

Reflections on Southern Baptist Baptisms

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Some people use statistics like a drunk uses a light pole—for support rather than illumination.

Introduction

Baptisms, their number and trends, have been and continue to be an important issue within Southern Baptist life. Articles and studies which explore issues related to baptisms have been put forth. Most of these have looked at baptisms for more recent times. Ten years ago an article analyzed baptisms in the SBC for the denomination's entire existence (Stanley and Jones, 1994). The researchers identified four major epochs of Baptisms in SBC life. The first epoch was from 1845 through 1920 and was characterized by an upward sloping trendline which projected an annual increase of 1,800 baptisms. The second epoch was from 1921 through 1942 and was characterized by a trendline with a slope projecting an annual increase of 1,110 baptisms. Thus, the trend line was not as steep as the first epoch. However, the number of baptisms was at a higher level during this epoch than it was during the first epoch. The third epoch was from 1943 through 1951 and was characterized by a trendline with a steep slope, projecting an annual increase of 23,000 baptisms. This epoch propelled baptisms to an even higher level. The fourth epoch was from 1952 through 1992 (the last year data was available to the researchers) and was characterized as plateaued. (The trendline had a slight negative slope with a projected annual loss of 375 baptisms.) The number of baptisms remained basically at the level that resulted from the third epoch. Since Stanley and Jones did their analysis, there is an additional twelve years of data (1993-2004). While several years of increased baptisms served to raise the trendline, the trend from 1950-2004 continues to be plateaued. The trendline for that period is basically flat, projecting an annual increase of only 45 baptisms.

The Numbers

This analysis looks at baptisms for the period from 1950 through 2004. Ranier (2005) addresses the issues related to the weaknesses of numbers as a measurement in Christian research. While in agreement with most of what is said, one can conclude that the measurements which we have, while not perfect, are realistic proxies for realities in the church and, if they are understood for what they are, provide adequate means for measuring, analyzing, and drawing conclusions. The data used for analysis all come from the ACP/UCL and the original source is the local congregations. The data used include:

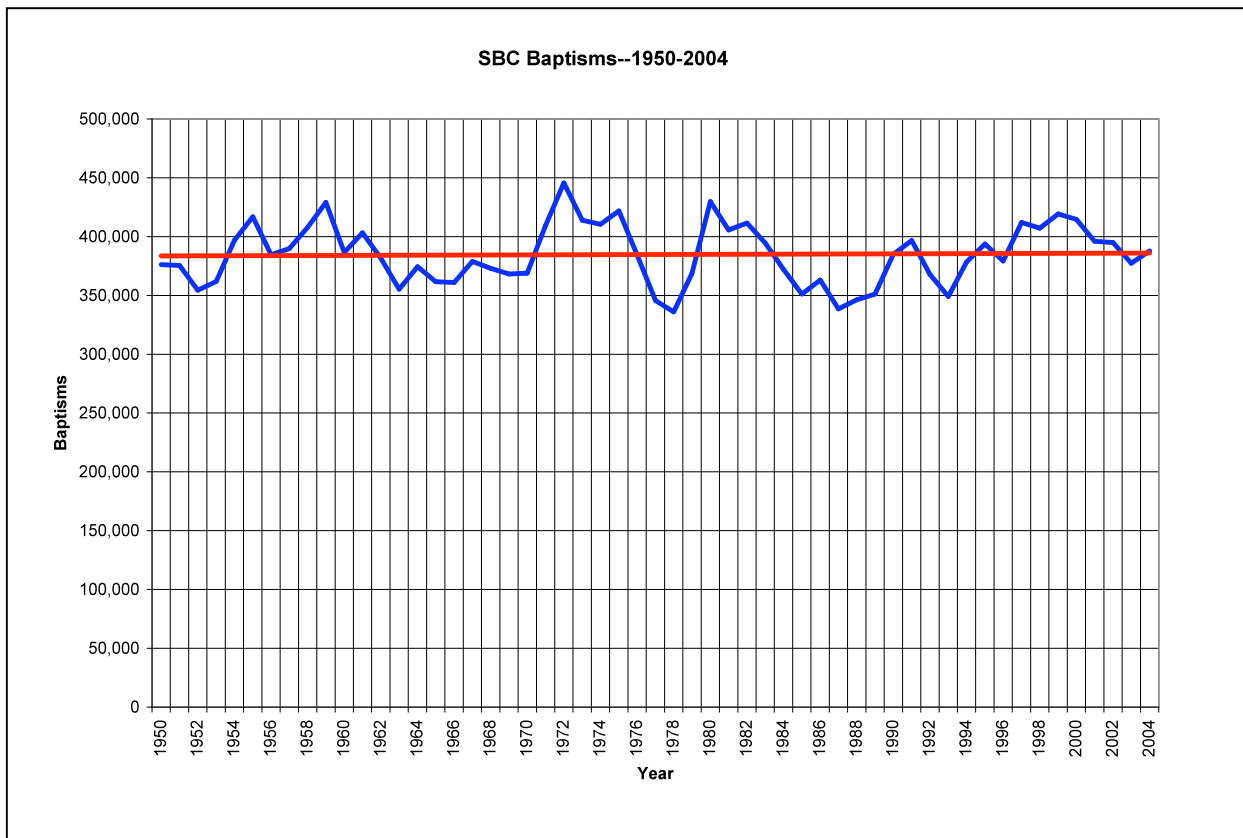
- (1) Total Baptisms—Total number of baptisms during the reporting year.
- (2) Total Members—Total of both Resident and Non-resident members added together.
- (3) Resident Members—Members who live close enough to the congregation to attend.

