

RESEARCH REPORT

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Analysis of Southern Baptist Churches by Size of Church

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North American Mission Board

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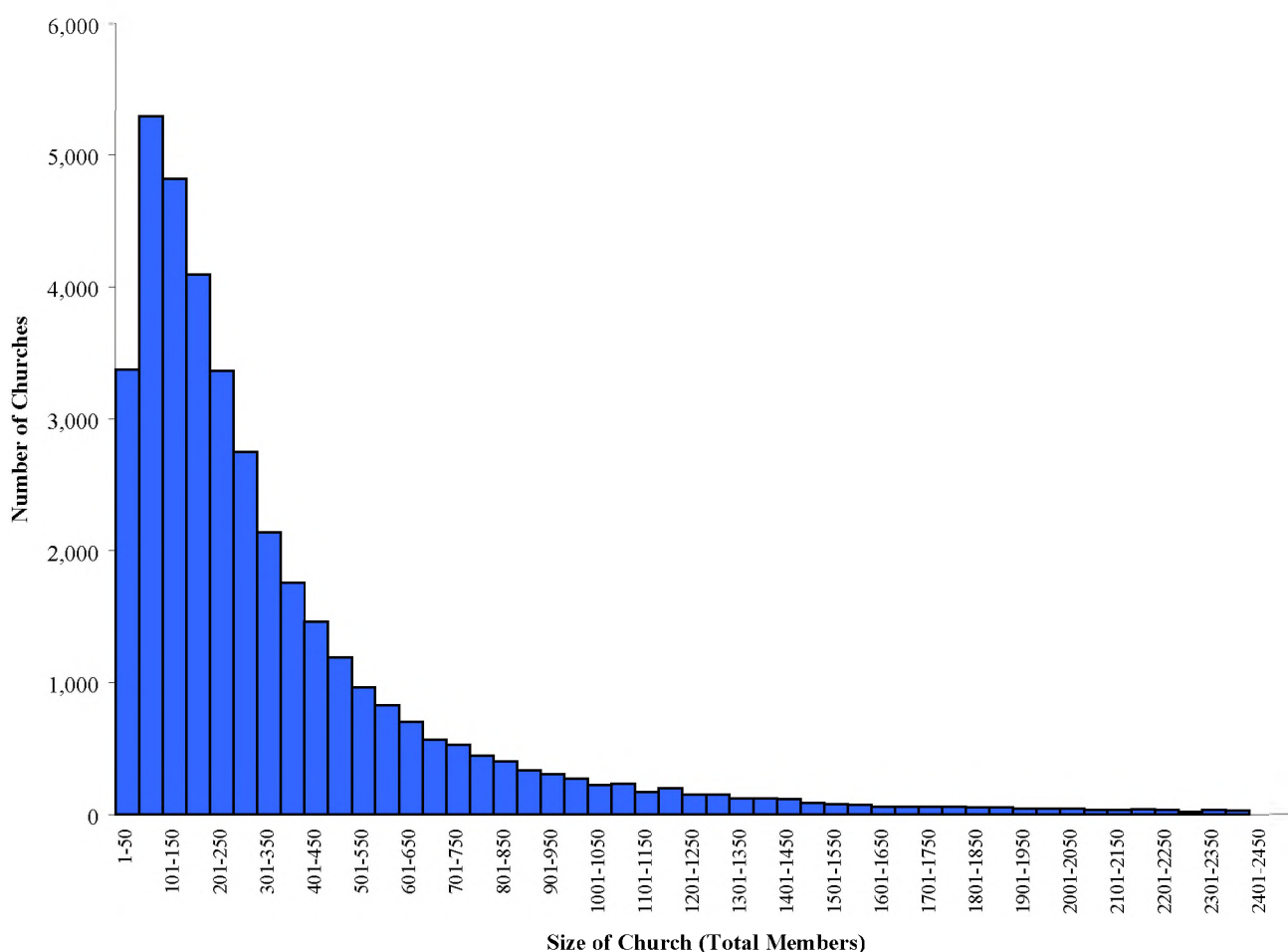
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Introduction

The Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) is predominantly comprised of smaller-size churches. This is illustrated in figure 1, which displays the frequency distribution of churches, by size of church. Churches are grouped into intervals with an interval width of 50 total members. The first column corresponds to the number of churches that have from 1 to 50 total members. Likewise the second column graphs the number of churches with 51 to 100 members. After the size category of 51 to 100 members, the number of churches in each progressively larger category gets continually smaller until there are relatively few churches in the very-large-church-size categories. This is an asymmetrical distribution with the bulk of Southern Baptist churches clustered on the smaller end of the distribution. Seventy percent of Southern Baptist churches have fewer than 400 members.

Figure 1—Number of SBC Churches by Size, 1995¹



In contrast, the distribution of members within the Convention looks very different. (This will be illustrated later in the report.) The majority of Southern Baptist members are in larger churches.

