

Southern Baptists meet as membership, baptism decline continues

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(RNS) For Southern Baptists, it's happened again: Another annual report shows the denomination is losing members and baptizing fewer people.

The Rev. Fred Luter, outgoing president of the Southern Baptist Convention, thinks old-time methods to spread the gospel have met a culture that's younger, more diverse and doesn't necessarily see the pew—or even sin—as a priority.

“Our society is just not what it used to be,” said Luter, who admitted he's discouraged by the reports. “When I grew up there was a challenge by parents in the home that our sons and daughters would be in church. It was a given. . . . That day and time is gone.”

Luter said he and others will address the issue at this year's annual meeting, which takes place June 10-11 in Baltimore. But beyond calls for reversing the trend, there's little sign of agreement on a way forward.

Though some have said the 15.7 million-member denomination needs to be more racially and ethnically inclusive, Luter, its first African-American president, thinks the main reason for decline is that all congregations need to take a role in evangelism.

“We have just not been very active in doing what we can to reach the lost and the unchurched in our nation,” said the 57-year-old New Orleans pastor.

Weeks before the denomination's annual meeting, a task force charged with helping Southern Baptists “own the problem” released a report that noted these recent signs of trouble:

- * one-quarter of Southern Baptist churches reported “0 baptisms”
- * 60 percent said they had baptized no youth (ages 12-17)

* 80 percent reported one or fewer young adult baptisms (ages 18-29)

Task force member Dennis Kim is one of the three men who hope to succeed Luter as president.

“When about 1,000 churches close their doors every year, I believe that the need of the hour is an evangelistic tool that is simple enough to train all church members, effective enough to ignite believers’ passion for evangelism, and engaging enough to captivate the hearts of the present generation,” said Kim, 64, pastor of a predominantly Korean-American megachurch in the Washington suburb of Silver Spring, Maryland.

The Rev. Jared Moore, pastor of a small church in Hustonville, Kentucky, is not convinced that a special method or a new way of training is the answer.

“It’s not something that any president or any individual can reverse,” he said of the trends that show seven straight years of declining membership. “It’s something that God must bring about.”

He added that “it takes a lot more time, a lot more conversations than it did 50 years ago” to succeed in evangelism when some people don’t consider themselves sinners.

“I think we’ve got to stay the course, continue preaching the gospel, even when the ears of our community is closed,” said Moore.

The Rev. Ronnie Floyd, a former SBC Executive Committee chairman who is considered to be a front-runner for the presidency, said there’s a need for “extraordinary prayer” for another “major spiritual awakening” in America. He said Baptists have determined that the Great Commission—a phrase about the biblical command to convert believers across the world—is the path they are committed to follow.

“Our problem is the pace,” said Floyd, 58, pastor of a multisite megachurch in northwest Arkansas. “We need to return to a commitment of personal evangelism.”

David Roozen, director of the Hartford Institute for Religion Research, said Southern Baptists are facing challenges, both theological—some people don’t see themselves in need of a conversion—and sociological—waning agreement with traditional conservative worldviews.

“It’s a tough world out there at this particular time and there’s not a lot of easy answers,” said Roozen, who said the Southern Baptists are joining mainline Protestants in the hand-wringing about declines. “There’s little fixes but they probably don’t address the root challenges.”