

Research Report

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*Executive Summary of
Southern Baptist Congregations Today*

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In early 2000, a representative sample of Southern Baptist congregations was asked to participate in a study titled *Southern Baptist Congregations Today: A Survey at the Turn of a New Millennium*. This survey is one of a group of studies of religious congregations known as Faith Communities Today (FACT). Like Southern Baptists, other religious groups conducted surveys among their constituent congregations. To facilitate summary and comparison among the differing religious groups, a set of core questions was developed and used by the surveying organizations. When data are compiled and aggregated for the participating religious bodies, it should provide the most complete picture of religious congregations ever developed in the United States. More than 14,000 congregations have participated in the study, and it is estimated that they represent 80 percent of the nation's congregations and 90 percent of all worshippers in the nation.

A total of 710 Southern Baptist churches and church-type missions participated in the study by completing an extensive questionnaire. The 11-page survey instrument contained questions about worship services, location, buildings, programs, ministries, leadership, organizational dynamics, participants, and finances. The following are highlights from the study.

- Sunday morning is the primary time for worship in Southern Baptist congregations—98.5 percent conduct services on Sunday morning. About 1 in 12 (8.1%) conducts two or more worship services on Sunday morning. A small group of large congregations even conduct three or more worship services (1.4%). It appears that most congregations offering multiple Sunday morning services do so because of worship space limitations, parking limitations, or possibly for convenience of participants and not necessarily to appeal to different types of people. However, most congregations only have one worship service with the typical congregation (the median) having 80 in attendance.
- The secondary time for Southern Baptists to hold worship services is Sunday evening. More than three-fourths of all congregations (78.7%) conduct Sunday evening services. For those reporting a Sunday night worship service, the typical church reports 40 in attendance.
- An examination of worship service attendance for the previous five years indicates that 47.1 percent of the congregations are growing, 20.2 percent are plateaued, and 32.7 percent are declining.
- Elements generally found in Southern Baptist worship services are Scripture reading, an invitation to accept Christ, collection of an offering, a printed order of service, prayer for the sick, recognition of visitors, and a time in the service where people greet each other. At the other extreme, elements that are usually considered liturgical such as use of candles or incense, use of creeds or statements of faith, corporate confession of sin, and kneeling by the congregation are rarely found in Southern Baptist worship services.
- Southern Baptists are a singing people. Worship services nearly always include congregational singing. You are likely to find the use of traditional hymns sung using hymnals and accompanied by organ and/or piano. Church choirs are common and the use of prerecorded music is not unusual. Rarely do you find the use of electric guitars, percussion instruments, or an orchestra. Even though there has been emphasis on contemporary worship services in recent years, there is not a preponderance of congregations using praise teams to lead music, nor do many of them project music on a screen.

- Based on the presence of praise teams leading music, words to songs projected on a screen, contemporary music/choruses, electronic keyboard or synthesizer, electric guitar/bass, drums or other percussion instruments in a worship service, 12.8 percent of Southern Baptist congregations can be categorized as mostly contemporary. At the other extreme, it appears that 70.6 percent of Southern Baptist congregations are traditional in their style of worship. The remainder, 16.6 percent, appear to be blended in their style of worship or have multiple services with possibly some being traditional and some contemporary.
- Worship style is highly related to size of the congregation. While contemporary worship is almost nonexistent in very small congregations, 7 of 10 churches with more than 1,000 participants are categorized as contemporary.
- The incorporation of contemporary elements into worship appears to have a positive affect on worship service attendance. Six of 10 contemporary churches are growing and only one-quarter are declining.
- The sermon is an important part of the worship experience in Southern Baptist congregations. The most frequently cited sermon topic is personal commitment or conversion. Six of 10 respondents indicated that sermons always focus on conversion. Other frequent sermon topics are God's love and care, personal spiritual growth, practical advice for living, and living a moral life. At the other end of the spectrum, social justice is the least frequently cited topic. Expository preaching (explanations of Scripture or doctrine) seems to be the primary mode of communication in sermons.
- There is near unanimity among Southern Baptists that the Bible is an absolutely foundational source of authority. Inspiration of the Holy Spirit is also considered absolutely foundational as a source of authority among the overwhelming majority of congregations. When forced to choose the most important source of authority, 93.4 percent of respondents indicated the Bible while the remaining 6.6 percent indicated the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.
- Four items in the questionnaire were used to measure spiritual health. These four are "Our congregation is spiritually vital and alive," "Our congregation helps members deepen their relationships with God," "Our congregation has a clear sense of mission and purpose," and "Our congregation's worship services are spiritually uplifting and inspirational." Based on the scale developed from these items, 52.5 percent of the congregations are classified as spiritually healthy, 45.9 percent are somewhat healthy, and only 1.6 percent can be classified as unhealthy.
- Almost three-fourths of congregations classified as contemporary (73.1%) can also be classified as healthy. This compares with 65.0 percent of blended worship congregations and 45.5 percent of traditional congregations.
- The typical (median) congregation responding to the survey was 66 years old.
- The decade of the 1950s stands out as the most fruitful era in the past 50 years for church planting. It appears that church planting waned during the '60s and '70s, but has emerged with renewed emphasis in the past couple of decades.

