

STRATEGIC PLANNING INDICATORS

A PUBLICATION OF STRATEGIC PLANNING SUPPORT, NORTH AMERICAN MISSION BOARD, SBC
NUMBER 2, SUMMER 2000

BAPTISMS

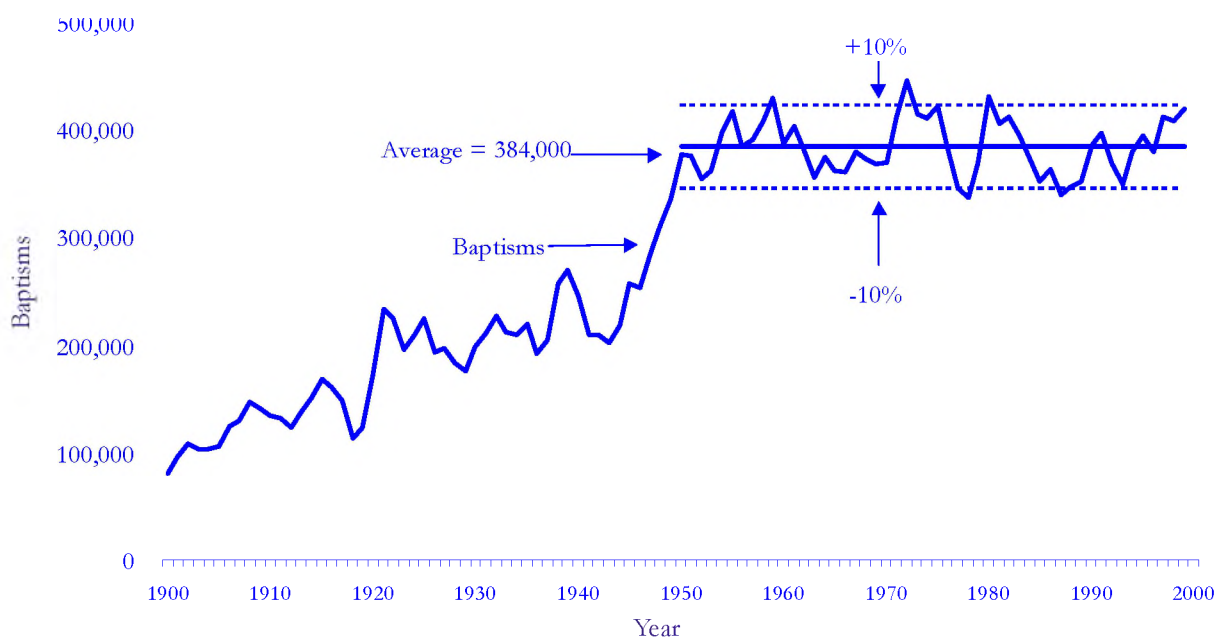
Southern Baptist churches reported 419,342 baptisms for the 1999 church year. This is the largest number of baptisms reported since 1980 and the fifth largest in the history of the Convention. (See table 1.) The 1999 figures represent a 3 percent increase over the number reported for 1998 and the third straight year Convention churches have reported more than 400,000 baptisms. Since 1994, there has been an overall upward movement in baptisms.

Despite the positive news, there is nothing to indicate that Southern Baptists have climbed off the plateau in baptisms that has existed since 1950. During this time, baptisms have ranged from a high of 446,000 in 1972 to a low of 336,000 in 1978, but have stayed within ± 10 percent of the average 384,000 for most years. (See figure 1.) The implication is that no specific program or emphasis has been able to create a sustainable trend of increased baptisms during the past half century.

Table 1—Largest numbers of baptisms reported by year

Rank	Year	Baptisms
1	1972	445,725
2	1980	429,742
3	1959	429,063
4	1975	421,809
5	1999	419,342
6	1955	416,867
7	1973	413,990
8	1997	412,027
9	1982	411,554
10	1974	410,482