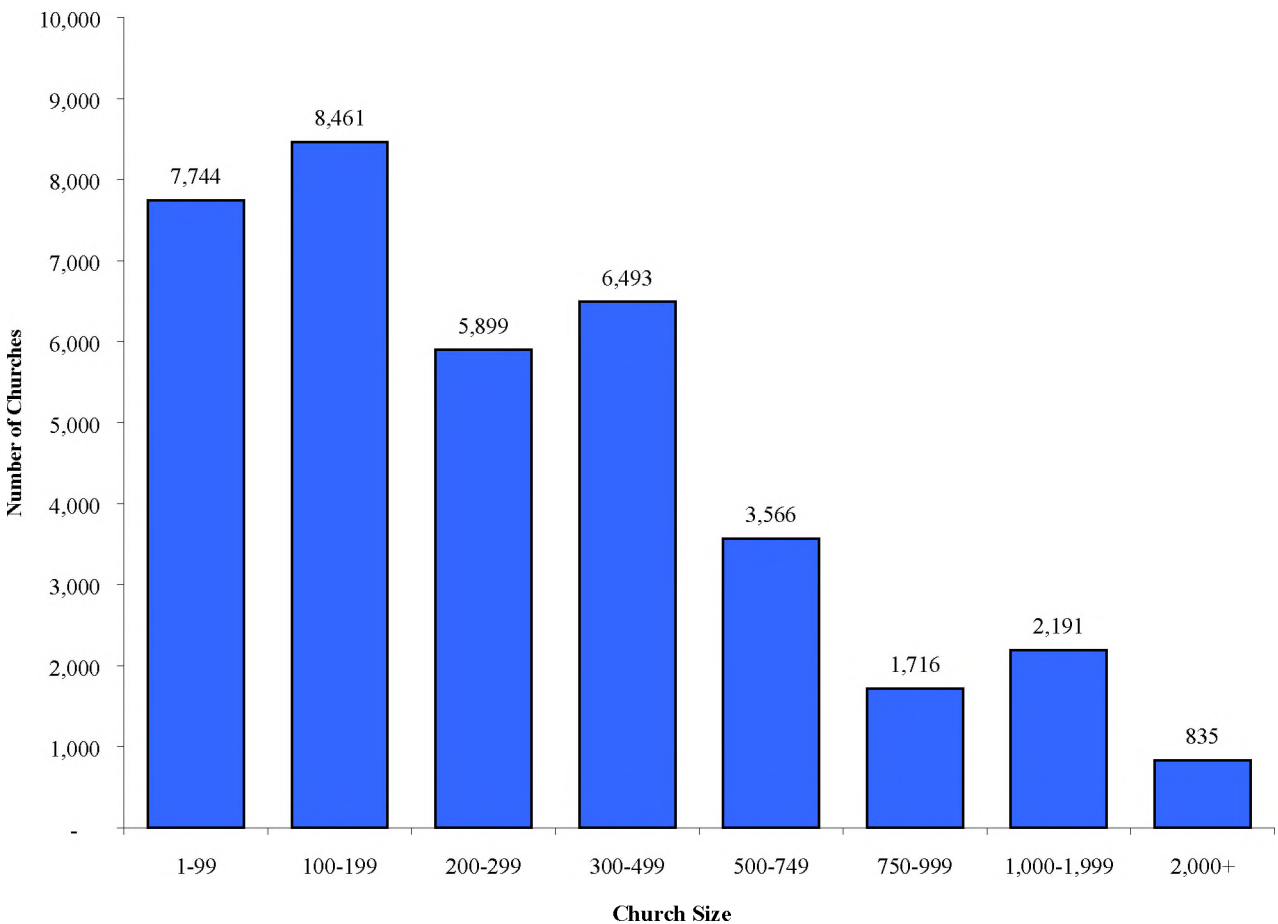
¹ This is not a complete frequency distribution, if it were a true representation the x-axis would extend past 28,000 in order to accommodate the very largest churches in the Convention.

Seventy percent of Southern Baptists are in churches that have more than 400 members. While relatively fewer in number, larger churches have a major impact on the Convention. They account for a significant portion of the Convention's membership, annual baptisms, program enrollments and financial resources.

This report uses eight different church-size categories to examine the contribution of different sizes of churches to the overall Southern Baptist Convention. These classifications are based on total membership as reported on the 1997 Annual Church Profile (ACP).² Examined in this report are number of churches, membership, attendance, baptisms, and various financial variables. The primary information in this report is communicated in graphical form. Each of the following pages begins with a graph and each graph is followed by a brief commentary.

² The official count of churches in the Southern Baptist Convention for 1997 is 40,887 churches. Total membership data is reported for 36,905 churches. The 1997 data used in this document are based on the Annual Church Profile reports for these 36,905 churches.

Figure 2—Number of SBC Churches by Size, 1997



Observations:

