

# Southern Baptist Churches Growing in Numbers, Declining in Membership

Southern Baptists experienced growth last year in the number of churches affiliated with the denomination and the total amount given for denominational missions causes. However, according to the Annual Church Profile (ACP) compiled by LifeWay Christian Resources in cooperation with Baptist state conventions, most of the ACP metrics declined in 2012 including membership, average attendance, baptisms and total giving.

The number of churches in the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) grew by 270 to 46,034, a 0.6 percent increase over the previous year. SBC churches also reported 4,992 church-type missions last year, 40 more than in 2011, although some state conventions no longer use that designation which may have impacted the total.

Although the number of SBC-affiliated congregations grew, reported membership of those churches declined more than one hundred thousand, down 0.7 percent to 15.9 million members. Primary worship attendance declined 3.1 percent to million Sunday worshippers.

Although baptisms were a bright spot in last year's report, increasing 0.7 percent, this year's report shows a decline of 5.5 percent to 314,956 people. Reported baptisms have declined six of the last eight years with 2012 the lowest since 1948. The ratio of baptisms to total members increased to one baptism for every fifty members.

"While we celebrate every new baptized believer represented by these numbers, fewer reported baptisms is heartbreaking," said Thom S. Rainer, president and CEO of LifeWay.

“Southern Baptists cannot rest on what God accomplished through us in prior years. The message of the gospel is alive, relevant, and powerful today, and the Great Commission task of sharing it should excite and embolden us as Christians.”

### **Giving and Mission Expenditures**

Changes in giving to SBC congregations are difficult to assess because not all Baptist state conventions gather the same data, however total and undesignated receipts reported through the ACP were down 2.4 percent and 1.5 percent respectively.

Total mission expenditures reported by SBC churches declined one percent in 2012, however, reported giving to Southern Baptist mission causes increased more than \$48 million (7 percent) to \$744 million. The ‘Great Commission Giving’ category was added to the ACP reporting form in 2011 as a reflection of each church’s financial gifts to local, state and national SBC missions causes. Although two more state conventions reported Great Commission Giving in 2012 than the previous year, two states have yet to add the statistic to their annual survey.

Giving through the SBC’s Cooperative Program (CP) mission initiative are not included in the ACP annual report because those totals are more accurately available through Baptist state conventions and the SBC Executive Committee which processes the mission gifts. However, giving through CP in fiscal year 2011 was virtually the same as the previous year. CP giving the first eight months of this year was reported earlier this month to be 1.6 percent behind the same period the year before.

Statistics for the national ACP are reported by individual churches to their local association and/or state convention, and national totals cannot be compiled and released until all cooperating state conventions have reported. Scott McConnell, LifeWay’s director of research, said the files are due in February but some final data was not received this year until

the last week of May.