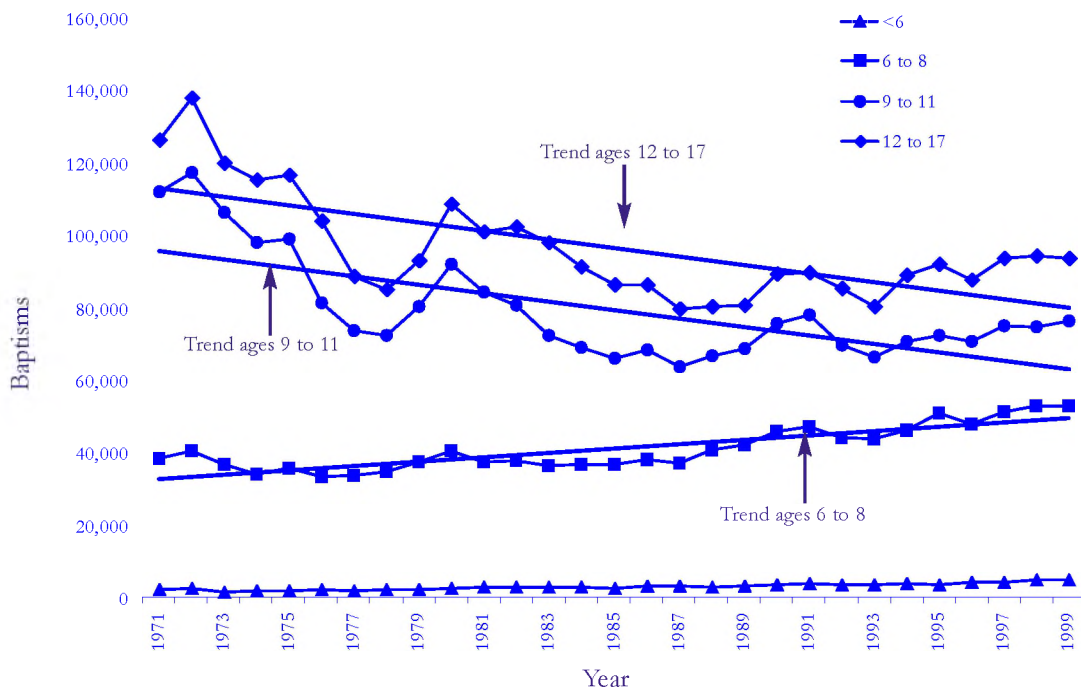
Figure 1—Baptisms have fluctuated around a 384,000 average since 1950



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Figure 2—Baptisms of older children and youth are declining while increasing for younger children



Baptisms by Age Group

The age composition of baptisms has changed during the past 29 years. In 1971, the first year that age data are available, 2 of 3 baptisms (68%) were persons under age 18. By 1983, 1 of 2 baptisms (53%) was under age 18. Since 1984, baptisms of persons under age 18 have stabilized around 55 percent of the total. The shift in composition was primarily due to declines in baptisms of children ages 9 to 11 and youth ages 12 to 17, and an increase in baptisms of adults ages 30 to 59.

Figures 2 (above) and 3 (page 5) illustrate the trends in baptisms by age group over the past 29 years (also see table 3 on page 4). In addition to the long-term declines of baptisms of children ages 9 to 11

and youth ages 12 to 17, there has been a decline in baptisms of adults ages 18 to 29.

In contrast, there have been long-term increases in baptisms of adults ages 30 to 59 and baptisms of children ages 6 to 8. In addition to these two age groups, increases have occurred in baptisms of persons ages 60 and older and children under age 6; however, both of these age groupings account for only 3 percent and 1 percent, respectively, of the total number of baptisms reported.

The number of baptisms in each of the age groups is correlated with the White population in the corresponding age group. For example, two-thirds of the variation in the number of baptisms ages 30 to 59 can be explained by the variation in the

count of White population ages 30 to 59. As baby boomers reached middle age and the number of people in this age group increased, baptisms increased. Likewise, the growth in baptisms of children ages 6 to 8, children under age 6, and persons over age 60 is largely a result of the increasing population in these age groups. Specifically, baptisms of children ages 6 to 8 are the most highly correlated of any of the baptism age cohorts with its comparable population count. Eighty-seven percent of the variation in baptisms of children ages 6 to 8 can be explained by the variation in the number of children in this age group.

In the same manner, the overall decline in the number of baptisms of persons ages 12 to 17, children