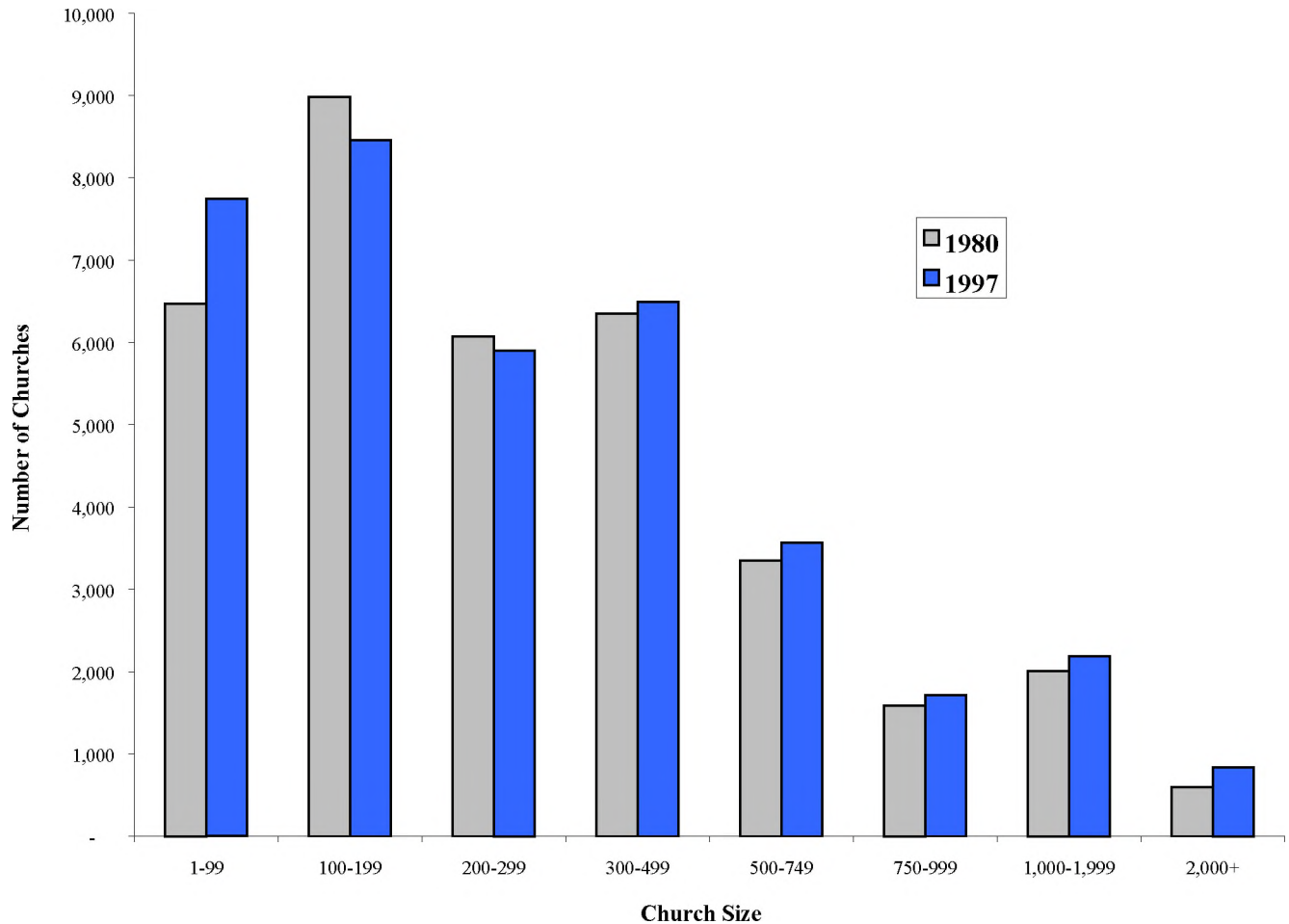
As pointed out in the introduction, the bulk of Southern Baptist churches are smaller churches. The median-size church—half are larger and half are smaller—is 233 total members.³ Note that 44 percent of churches have fewer than 200 members and 77 percent have 500 or fewer members. At the other end of the spectrum note that only 835 churches report more than 2,000 members⁴—this translates to 2 percent of all SBC churches. Churches with more than 1,000 members account for 8 percent of all churches.⁵

³ Further detail on the typical SBC church is found in *Research Review*, No. 6, Fall 96 attached to this report.

⁴ While there are 835 churches reporting more than 2,000 members, only slightly fewer than 100 churches report having more than 2,000 in worship service attendance on Sunday morning. Mega churches are sometimes defined as having 2,000 or more members or more rigorously defined as having 2,000 or more in worship service attendance during a week.

⁵ This also includes the 2 percent of churches that have 2,000 or more total members.