In addition to the above raw data, calculations of some of the raw data were used to derive other measurements, namely a ratio of baptisms to members. This was done

using both Total Membership and Resident Membership. The data is presented in Appendix A.

Figure 1 graphically presents Southern Baptists Total Baptisms for the period from 1950 through 2004. A trendline has been added. Several conclusions are evident from the figure. First, baptisms are basically flat for the time period—the trendline only showing an increase of 45 baptisms per year. Second, and related to the first conclusion, baptisms have stayed within a narrow band throughout the time period—from a low of 336,050 in 1978 to a high of 445,725 in 1972. Third, looking at the data reveals an upward trend for the years 1987-2004. Indeed the trendline for that period projects an annual increase in baptisms of 2,987. The trend for the earlier years (1950-1986) only projects an increase of 10 baptisms per year. Thus it appears that a change occurred around 1987 to reverse a downward trend. This reversal served only to end several years of decline and **did not** move baptisms off of their plateau into a new epoch.

Figure 1



Another measure of effectiveness in evangelism is the Baptisms-to-Membership Ratio. This ratio (based upon Total Membership) is one of the statistical items reported to the Convention each year and shows the number of members it “takes” to have one baptism.

This ratio has been increasing over the 1950-2004 time-period (which is reflective of less evangelistic effectiveness). In 1950 it took 19 members to baptize one person, while in 2004 it took 42 persons to baptize one person. Thus the ratio has increased by 2.2 times over the period. Some would say that Total Membership is not reflective of the true strength of the denomination as membership rolls tend to build and not be kept current. Resident Membership may be a better measure to use in calculating the ratio. When this is done, the numbers drop, **but the trend is the same**. In 1950 the ratio based upon Resident Members was 1:14, while in 2004 the same ratio was 1:29. The Resident Membership ratio increased over the 1950-2004 period by 2.1. Thus, the trend is the same regardless of which of the membership numbers is used. Ratios of Baptisms-to-Membership reveal declining evangelistic effectiveness among Southern Baptists.

The Mathematics

Some of the analysis is impacted by mathematics and the nature of the measurements.

First, the results of calculating the Baptisms-to-Membership Ratio is actually determined by the trends apparent in the two sets of data being used. The divisor for the ratio is Total Baptisms and it is basically a plateaued or flat distribution. The dividend is Total (or Resident) Membership and it is an increasing distribution. When you have a set of numbers increasing over time and a set of numbers basically flat over time, the resulting ratio of the two distributions will always be an increasing ratio. This is a principle that is operative when working with the Baptisms-to-Membership Ratio.