- Most Southern Baptist congregations are small and are located in small towns and rural areas. Over a third are located in rural or open country. Slightly less than a third are located in small towns and villages of less than 10,000 population. The remaining third are located in or around cities of more than 10,000 population. Specifically, only 1 in 10 congregations is located around cities of 250,000 or more population.
- Analysis of locations in and around cities shows that congregations in new suburban areas are the most likely to be growing—65.8 percent. The high percentage of growing churches in new suburban areas occurs regardless of size of city. The very highest percentage of growing churches in the study was found in new suburbs around large cities.
- Roughly two-thirds of congregations in medium and large cities are categorized as healthy. In contrast, slightly less than half of the congregation in locations with less than 10,000 population are categorized healthy.
- The median church has worship space for 187 people or space for a little more than double its current worship service attendance. Nine of 10 Southern Baptist congregations have sanctuaries that hold 450 people or less.
- The overwhelming majority of congregations (96.7%) meet for worship in a church building, and in most instances (93.7%) the congregation owns the building. Only 7.4 percent of all congregations indicate they share building space for worship with another congregation.
- The majority of congregations indicated they have enough space for their needs. For those needing more space, the primary needs are for educational space and for fellowship space.
- Like Sunday morning worship services, the Sunday School program is nearly universal in Southern Baptist congregations—98.2 percent have a Sunday School that meets regularly. The typical (median) congregation with a Sunday School has 40 adults attending weekly plus another 22 children and teens.
- The most frequently emphasized home or personal practice among Southern Baptist congregations is personal prayer, Scripture study, or devotions. The majority of congregations also put considerable emphasis on keeping the Lord's Day and abstaining from premarital sex. On the other hand, fasting, displaying religious objects, symbols, etc., and observing dietary restrictions received relatively little emphasis.
- The predominant outreach methods employed by most congregations were pastoral phone calls and visits, stressing to the members the importance of witnessing to others about one's faith, and relying on phone calls or personal visits by laity. Radio or TV, probably because of expense, was the least frequently employed outreach method.
- One of the major purposes of the larger FACT study is to document the contributions that religious congregations make to their communities. Providing cash assistance, food pantries, and clothing

closets are the primary ways in which Southern Baptist congregations provide ministry assistance. While the number of people served runs into the thousands for some congregations, the typical Southern Baptist congregation provides ministry to 20 people per month. Using the sample of congregations to infer back to the population of all congregations, nearly 3 million people nationwide are served through the ministries of Southern Baptist congregations during a typical month.