Figure 3—Number of Churches by Church Size, 1980 and 1997



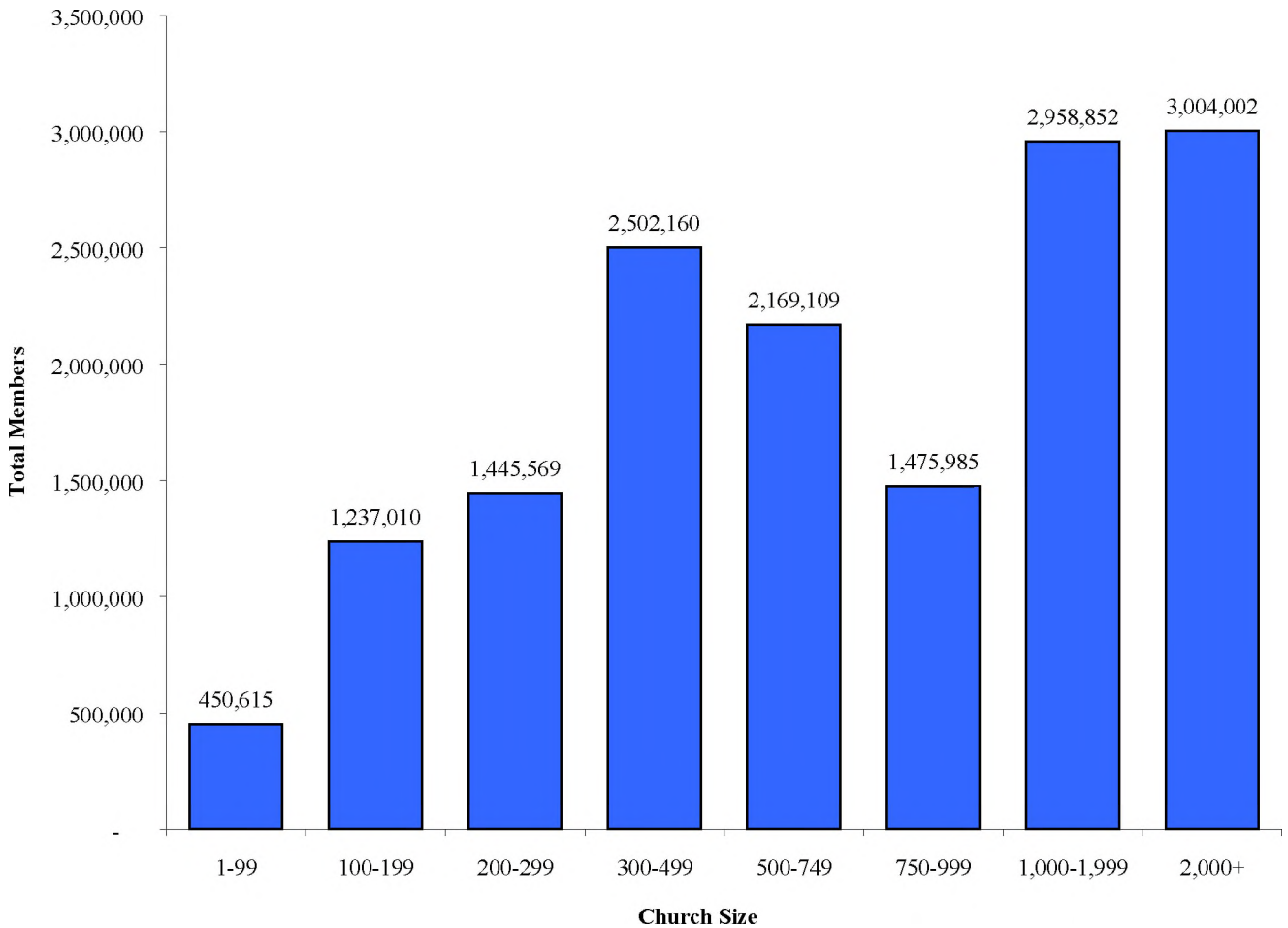
Observations:

This figure illustrates the change in the distribution of churches that has taken place from 1980 to 1997. This is not a complete picture because there are 4,000 churches on the 1997 ACP file that are not included in the analysis due to lack of membership data. In contrast, fewer than 500 churches are omitted from the 1980 distribution due to lack of information. Overall, there has been an increase of 5,000 constituted churches from 1980 to 1997, an average increase of about 300 a year.

Even though an incomplete picture, figure 3 does indicate that the largest percentage increase in churches has occurred for those with 2,000 or more members. The second largest percentage increase has occurred in the 1 to 99 member size category. Both these increases reflect two trends during the last 17 years—(1) the emphasis on church starting in the Convention and (2) the growth of the megachurch.

Only two categories declined in numbers during this period, churches from 100 to 199 members and churches with 200 to 299 members. It is a little surprising these two categories of churches declined in number over 17 years, given the overall increase in churches. There is no apparent explanation for the decline. Despite the changes, the overall distribution of churches has changed only slightly during the past 17 years.

