

Major Evangelic Denomination Sees Memberships Fall Amid Debates Over Female Pastors, Growing Distrust

The Southern Baptist Convention is witnessing rising baptisms and attendance, but declining church membership and stagnant giving to its national institutions.

Total membership in the SBC declined by 3 percent between 2024 and 2025, according to a report from Lifeway Research released on May 5, marking the 19th straight year of decline.

There are now 12.3 million SBC church members across the country.

But 4.5 million people attend SBC churches every week, while 2.6 million take part in a small group or Sunday School – both of which are 3 percent increases from 2024.

The number of baptisms meanwhile rose by 5 percent, with over a quarter million people getting baptized – the fifth consecutive year of increases for the SBC.

Giving to the Cooperative Program – the SBC fund that churches pool for seminary education, national and global missions, and public policy advocacy – remained around the same level as last year.



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News of the mixed signs of spiritual vitality and decline occur after years of debate within the SBC about female pastors, as well as other signs of liberal drift and

institutional distrust in the denomination.

While the Baptist Faith and Message, the SBC's statement of faith, explicitly says that the office of pastor is "limited to men as qualified by Scripture," some churches have generated controversy for hiring women as pastors in associate or youth ministry roles.

In recent years, attendees of the SBC annual meetings have declined to support efforts such as the Law Amendment, which would amend the SBC constitution to make clear that churches with female pastors are not permitted to be part of the association.

Many debates at SBC annual meetings have also centered on perceived liberal drift within major SBC national entities, such as the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, the denomination's public policy arm.

Last year, 43 percent of annual meeting attendees voted to abolish the ERLC altogether, spurring the resignation of its president weeks later.

Such entities are funded through Cooperative Program dollars, which are allocated at the discretion of local churches.

SBC conservatives interpreted the membership, attendance, baptism, and Cooperative Program statistics through the lens of debates at the national level.

William Wolfe, the executive director of the Center for Baptist Leadership, wrote on social media that "baptism numbers going up" may point to "health in the local churches."

But Wolfe noted that the encouraging figures do not "negate the Cooperative Program giving going down," which shows "distrust in the SBC as an institution."

"The goal is to reform and restore trust in the institutions of the SBC," he remarked.

“And you shouldn’t use the good fruit of local churches to try and mask the issues in leadership and the entities.”

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