Second, one needs to understand the nature of the two measurements. Total Baptisms are reported for a twelve-month period. Thus, they fall back to zero each reporting cycle, i.e.—When a congregation reports the number of baptisms for a reporting period, they begin the next reporting period at zero. Membership figures, on the other hand, are reported as of a point in time (such as the end of the reporting year). These figures do not automatically fall to zero, rather they remain the same, i.e.—a congregation with 500 members at the end of the reporting year usually begins the next reporting cycle with 500 members.

Some Issues

An issue worth noting deals with the question: Who have Southern Baptist been adding to their membership rolls? This is important as it deals with the people who are expected to be evangelists. In what ways, if any, does the Southern Baptist membership differ from what it was in the early part of the 1950-2004 time-period? Possible sources for increases in membership among Southern Baptists include:

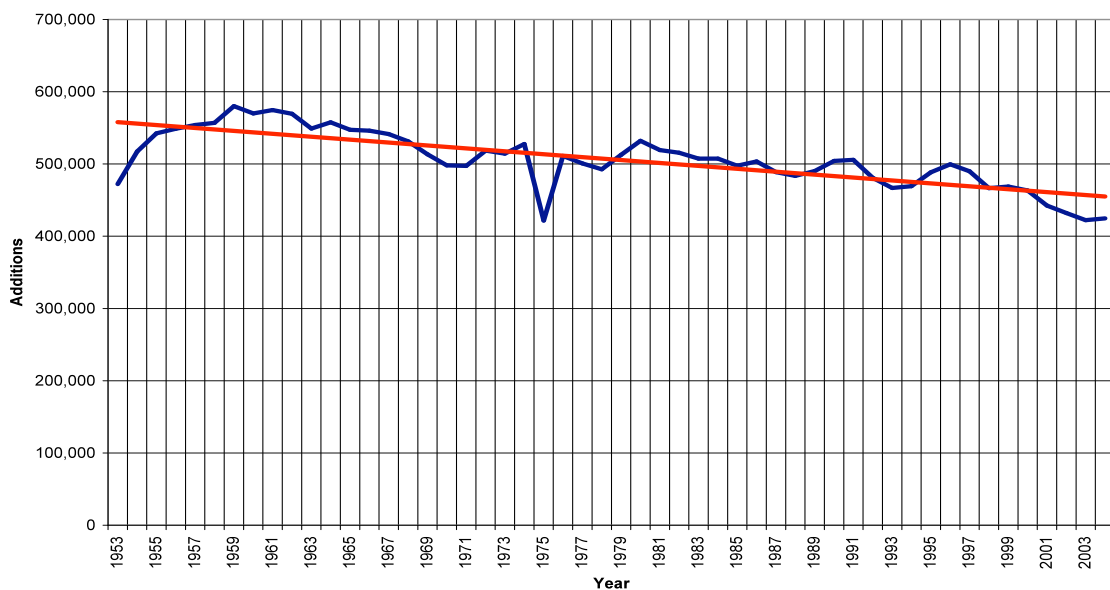
1. persons who have been baptized;
2. persons who have joined the membership by means other than baptism (letter or statement);
3. members of congregations already in existence who are affiliating with the SBC;
4. members of new congregations (churches and church-type missions).

A facet related to the latter two items is that Southern Baptists have added more Black and ethnic congregations and hence more Black and ethnic members. What type of impact, if any, have these changes had on evangelistic efforts? While a complete analysis was not possible, analysis did reveal that the 2004 Baptisms-to-Membership Ratio for the racial/ethnic groups was much lower (in the 1:20 range) than the ratio for White/Non-Hispanic congregations (1:43). The lower ratio points toward a greater evangelistic effectiveness among these congregations. In addition, for most groups when the 2004 ratio is compared with the comparable 1980 ratio, the ratio either remains about the same or drops (which is positive). This again points toward higher evangelistic effectiveness among the racial/ethnic groups.

