

SBC totals down? No, just a glitch in reporting: SBC grew, but more slowly than population

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The *Yearbook of American & Canadian Churches*, the annual “bible” of data and details on national church organizations, noted in its recently published 2006 edition a 1.05 percent decrease in membership for the Southern Baptist Convention, and it had conflicting numbers for the Mormon Church.

The Southern Baptist numbers are actually up a bit, and the Mormons continue to report growth—but not as high as one total published for 2004. (Because of deadlines for the 2006 yearbook—edited as a project of the National Council of Churches—the last year of statistics reported by most denominations was 2004.)

The Southern Baptist discrepancy was more sensitive because the figures seemed to show an unusual membership decline for the nation’s largest Protestant body. Southern Baptist officials said that in reality the SBC grew .385 percent in 2004.

The problem, as described by Baptist Press news service, was that in compiling the 2002 figures, church officials mistakenly counted an unnamed church in California as having a membership of 110,110 when it had only 110 people on its rolls. Thus the national totals for 2002 and 2003 were too high by 110,000.

Southern Baptist officials, after learning of the error, reported the correct total for 2004, which is 16,267,494 members. But that made it appear that the SBC had a decrease of 47,556 in membership instead of an increase of 62,444.

An asterisk with a chart of American denominations in the latest yearbook guides the reader to an explanation of mistaken totals in previous yearbooks. Kenyn Cureton, the SBC’s vice president for convention relations, took issue with the way the yearbook handled the problem, fearing it would be erroneously reported in the news, as was the case in at least one instance.

Nevertheless, Cureton said, Southern Baptists should not be too relieved since the gain amounted to “incremental” membership growth. “In fact, we are not even keeping up with the rate of population growth,” he said.

In the Mormon case, the Century spotted an extra 400,000 members credited to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in one section of the 2006 yearbook.

The correct total of 5,599,177 for 2004 was printed in the book’s statistical section, but the higher total was reported in another table near the front, and the error was repeated in an NCC news release in March. Associate yearbook editor Marcel Welty said the figure of 5.99 million members “is incorrect, the result of an error introduced by the publisher,” Abingdon Press.

Despite the glitches, many church leaders regard the 89-year-old yearbook as an unparalleled resource. The 2006 edition includes a record number of 219 national church organizations in North America.