Figure 4—Total Members by Church Size, 1997



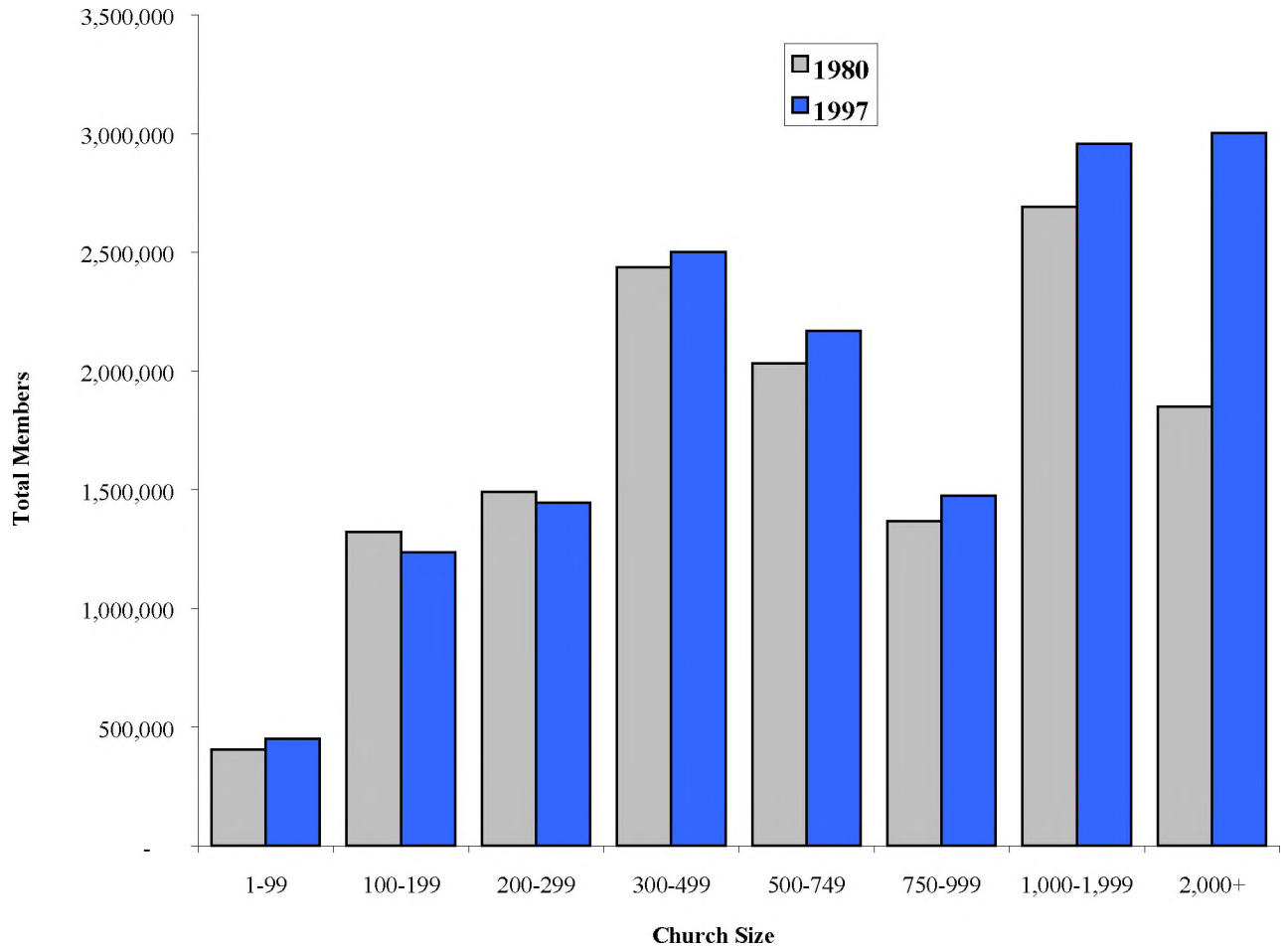
Observations:

To some extent, the distribution of members by church size appears to be the reverse image of the distribution of churches. The bulk of SBC membership is found in larger churches. While churches with 2,000 or more members represent only 2 percent of all SBC churches, they account for 20 percent of all members. Churches with 1,000 or more members account for only 8 percent of all churches yet they claim nearly 40 percent of all members.⁶ In contrast, churches with fewer than 300 members account for 44 percent of all SBC churches but only 11 percent of total membership.⁷

⁶ Churches with 2,000 or more members are included in this statement.

⁷ The official count of SBC total members for 1997 is 15,891,514. Of these total members, 96 percent are included in figure 4.

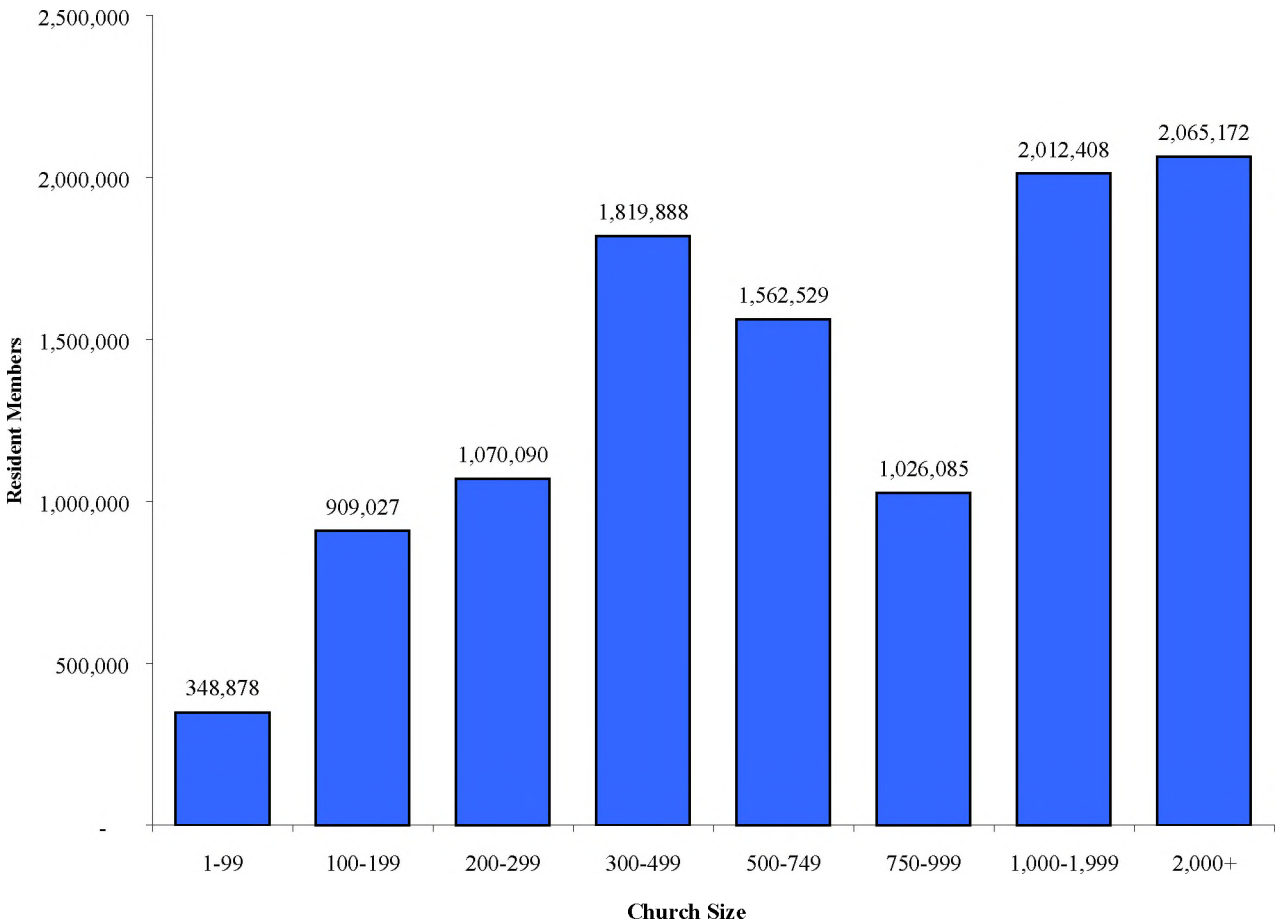
Figure 5—Total Members by Church Size, 1980 and 1997



