

Report Finds Signs of Life in North American Denominations

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✖ Two Pentecostal groups reported membership gains despite declines within several other North American denominations, according to an annual report from the National Council of Churches.

The Assemblies of God grew percent from 2,863,265 members to 2,899,702, while the Church of God (Cleveland, Tenn.) grew percent from 1,053,642 members to 1,072,169, according to the *2010 Yearbook of American & Canadian Churches*.

The Pentecostal denominations were the only Protestant groups to show membership gains in this year's report. The Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), the nation's second largest denomination, showed a slight membership drop for the second consecutive year.

The SBC, which the National Council of Churches said is typically viewed as a reliable indicator of church growth, reported a percent decline again this year, taking its membership down from 16,266,920 members to 16,228,438.

The Catholic Church, however, rebounded this year after a percent decline in 2009. The nation's largest Christian body grew roughly percent from 67 million members to more than 68 million.

Of the 25 largest church groups, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the Jehovah's Witnesses also saw membership gains. The Mormon Church reported percent growth, raising its membership to 5,873,408, and the Jehovah's

Witnesses grew 2 percent to 1,092,169 members, according to the report.

The Presbyterian Church (USA) reported the sharpest membership decline, dropping percent to 2,941,412 members. The American Baptist Churches in the USA dropped 2 percent to 1,358,351 members, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America declined percent to 4,709,956 members.

Churches collected membership figures in 2008 and reported them to the yearbook in 2009. Eleven of the nation's 25 largest denominations did not submit membership data, including the Church of God in Christ, the National Baptist Convention USA, the National Baptist Convention of America, the African Methodist Episcopal Church and the Pentecostal Assemblies of the World. Those denominations also did not report membership changes for the 2009 report.

Many observers attribute declines in church growth to the advance of secularism in North America. But the Rev. Dr. Eileen W. Lindner, editor of the yearbook, said secularism may not be the only factor.

"American society as a whole has not experienced the kind and rate of secularization so clearly demonstrated during the last quarter century in Western Europe," she stated. "Indeed, American church membership trends have defied gravity particularly where the Pentecostal experience is included."

She noted that a plurality of immigrants to the U.S. have been Christian. "In an era in which we have come to expect the inevitable advance of secularism in the U.S., the influx of robust Christian communities among new immigrants once again amends the topographical map," Lindner added.

Despite the losses, the yearbook reports that total church membership grew percent over last year to 147,384,631. In 2009, total church membership had dropped percent from 147,382,460 members to 146,663,972.