

SBC reports baptism rate lowest in decade: Membership dropped; attendance increased

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The number of baptisms in Southern Baptist churches—considered a key measure of vitality and evangelism—dropped to its lowest level in a decade last year, the denomination has announced.

The announcement came as outgoing SBC president, Frank Page, author of a recent book, *The Incredible Shrinking Church*, said in a May 1 conference call to fellow pastors that resistance to change and succumbing to distractions could kill off more than half of the denomination's 44,000 congregations by 2030.

The nation's largest Protestant denomination has highlighted its need to increase baptisms in recent years, with special emphases at annual meetings and a nationwide tour by a past president. But data gathered by the convention's LifeWay Christian Resources show that baptisms have declined for the third straight year.

Baptisms declined in 2007 by 5 percent to 345,941, compared to 364,826 in 2006.

"This report is truly disheartening," said Thom S. Rainer, president of LifeWay Christian Resources, announcing the findings on April 23. "We are a denomination that, for the most part, has lost its evangelistic passion."

Southern Baptists also saw a drop of almost 40,000 in membership, from 16,306,246 in 2006 to 16,266,920 in 2007. At the same time, attendance increased slightly and the number of congregations grew by 1 percent. —*Religion News Service, Ecumenical News International*