topping \$10 billion in 2023, and mission expenditures through Southern Baptist avenues increased by more than 9 percent to reach almost \$800 million.

Southern Baptist Convention membership falls below 13 million

Prepared by Lifeway Research in conjunction with Baptist state conventions



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“For 2023, 69 percent of Southern Baptist churches reported at least one statistic on the ACP. That is the same percentage as 2022,” said Scott McConnell, executive director of Lifeway Research. “This represents a massive amount of cooperation among churches and the local associations and state conventions that collected most of the data. But this also means there is more church membership and attendance, baptisms and giving beyond these totals.

“While we celebrate the attendance growth, we continue to see a wide gap compared to what was reported before the pandemic. Our team will be conducting further analysis to determine if this is due to congregations not reporting or people who are not coming back to worship as often.”

The 2023 ACP records the total membership of Southern Baptist-affiliated congregations at 12,982,090, down 241,032 (1.8 percent) from 2022. The three previous years saw declines of 2.9 percent or more. States home to the most Southern Baptists include Texas (2,461,681), Georgia (1,142,325), North Carolina (989,872), Tennessee (849,306) and Florida (768,437).

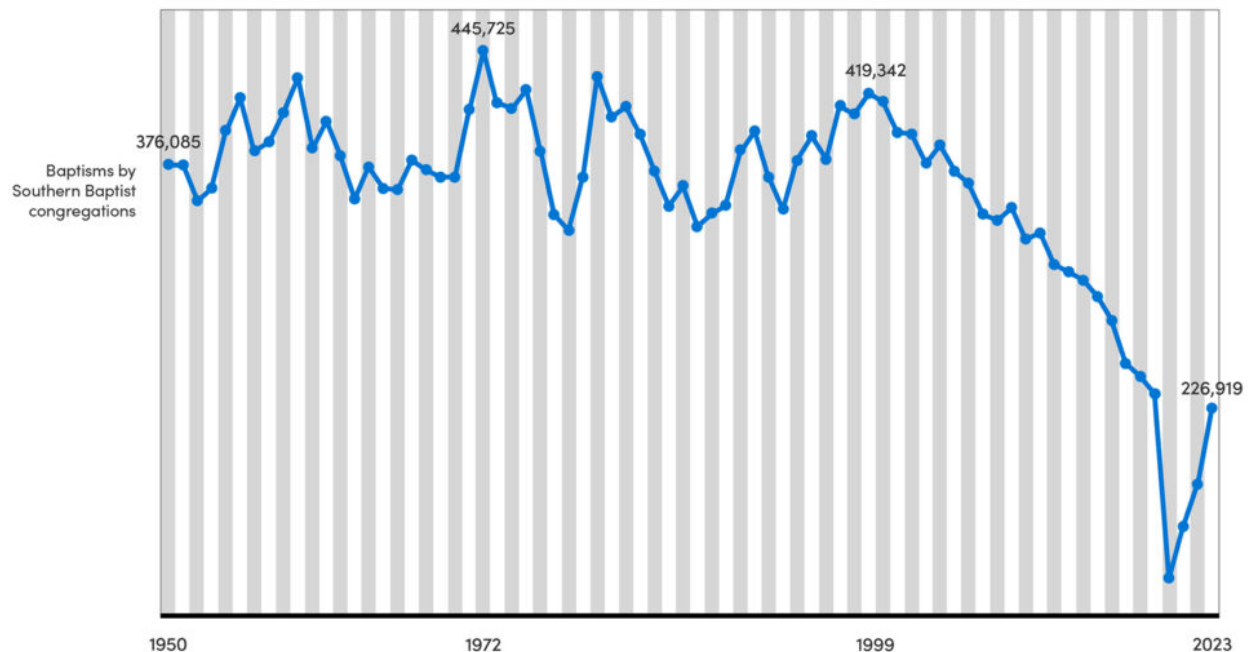
This year, several state conventions also used the ACP to ask churches about sexual abuse prevention and response. More than half of responding Southern Baptist-affiliated congregations (58 percent) say they require background checks for all staff and those who work with children and students. Fewer say staff and those working with younger churchgoers have been trained in reporting sexual abuse cases (38 percent) or caring for survivors of sexual abuse (16 percent).

Baptisms increase nearly 26 percent

Total baptisms in Southern Baptist-affiliated congregations grew to 226,919 in 2023, an almost 26 percent jump from 2022, placing current numbers close to pre-pandemic levels. While most baptisms happened in the U.S. South, growth happened across the country, as 35 of 41 state conventions experienced year-over-year growth in the total number of baptisms. This marks the third straight annual baptism increase, which hasn't happened in more than three decades.

SBC baptisms return to near pre-pandemic levels

Prepared by Lifeway Research in conjunction with Baptist state conventions



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“A linear trendline of baptisms before the pandemic using data from 1999 to 2019 would have predicted fewer baptisms in 2023,” McConnell said. “It is reassuring that the God who has changed the lives of the people represented by these baptism numbers is not limited by trendlines or history. And Southern Baptist congregations welcomed 175,026 other new members which is within half a percent of those joining in 2019.”

States with the most total baptisms reported include Florida (29,063), Texas (22,294), Georgia (21,177), Tennessee (19,639) and North Carolina (15,088).

Except for California, the states with the largest numerical increase from the previous year were traditional Southern Baptist states. Florida (an increase of 7,048), Georgia (6,156), California (5,181), North Carolina (3,763) and Tennessee (3,664) had the five largest jumps from 2022 to 2023.