Observations:

Far and away the greatest percentage increase in membership from 1980 to 1997 occurred in churches with 2,000 or more members. This category increased by 62 percent during this time frame. The only other double digit increase occurred in churches with fewer than 100 members—11 percent. Overall, churches with 100 to 199 total members and churches with 200 to 299 total members decreased in total membership. This is consistent with the decrease in churches for these two categories during the same time frame; however, there is no apparent explanation for the decline. Excluding the overall losses of these two categories, churches with 2,000 or more total members account for 65 percent of the growth of the remaining categories from 1980 to 1997.

Figure 6—Resident Members by Church Size, 1997

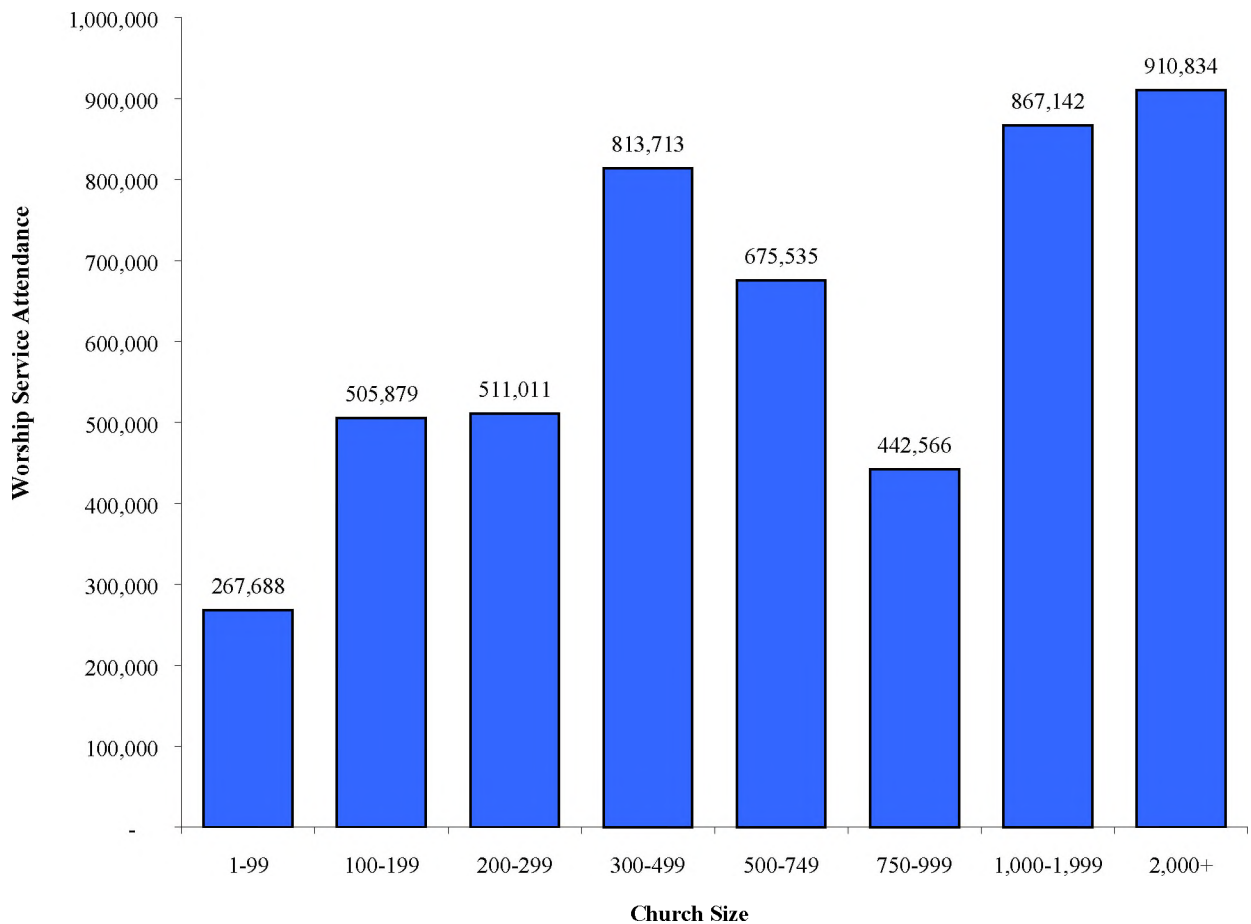


Observations:

This figure has been included because resident membership is closer to active membership than is total membership. In the SBC there are approximately 11 million resident members, which translates to 68 percent of total membership. While the numbers are different than for total membership, the pattern is still very similar. Resident membership is concentrated in the larger-church-size categories.