—continued on page 5

Table 2—Total baptisms in the Southern Baptist Convention, 1900-1999

Year	Number of Baptisms	Year	Number of Baptisms	Year	Number of Baptisms
1900	80,465	1935	220,047	1970	368,863
1901	95,610	1936	191,993	1971	409,659
1902	108,517	1937	204,567	1972	445,725
1903	103,241	1938	256,814	1973	413,990
1904	103,021	1939	269,155	1974	410,482
1905	105,905	1940	245,500	1975	421,809
1906	124,911	1941	209,593	1976	384,496
1907	129,152	1942	209,127	1977	345,690
1908	146,717	1943	202,301	1978	336,050
1909	140,980	1944	218,223	1979	368,738
1910	134,440	1945	256,699	1980	429,742
1911	132,396	1946	253,361	1981	405,608
1912	123,471	1947	285,152	1982	411,554
1913	137,396	1948	310,226	1983	394,606
1914	151,441	1949	334,892	1984	372,028
1915	168,235	1950	376,085	1985	351,071
1916	160,497	1951	375,525	1986	363,124
1917	148,699	1952	354,384	1987	338,495
1918	113,833	1953	361,835	1988	346,320
1919	123,069	1954	396,857	1989	351,107
1920	173,595	1955	416,867	1990	385,031
1921	233,571	1956	384,627	1991	396,668
1922	224,844	1957	389,716	1992	367,847
1923	195,864	1958	407,892	1993	349,073
1924	209,676	1959	429,063	1994	378,463
1925	224,191	1960	386,469	1995	393,811
1926	193,279	1961	403,315	1996	379,344
1927	197,155	1962	381,510	1997	412,027
1928	183,020	1963	355,325	1998	407,264
1929	175,631	1964	374,418	1999	419,342
1930	198,579	1965	361,634		
1931	211,253	1966	360,959		
1932	226,855	1967	378,937		
1933	211,393	1968	373,025		
1934	209,364	1969	368,225		

Source: Annual Church Profile and Uniform Church Letter, LifeWay Christian Resource Center, Nashville, Tenn.

Table 3—Baptisms by age group, 1971-1999

Year	Under							Total	Under							Total
	6	6 to 8	9 to 11	12 to 17	18 to 29	30 to 59	60 +		6	6 to 8	9 to 11	12 to 17	18 to 29	30 to 59	60 +	
	Number of Baptisms								Percentage of Baptisms							
1971	1,899	38,298	111,890	126,127	71,845	53,623	5,977	409,659	0.5 %	9.3 %	27.3 %	30.8 %	17.5 %	13.1 %	1.5 %	100.0 %
1972	2,323	40,306	117,141	137,667	81,964	57,962	8,362	445,725	0.5	9.0	26.3	30.9	18.4	13.0	1.9	100.0
1973	1,465	36,776	106,323	119,844	83,112	57,734	8,736	413,990	0.4	8.9	25.7	28.9	20.1	13.9	2.1	100.0
1974	1,708	34,237	97,955	115,317	90,176	61,267	9,822	410,482	0.4	8.3	23.9	28.1	22.0	14.9	2.4	100.0
1975	1,812	35,723	99,052	116,564	91,951	66,919	9,788	421,809	0.4	8.5	23.5	27.6	21.8	15.9	2.3	100.0
1976	2,061	33,501	81,613	103,981	88,757	64,465	10,118	384,496	0.5	8.7	21.2	27.0	23.1	16.8	2.6	100.0
1977	1,704	33,892	74,027	88,838	76,444	61,826	8,959	345,690	0.5	9.8	21.4	25.7	22.1	17.9	2.6	100.0
1978	1,825	34,747	72,399	85,138	73,856	58,678	9,407	336,050	0.5	10.3	21.5	25.3	22.0	17.5	2.8	100.0
1979	2,087	37,307	80,360	93,142	82,497	63,778	9,567	368,738	0.6	10.1	21.8	25.3	22.4	17.3	2.6	100.0
1980	2,377	40,295	92,168	108,633	100,260	75,462	10,547	429,742	0.6	9.4	21.4	25.3	23.3	17.6	2.5	100.0
1981	2,519	37,367	84,364	101,076	95,731	73,837	10,714	405,608	0.6	9.2	20.8	24.9	23.6	18.2	2.6	100.0
1982	2,631	37,690	80,719	102,259	99,460	77,982	10,813	411,554	0.6	9.2	19.6	24.8	24.2	18.9	2.6	100.0
1983	2,556	36,568	72,623	97,984	95,537	78,400	10,938	394,606	0.6	9.3	18.4	24.8	24.2	19.9	2.8	100.0
1984	2,541	36,700	69,323	91,431	86,865	74,572	10,596	372,028	0.7	9.9	18.6	24.6	23.3	20.0	2.8	100.0
1985	2,455	36,764	66,190	86,499	78,816	69,885	10,462	351,071	0.7	10.5	18.9	24.6	22.5	19.9	3.0	100.0
1986	2,987	37,979	68,602	86,387	82,674	73,376	11,119	363,124	0.8	10.5	18.9	23.8	22.8	20.2	3.1	100.0
1987	2,938	37,115	63,836	79,900	75,282	69,135	10,289	338,495	0.9	11.0	18.9	23.6	22.2	20.4	3.0	100.0
1988	2,738	40,591	66,936	80,391	75,459	69,641	10,564	346,320	0.8	11.7	19.3	23.2	21.8	20.1	3.1	100.0
1989	3,043	42,181	68,821	80,704	74,755	71,192	10,411	351,107	0.9	12.0	19.6	23.0	21.3	20.3	3.0	100.0
1990	3,320	45,870	75,818	89,596	80,595	78,358	11,474	385,031	0.9	11.9	19.7	23.3	20.9	20.4	3.0	100.0
1991	3,665	47,021	78,341	89,691	82,394	83,888	11,668	396,668	0.9	11.9	19.7	22.6	20.8	21.1	2.9	100.0
1992	3,405	43,910	70,035	85,473	74,257	79,495	11,272	367,847	0.9	11.9	19.0	23.2	20.2	21.6	3.1	100.0
1993	3,386	43,854	66,648	80,438	67,416	76,356	10,975	349,073	1.0	12.6	19.1	23.0	19.3	21.9	3.1	100.0
1994	3,610	46,041	70,923	89,085	71,448	85,986	11,370	378,463	1.0	12.2	18.7	23.5	18.9	22.7	3.0	100.0
1995	3,262	50,594	72,638	92,032	71,275	93,583	10,427	393,811	0.8	12.8	18.4	23.4	18.1	23.8	2.6	100.0
1996	3,873	47,705	70,964	87,653	68,203	88,917	12,029	379,344	1.0	12.6	18.7	23.1	18.0	23.4	3.2	100.0
1997	4,133	51,051	75,238	93,593	76,406	98,948	12,658	412,027	1.0	12.4	18.3	22.7	18.5	24.0	3.1	100.0
1998	4,516	52,509	74,739	94,341	71,194	96,796	13,169	407,264	1.1	12.9	18.4	23.2	17.5	23.8	3.2	100.0
1999	4,574	52,788	76,510	93,757	74,060	103,620	14,033	419,342	1.1	12.6	18.2	22.4	17.7	24.7	3.3	100.0