However, the state conventions with the largest percentage increase over the previous year were all from outside of the South: California (248 percent increase), Colorado (96 percent), Utah-Idaho (89 percent), Alaska (69 percent) and Pennsylvania-South Jersey (61 percent).

“What’s really encouraging is that this trend is widespread,” said Kevin Ezell, president of the North American Mission Board. “We have heard from so many state convention partners who are reporting healthy increases in baptisms this year.

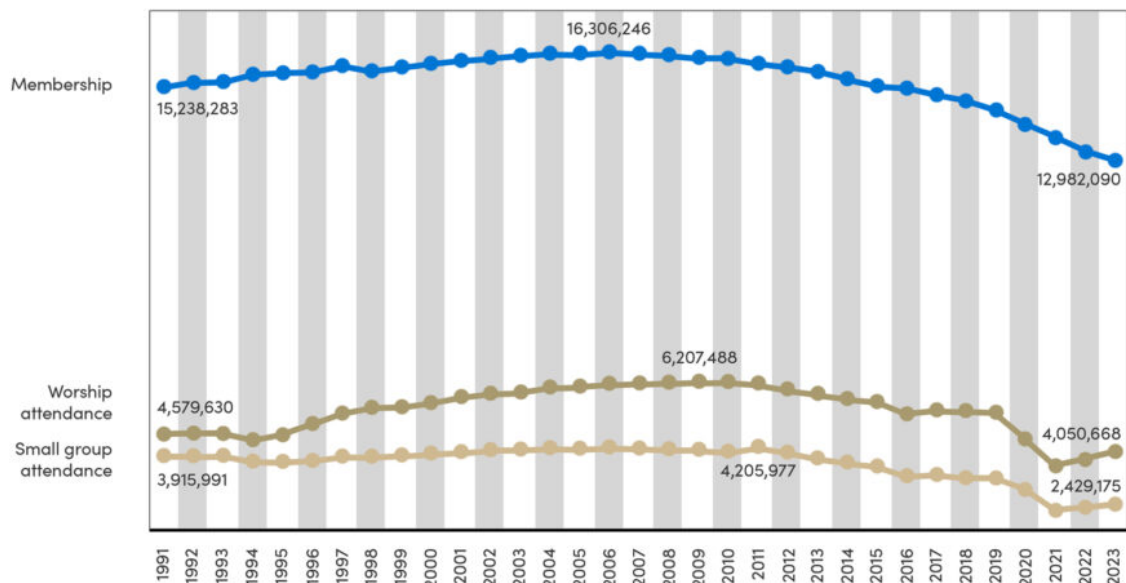
“Pastors are the difference makers here. Despite all the distractions and challenges out there, they are keeping the focus on evangelism and encouraging new believers to follow up with baptism. To see the largest percentage increases coming from states outside the South indicates that our focus on these areas continues to show results. I believe if we can stay unified in prioritizing the Gospel, we will continue seeing progress like this.”

Church attendance and participation growth

Average in-person weekly worship service attendance at Southern Baptist-affiliated congregations continues to rebound, topping 4 million in 2023 for the first time since the COVID-19 pandemic. The overall growth from 2021 to 2023 marks the first time Southern Baptists have seen consecutive years of worship attendance growth in more than a decade.

SBC membership declines, worship and group attendance continues climb

Prepared by Lifeway Research in conjunction with Baptist state conventions



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Though driven in part by the dramatic drops during the pandemic, the current percentage increases are some of the largest since the mid-1990s. On any given week last year, 4,050,668 individuals attended a congregation affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention, an increase of 246,178 over 2022 for a more than 6 percent jump.

Five states averaged more than 250,000 worshipers in congregations during 2023: Texas (469,532), Florida (406,142), Georgia (351,850), North Carolina (333,572) and Tennessee (281,981).

Every state convention except two grew in their in-person worship attendance average. Most states with the largest numerical increases were in the South, including Florida (43,334 increase over 2022), Texas (30,667), North Carolina (22,850), Alabama (22,119) and Tennessee (19,732). The states with the largest percentage increases, however, came from outside traditional SBC areas, including Colorado (58 percent increase over 2022), Utah-Idaho (52 percent), Alaska (29

percent), Ohio (27 percent) and New York (27 percent). California had both a significant numerical and percentage jump (19,502 and 23 percent).

Additionally, Southern Baptist-affiliated congregations saw more people participate in their in-person small groups. In 2023, small group ministries averaged 2,429,175 people each week, an increase of more than 4 percent over 2022. The back-to-back years of growth marked the first years of consecutive growth since the early 2000s.

Every state convention but seven experienced growth. The largest numerical jumps include Florida (up 22,008), Texas (17,405), Alabama (14,539), Virginia (12,651) and Kentucky (7,835).

Some of the highest percentage increases happened in Colorado (46 percent), Utah-Idaho (39 percent), Iowa (37 percent), Michigan (30 percent) and Alaska (29 percent).

“Outreach and discipleship are difficult today,” McConnell said. “They require time and commitment when our culture offers numerous distractions and alternatives. The pandemic was discouraging as fewer people engaged in these activities. But as people have re-engaged and new people are participating, there is much to celebrate in Southern Baptist churches today while we invite more to join.”

For more information, view the 2023 Southern Baptist Convention statistical summary, the 2023 state convention statistics report, the 2023 sexual abuse prevention statistics report and visit [LifewayResearch.com](https://lifewayresearch.com).

Methodology

The Annual Church Profile (ACP) is an annual statistical census of Southern Baptist congregations conducted cooperatively by local associations, state conventions, and Lifeway Christian Resources. Around 7 in 10 Southern Baptist

churches (69 percent) reported at least one item on the 2023 ACP.