- Nine of 10 Southern Baptist congregations have the services of an ongoing pastor—either regular or interim. Specifically, 83.3 percent of all congregations have a regular call pastor. Another 6.3 percent reported having an interim pastor. Only 3.9 percent report having neither a regular nor interim pastor.
- The typical regular pastor is 48 years old. In contrast, the median age of interim pastors is 70 years old. The majority of Southern Baptist pastors have college degrees and seminary degrees. Only 1 in 10 Southern Baptist pastors has no formal ministerial education. The typical tenure for pastors (excluding interims) is 4 years.
- The typical congregation (median) reported 1 full-time paid ministerial/program person and 1 part-time person. The typical church also has 1 paid part-time support staff—either secretarial or maintenance.
- Most congregations have to deal with conflict at some point in their existence—72.1 percent of responding congregations reported having conflict over some issue in the past 5 years. One of 4 congregations reported having serious problems. The most frequent disagreement experienced by Southern Baptist congregations is over the pastor’s leadership style. Theology was the problem cited least by congregations, and even when cited it tended not to be a very serious problem. Over half the congregations categorized as contemporary experienced conflict over worship.
- Some commentators are touting post-denominationalism in the United States. In contrast to this assertion, most congregations buy their worship, educational, stewardship, and evangelism materials and supplies from denominational sources. Furthermore, in more than 9 of 10 congregations it is important to the members to be affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention. Plus, 8 of 10 congregational respondents, presumably the pastors, indicate it is important to the stability and vitality of the congregation to be affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention. Furthermore, two-thirds of the congregations indicate they clearly express their Southern Baptist heritage.
- Only 3.2 percent of the congregations indicated they were dually aligned with another denomination.
- Southern Baptist congregations have fairly clear expectations for their members, but little church discipline is employed in coercing members toward compliance.
- Southern Baptist congregations are typically not large. The median number of participants associated in any way with the life of the congregation, is 125. When participation is limited to those who regularly attend, the typical congregation has 90 participants—60 adults and 30 children and teens. Using these figures from the sample data to infer to the entire population of Southern Baptist congregations, there should be 4.9 million regularly participating adults and another 2.5 million regularly participating children and teens (under age 18).

- The three top descriptors of Southern Baptist adult participants are married, female, and lifelong Southern Baptists. In this survey, it is roughly estimated that 59 percent of adult participants are married and 52 percent are female. Conversely, the three descriptors least likely to describe Southern Baptists are “In households with incomes above \$75,000,” “Not high school graduates,” and “Regularly involved in personal witnessing.” Because of the emphasis on evangelism in Southern Baptist life, it is interesting to note that 16 percent of adult Southern Baptist participants are estimated to be regularly involved in personal witnessing.
- Southern Baptist congregations are predominantly White. Nine of 10 Southern Baptist congregations are racially/ethnically predominantly White, i.e., in 92.1 percent of the congregations, Whites (non-Hispanic) comprise more than half the adult participants. Hispanics are the predominant ethnic group in 2.7 percent of Southern Baptist congregations while Asians are the predominant group in 1.3 percent of congregations. A little over a fourth (27.2%) of Southern Baptist congregations have Hispanic adult participants and almost a fourth (23.3%) have African-American participants. In all, there are an estimated 4.9 million adults that regularly participate in Southern Baptist congregations. About 4.5 million of these adults are White (non-Hispanic), the remaining 400,000 are non-White. Of these 400,000, about 138,000 are Hispanic, 124,000 are African-American, and 65,000 are Asian.
- Southern Baptists are comprised of theological conservatives. Only 1 of 10 congregations was described as moderate.
- At the turn of the new millennium, most Southern Baptist congregations (3 of 4) are described as being in good or excellent financial shape. Less than 5 percent of Southern Baptist congregations seem to be currently experiencing financial difficulty.
- The median congregation received \$79,000 from all sources during 1999. It spent 38 percent of its income on staff salaries and benefits, 20 percent on congregational operations, 5 percent on program support and materials, and 10 percent on Southern Baptist mission work at the associational, state convention, or national Convention level.
- The primary method for promoting stewardship in Southern Baptist congregations is teaching that a 10 percent tithe belongs to God, is due to God, and should be given to God. The next most common approach was preaching sermons on stewardship. Making a special appeal based on a specific need was the other approach employed by the majority of congregations.