Source: Annual Church Profile and Uniform Church Letter, LifeWay Christian Resource Center, Nashville, Tenn.

ages 9 to 11, and young adults ages 18 to 29 can be explained by the overall decline in the White population in these age groups. All are highly correlated.¹

An interesting change is now taking place. Even though there was an overall decline from 1971 through 1999, since 1990 White persons ages 12 to 17 have been increasing in the United States. Baptisms track so closely with the population that baptisms for this age group have also increased in recent years. Baptisms of children ages 9 to 11 and young adults ages 18 to 29 have both slightly increased in recent years—the result of population increases.

The conclusion is that increases or decreases of baptisms in any age group are more a function of population shifts in the United States

than of change in the way Southern Baptist churches are emphasizing or implementing evangelism. This is *not* a deterministic relationship in that Southern Baptists can do nothing to promote (or even inhibit) baptisms—however, we do need to recognize the importance of the demographic forces underlying the trends.

Age-Specific Baptism Rates (Per 1,000 Population)

One way of examining the effectiveness of Southern Baptists in reaching the lost is to calculate the number of baptisms per 1,000 population in an age group. Table 4 lists a 20-year average of age-specific baptism rates. For example, Southern Baptist churches baptize 8.4 persons ages 9 to 11 for every 1,000 children ages 9 to 11. Southern Baptists are more effective in reaching this age group than any

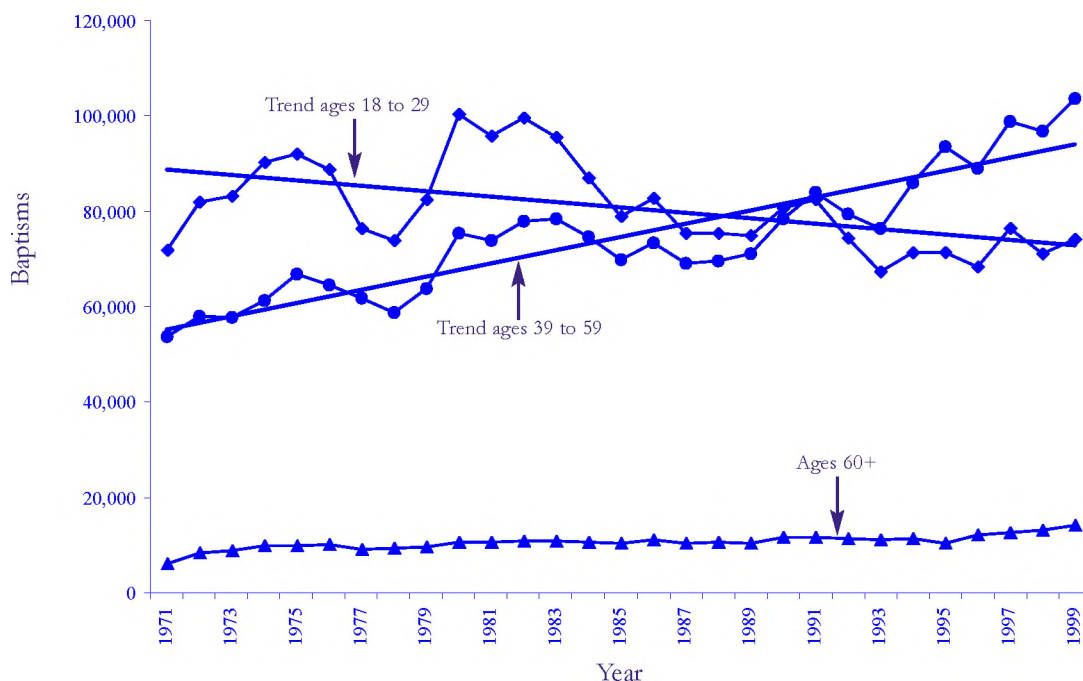
Table 4—Baptisms per 1,000 White population

