

SBC notes a drop in baptisms, attendance

by [Bob Allen](#) in the [July 12, 2011](#) issue

The Southern Baptist Convention has reported declines last year in several categories traditionally used as markers of denominational vitality. Dips in baptisms, total church membership, worship attendance and participation in Sunday school and other Christian education programs were detailed in the 2010 Annual Church Profile.

Southern

Baptists reported 5 percent fewer baptisms in 2010 than in 2009—332,321 compared to 349,737. Total membership was counted at 16,136,044, a drop of 0.15 percent and the fourth straight year of membership losses.

"I

pray that all of us will see the urgency of the moment," said Thom Rainer, president and CEO of LifeWay Christian Resources, which released the figures June 9. "We must make the Great Commission the heart of all we do and say. These latest numbers should be received with a broken spirit and a God-given determination to reach people for Christ."

When

the SBC ended its annual meeting June 15 in Phoenix, another statistic noting a decline was announced: the gathering was attended by 4,814 registrants, the lowest number since 1944.

One area that did show

increase in the LifeWay report was the number of churches, which rose 1.59 percent to 45,727. Rainer said he was encouraged by a church-planting trend that could help stall the membership decline.

In

2009 baptisms had increased after four straight years of decline. The

record year for baptisms was 445,725 in 1972. While there are far more Southern Baptist churches now, observers say baptisms have essentially plateaued since 1950. In 2010 there was one baptism for every 48 members of a Southern Baptist church. Sixty years ago the ratio was 1:19.

Convinced

in the 1970s that creeping liberalism would lead to decline similar to that suffered in mainline denominations, the SBC leadership launched a "conservative resurgence" to focus on conservative theology and evangelism.

Affirming the movement for theological reform, two years ago leaders launched a "Great Commission Resurgence" aimed at renewing evangelistic zeal. Part of that process included increased focus of the North American Mission Board on starting new churches. —ABP