While not included in this report, the picture of growth and decline in resident members since 1980 is generally the same as for total membership. Most of the resident membership growth occurred in churches with 2,000 or more total members. This group of churches accounted for 72 percent of the resident membership growth reported.

Figure 7—Sunday Morning Worship Service Attendance by Church Size, 1997

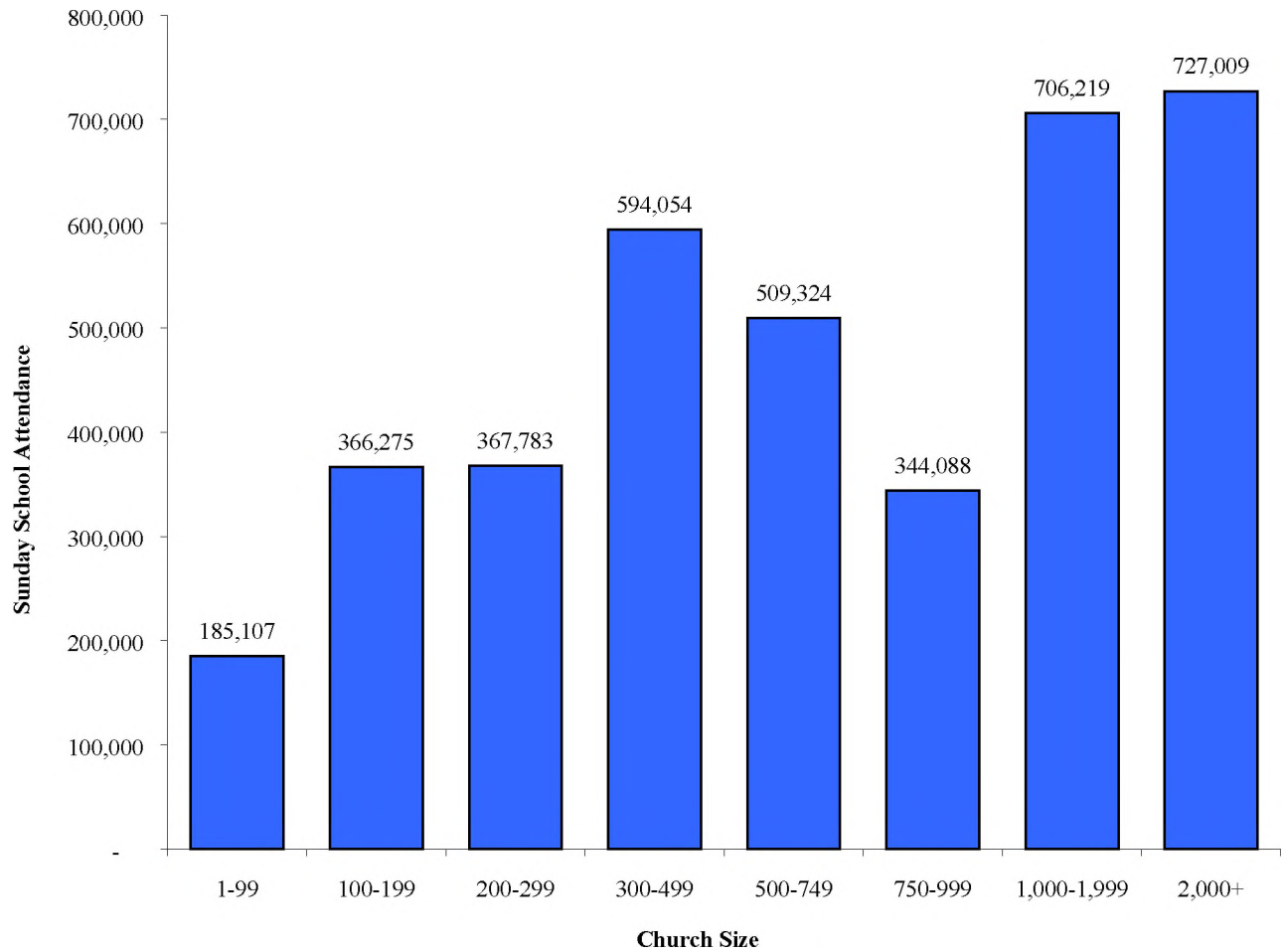


Observations:

The combined Sunday morning worship service attendance for all churches in the SBC is approximately 5 million people.⁸ That represents 46 percent of the resident membership. Of this 5 million, 18 percent are reported by churches with more than 2,000 total members, while 36 percent are reported by churches with more than 1,000 members. This distribution has the same general shape as the distribution for total members, i.e., the bulk of attenders are concentrated in the larger-size categories.