Another group impacting membership is those persons who join the membership by ways other than baptism. (See Figure 2 and note the decline in the number of persons joining Southern Baptist churches through means other than baptism.) While the number has fluctuated in a band between 400,000 and 600,000 since 1953, the impact on Total Membership from this source is not that great. Many of the persons in this category are simply moving from one Southern Baptist church to another Southern Baptist church. Thus, the “additive” nature of this number is not nearly as great as the absolute number. Another factor which the researcher believes is operable, but not able to be documented, is an increase in the number of persons from other denominations who are entering Southern Baptist life through this means. While it used to be that persons coming from other Christian denominations were nearly always baptized again in a Southern Baptist church, the researcher feels that there has been an increase in accepting these persons into Southern Baptist membership without having them re-baptized. If this trend is actually taking place, the impact on membership from this source could be greater than it was in the past.

Figure 2

Other Additions for Southern Baptists--1953-2004



Demographic and societal trends which are operative in the United States have also impacted Southern Baptist membership. It would be reasonable to expect that since 1950, Southern Baptist members can be characterized as having become older, better educated, more affluent, and more urban. How have these developments changed the composition of Southern Baptist membership and impacted evangelistic effectiveness?

Jones (“Baptisms,” 2000) analyzed the age composition of baptisms from 1971-1999 and identified that there had been changes. There was a decline in the percentage of baptisms under 18 years of age and an increase in the percentage of baptisms of adults 30-59. Further analysis revealed that changes in baptisms were highly correlated with changes in the White US population. This analysis served to underscore the importance of demographic factors which may underlie baptism trends. While this correlation may decrease as Southern Baptist become more diverse, demographic and social trends will continue to be important factors in the baptism equation.

Jones also examined Southern Baptists’ effectiveness in reaching various age groups of the population. He found that Southern Baptists are more effective reaching the 9-11 year-old age group, followed by the 6-8 year-old and 12-17 year-old groups and concluded that “the pre-adult years are prime years for reaching people for Christ.” (p. 6)

There has been an increase in the number of larger churches in the SBC—the number of churches having 3,000 or more members going from 124 in 1968 to 389 in 2004. Indeed the phenomenon of “mega-churches” has been a development of the last 20-25 years. What impact, if any, does the existence of more larger churches have on evangelistic effectiveness within the SBC? When one calculates the 2004 Baptisms-to-Membership Ratio for congregations having 3,000 or more Total Members, the ratio is 1:41, not vastly different from the overall SBC ratio of 1:42. When the 2004 ratio is calculated for those Southern Baptist churches having 10,000 or more members (n=33), the ratio is 1:32—significantly better than the ratio for all large SBC churches. However, when the total span of church sizes is considered, the size category with the best ratio is the smallest (1-149 total members). See Table 1 for a complete reporting of the ratios by size.

Table 1

2004 Baptism Ratios By Total Membership Categories	
Total Membership	Ratio
1-149	1:23
150-299	1:37
300-499	1:41
500-999	1:48
1,000-1,999	1:49
2,000-2,999	1:48
3,000 Up	1:41
Overall SBC	1:42

How effective are the congregations that report the highest number of baptisms? When the Baptisms-to-Membership Ratio for the 100 churches that reported the highest number of baptisms in 2004 was calculated, the ratio for these churches was 1:22. This ratio represents a much higher level of evangelistic effectiveness than the SBC overall. However, nine of the 100 congregations had a ratio higher than the overall SBC ratio of 1:42! This analysis also revealed that 0.2% of SBC churches reported 9.4% of the Total Baptisms.

When Baptism-to-Membership Ratios are analyzed by age of the congregation (using Year Organized), it is obvious that younger churches are more effective in evangelism than older ones. Churches five years old or younger have a ratio of 1:10, while those 25-50 years of age have a ratio of 1:42 and those more than 50 years of age have a ratio of 1:52. Table 2 presents the ratios for the different age groupings of churches.

