

Southern Baptist numbers drop for baptisms, membership

by [Bob Allen](#) in the [July 10, 2013](#) issue

Annual baptisms in Southern Baptist churches have declined by 100,000 in the past 12 years and last year dropped to the lowest number in 64 years. LifeWay Christian Resources of the Southern Baptist Convention released figures on June 5 reporting 314,959 baptisms in 2012, down 18,385—or 5.5 percent—from 2011.

With a total membership of 15,872,404, the SBC marked the sixth straight year of statistical decline. It remains the nation's second-largest faith group, behind Roman Catholics. Membership dropped by 105,000—two-thirds of a percent. Weekly worship attendance, meanwhile, fell below 6 million to 5,966,735, down 3 percent.

Long regarded a sign of denominational vitality, SBC baptisms leveled off after an all-time record 445,725 in 1972. They have declined six out of the last ten years to the lowest number since 1948, the year Southern Baptists first exceeded the 300,000-baptism benchmark with 310,266.

Leaders offer various explanations for the trend. Professor William Day of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary cited two factors in a 2003 article in the *Journal for Baptist Theology and Ministry*.

One factor is an increasing ratio between church membership and baptism rates. Before 1935 Southern Baptists baptized one person for every 20 members. Between 1935 and 1959 the ratio was about one to 25. In 2012 it was 50 church members to one person baptized. Day said that indicates an overall loss of evangelistic zeal.

Another factor is the changing role of Sunday school. During the 1950s Southern Baptists viewed Sunday school as the “outreach arm of the church,” he said. In most churches today Sunday school functions to assimilate members in small groups after they walk the aisle in worship to join.

Ed Stetzer, head of LifeWay Research, has suggested that the “conservative resurgence” (in 1980s and '90s), while affirming the convention's commitment to

the Bible's truthfulness, failed in the area of evangelism. —ABP