under 6	0.2
6 to 8	5.1
9 to 11	8.4
12 to 17	5.1
18 to 29	2.0
30 to 59	1.0
60+	0.3

other age. Beyond this age group, Southern Baptists seem to be equally effective in reaching 6- to 8-year-olds and 12- to 17-year-olds—a shared rate of 5.1 baptisms per 1,000 population.

The information in table 4 suggests that past age 11, it becomes increasingly difficult to reach people for Christ. For example, Southern Baptists are over 8 times more likely to reach a 9- to 11-year-old child for Christ than a 30- to 59-year-old

Figure 3—Baptisms of younger adults are decreasing while increasing for older adults



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adult. Based on previous research that indicated only 40 percent of adults baptized in Southern Baptist churches did so as the result of a conversion experience, the challenge of reaching an adult for Christ is even more formidable than the numbers in the table suggest.² The chance of reaching someone over the age of 60 is slim indeed—but not impossible.

The information in table 4 is generally consistent with other research and informal observation that the pre-adult years are prime years for reaching people for Christ. One major exception is that the age-specific baptism rate for youth ages 12 to 17 appears inconsistent with recent observations by the Barna Research Group indicating that the teen years are not prime years for evangelistic activity. Specifically,

Barna concludes that teens (as well as adults) have little chance of accepting Christ as their savior.³ In contrast, by comparing age-specific baptism rates, it does not appear that Southern Baptists are having unusual difficulty reaching teens compared with reaching children ages 6 to 8 and children ages 9 to 11. The magnitude of difference between these age-specific baptism rates is not as great as Barna found between the likelihood of converting children and the likelihood of converting teenagers. (Barna found that the likelihood of a 5- to 13-year-old accepting Christ was 32% while that likelihood for a 14- to 18-year-old was only 4%.) Conclusions based on the age-specific baptism rates for Southern Baptists do not invalidate Barna's conclusions because the data underlying both

are not strictly comparable. Barna's research is intended to be inclusive of the whole Christian church in the United States, while the age-specific baptism rates only represent Southern Baptists' efforts in reaching certain age groups. It is possible that both conclusions are true: Teens are hard to reach *and* Southern Baptists are relatively effective in reaching teens (at least as compared to reaching younger children).

The age-specific baptism rates in table 4 are 20-year averages. There have been some changes in these rates over the years. In summary, Southern Baptists have become less effective in reaching 9- to 11-year-olds and more effective in reaching 6- to 8-year-olds. The other age-specific baptism rates have remained approximately the same.

¹It was expected that changes in baptisms, especially for children and youth, were correlated with changes in the White population in these age groups since Southern Baptist churches, while increasingly diverse, are still predominantly White. A database was constructed of population estimates of the White population in each of the age groups and correlated with number of baptisms in each age group. Baptisms in all age groups were highly correlated with the White population. The correlation coefficients are as follows: for under age 6, $r = .77$; for ages 6 to 8, $r = .93$; for ages 9 to 11, $r = .55$; for ages 12 to 17, $r = .80$; for ages 18 to 29, $r = .77$; for ages 30 to 59, $r = .81$; for ages 60+, $r = .63$. The source for the White population estimates is the Bureau of the Census. The racial category "White" does include a portion of the Hispanic population.

²Phillip B. Jones, et. al., *A Study of Adults Baptized in Southern Baptist Churches*, 1993.

³*The Barna Report*, October-December 1999.



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