Table 2

2004 Baptism Ratios By Age of Church	
Year Organized	Ratio
2000-2004	1:10
1995-1999	1:17
1990-1994	1:21
1985-1989	1:26
1980-1984	1:26
1955-1979	1:42
Before 1955	1:52

Some Observations

1. Southern Baptists are in the fourth epoch of baptism reporting. The current epoch is the second longest epoch and is the only one which reflects a plateau. The other three epochs all reflected a growth trend.
2. All indications are that the Southern Baptist Convention has been, since 1950, in an epoch of plateaued baptisms and decreasing evangelism effectiveness as measured by the number of baptisms and the Baptisms-to-Membership Ratio. During this 55-year period, Southern Baptists have engaged in many activities and emphases whose goal was to increase baptisms and evangelism. It would appear that none of these actions have resulted in any long-term, sustainable increase of evangelistic growth
3. Racial/ethnic congregations appear to be more effective in evangelism (as measured by the Baptisms-to-Membership Ratio) than white/Non-Hispanic congregations.
4. The age-composition of Southern Baptist baptisms has changed over the years, being highly correlated with the changes in the US White population.

5. Southern Baptists appear to be more effective in reaching pre-adult age persons and these are prime years for evangelism.
6. Overall, larger SBC churches (3,000 or more Total Members) did not appear to be any more effective in evangelism than the SBC overall. However, extremely large Southern Baptist churches (10,000 or more members) did seem to be more effective than either all large churches or the overall SBC.
7. The top 100 churches in Total Baptisms seem to be more effective in evangelism than any of the groupings of Southern Baptist congregations which were examined. However, some of the churches in this grouping had a Baptisms-to-Total Membership Ratio higher than the overall SBC.
8. The Baptisms-to-Membership Ratio is lower for smaller churches than for larger churches. There is not a great deal of change in the ratio after a church reaches 500 in Total Membership.
9. Newer churches tend to be more effective in evangelism than older churches.
10. Factors which may have impacted Southern Baptist evangelism effectiveness are many and complex. Some of them are inter-related. (For example racial/ethnic churches tend to be more effective in evangelism than White, Non-Hispanic churches. But, these churches tend to be smaller churches and smaller churches are more effective in evangelism. Which of these factors—racial/ethnic make-up or size—has the most impact?) One should be careful in over-simplifying the issues which may be at work and suggesting solutions. Indeed, some of the major variables may be very difficult to measure and analyze.
11. This analysis and the accompanying reflections are basically of a descriptive nature. They do not answer many of the significant causal issues related to the plateau of baptisms and the decline in evangelistic effectiveness. Hopefully, they had shed illumination on some aspects of this significant aspect of Southern Baptist life and will spark additional analysis.

Bibliography

Jones, Phillip B. "Baptisms," Strategic Planning Indicators, Number 2, Summer 2000. (This is a publication of Strategic Planning Support, NAMB).

Ranier, Thom S. "A Resurgence Not Yet Realized: Evangelistic Effectiveness in the Southern Baptist Convention Since 1979," The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology, Vol. 9, Number 1 (Spring 2005), pp. 54-69.

Stanley, Richie C. and Jones, Phillip B. "Four Major Epochs of Baptisms in SBC," ResearchReview, Winter 1994, Number 2, pp. 3 and 6.

Appendix A

Data from the Annual Church Profile

SBC Data from Uniform Church Letter and Annual Church Profile

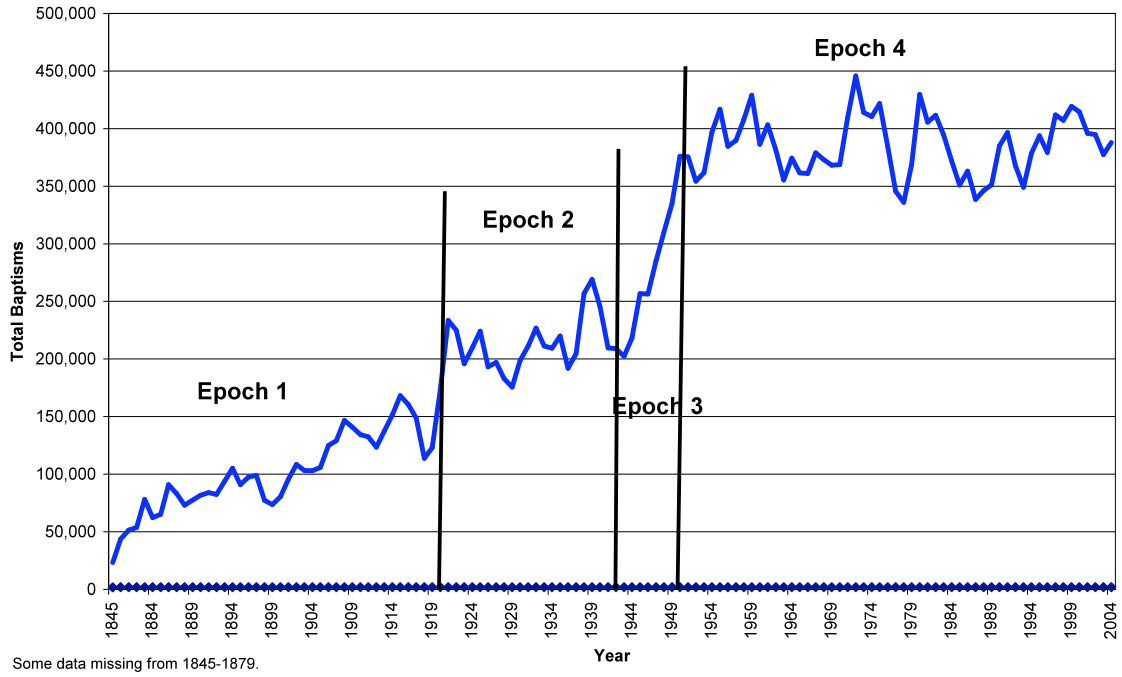
YEAR	Baptisms	Total Mem	TM/Bapt	Resident Mem	RM/Bapt
1950	376,085	7,079,889	19	5,224,958	14
1951	375,525	7,373,498	20	5,441,642	14
1952	354,384	7,634,493	22	5,290,704	15
1953	361,835	7,886,016	22	5,425,579	15
1954	396,857	8,169,491	21	5,560,156	14
1955	416,867	8,474,741	20	5,985,582	14
1956	384,627	8,708,823	23	6,224,892	16
1957	389,716	8,966,255	23	6,491,569	17
1958	407,892	9,206,758	23	6,680,375	16
1959	429,063	9,485,276	22	6,936,284	16
1960	386,469	9,731,591	25	7,061,544	18
1961	403,315	9,978,488	25	7,261,747	18
1962	381,510	10,193,052	27	7,381,072	19
1963	355,325	10,395,940	29	7,525,179	21
1964	374,418	10,601,515	28	7,747,196	21
1965	361,634	10,772,712	30	7,878,220	22
1966	360,959	10,949,493	30	7,989,419	22
1967	378,937	11,142,726	29	7,924,129	21
1968	373,025	11,332,229	30	8,208,482	22
1969	368,225	11,489,613	31	8,312,569	23
1970	368,863	11,629,880	32	8,451,769	23
1971	409,659	11,826,463	29	8,482,724	21
1972	445,725	12,067,284	27	8,784,699	20
1973	413,990	12,297,346	30	8,925,026	22
1974	410,482	12,515,842	30	9,088,409	22
1975	421,809	12,735,663	30	9,244,524	22
1976	384,496	12,922,605	34	9,361,844	24
1977	345,690	13,083,199	38	9,443,431	27
1978	336,050	13,196,979	39	9,491,280	28
1979	368,738	13,379,073	36	9,604,482	26
1980	429,742	13,606,808	32	9,767,343	23
1981	405,608	13,789,580	34	9,908,157	24
1982	411,554	13,998,252	34	10,063,140	24
1983	394,606	14,185,454	36	10,161,748	26
1984	372,028	14,349,657	39	10,250,707	28
1985	351,071	14,486,403	41	10,298,106	29
1986	363,124	14,618,567	40	10,375,379	29
1987	338,495	14,727,770	44	10,399,810	31
1988	346,320	14,818,496	43	10,434,911	30
1989	351,107	14,913,538	42	10,452,645	30
1990	385,031	15,044,413	39	10,563,494	27
1991	396,668	15,238,283	38	10,746,094	27
1992	367,847	15,365,486	42	10,859,765	30
1993	349,073	15,404,621	44	10,939,093	31
1994	378,463	15,619,912	41	11,094,044	29
1995	393,811	15,668,077	40	11,097,362	28

1996	379,344	15,694,050	41	10,710,197	28
1997	412,027	15,891,514	39	10,813,215	26
1998	407,264	15,729,356	39	10,737,017	26
1999	419,342	15,851,756	38	11,106,639	26
2000	414,657	15,960,308	38	11,141,427	27
2001	395,930	16,062,920	41	11,108,768	28
2002	394,893	16,137,736	41	11,189,579	28
2003	377,357	16,205,050	43	11,346,456	30
2004	387,947	16,267,494	42	11,365,161	29

Appendix B

Four Epochs of Baptisms in SBC

Southern Baptist Baptisms 1845-2004

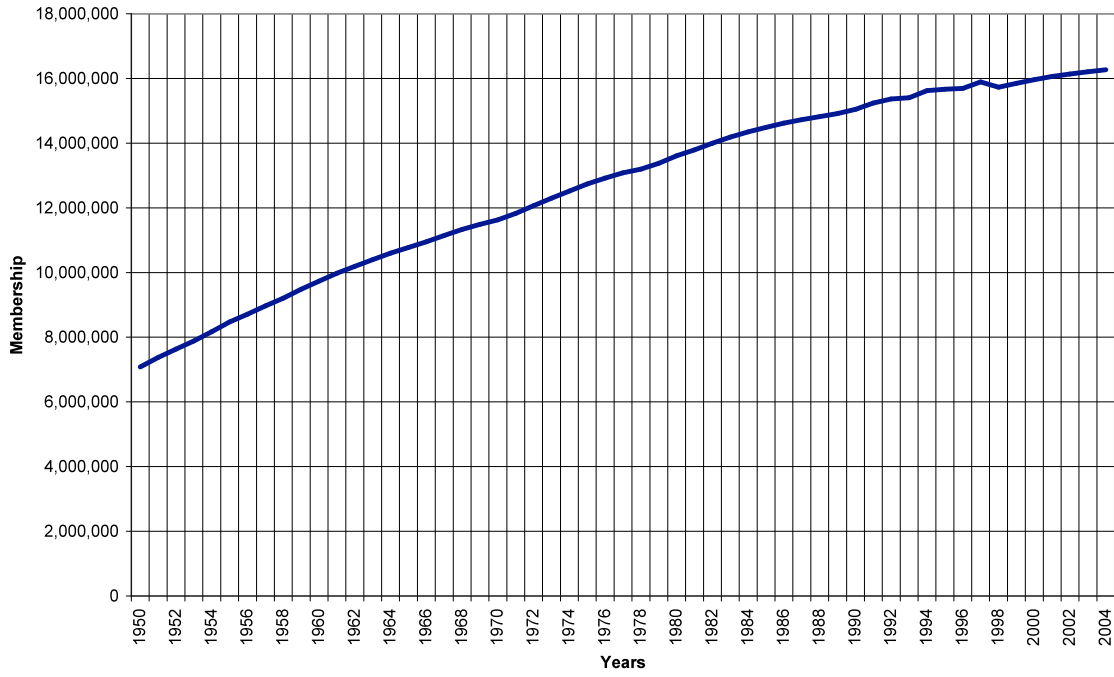


Adapted from: Stanley, Richie C. and Jones, Phillip B. "Four Major Epochs of Baptisms in SBC," ResearchReview, Winter 1994, Number 2, pp. 3.

Appendix C

Southern Baptist Total Membership

Southern Baptist Total Membership--1950-2004



Annual % Change in Total Membership--1951-2004