⁸ The question asked of each church is “Number of persons in Sunday morning worship service(s) on last Sunday of the 1996–1997 associational year. If no Sunday AM service, give information for your primary worship service(s).” There are a combined 4,994,368 people reported by the 36,905 churches included in this analysis. The official count for the SBC will be slightly higher.

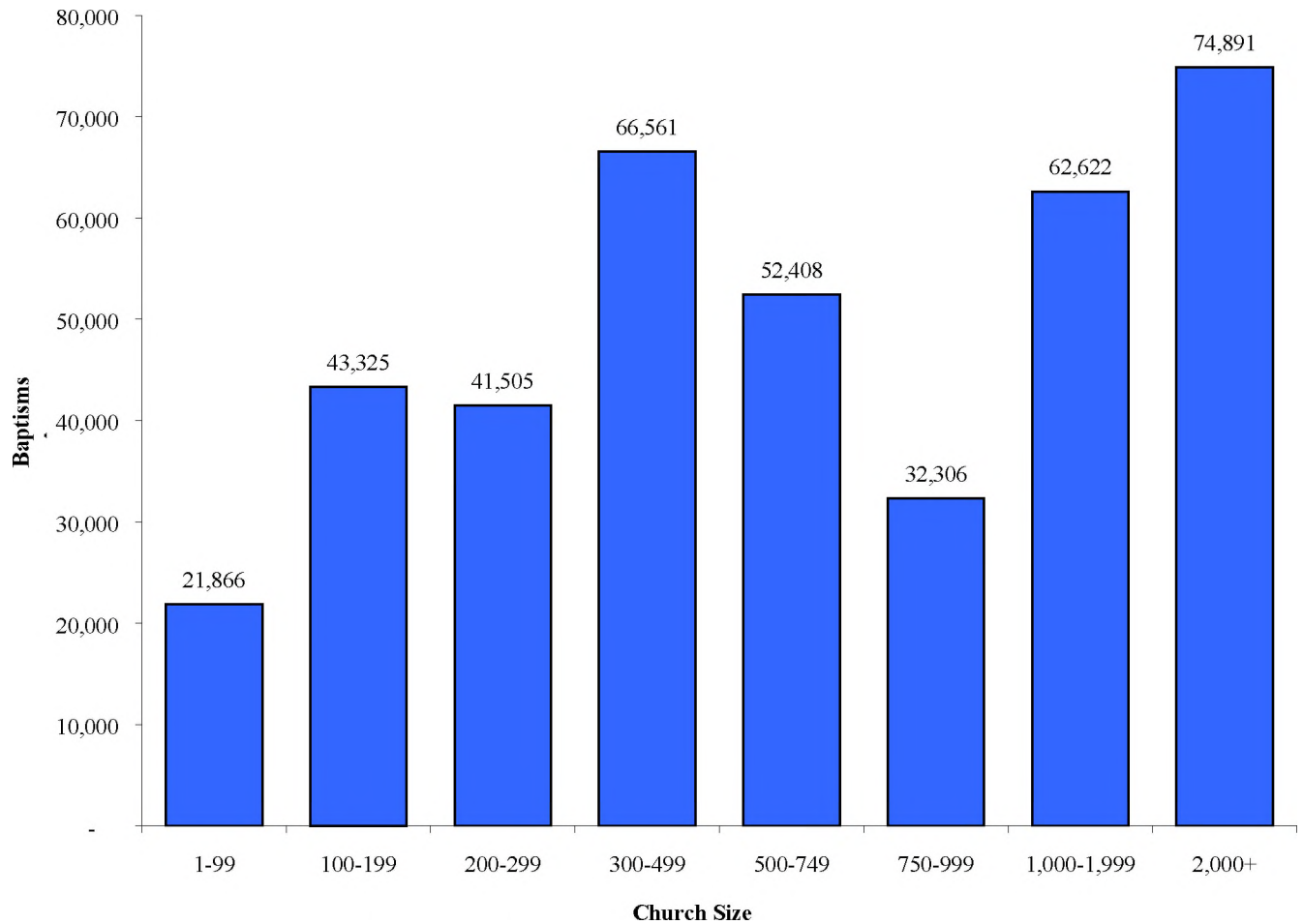
Figure 8—Average Weekly Sunday School Attendance by Church Size, 1997



Observations:

Average weekly Sunday School attendance is another indicator of the active participation of people in SBC churches. This distribution is very similar to the worship service attendance distribution. Total average weekly Sunday School attendance for the SBC is 3.8 million. Churches with 2,000 or more members report 19 percent of this total and churches with 1,000 or more members report 38 percent of the total.

Figure 9—Baptisms by Church Size, 1997



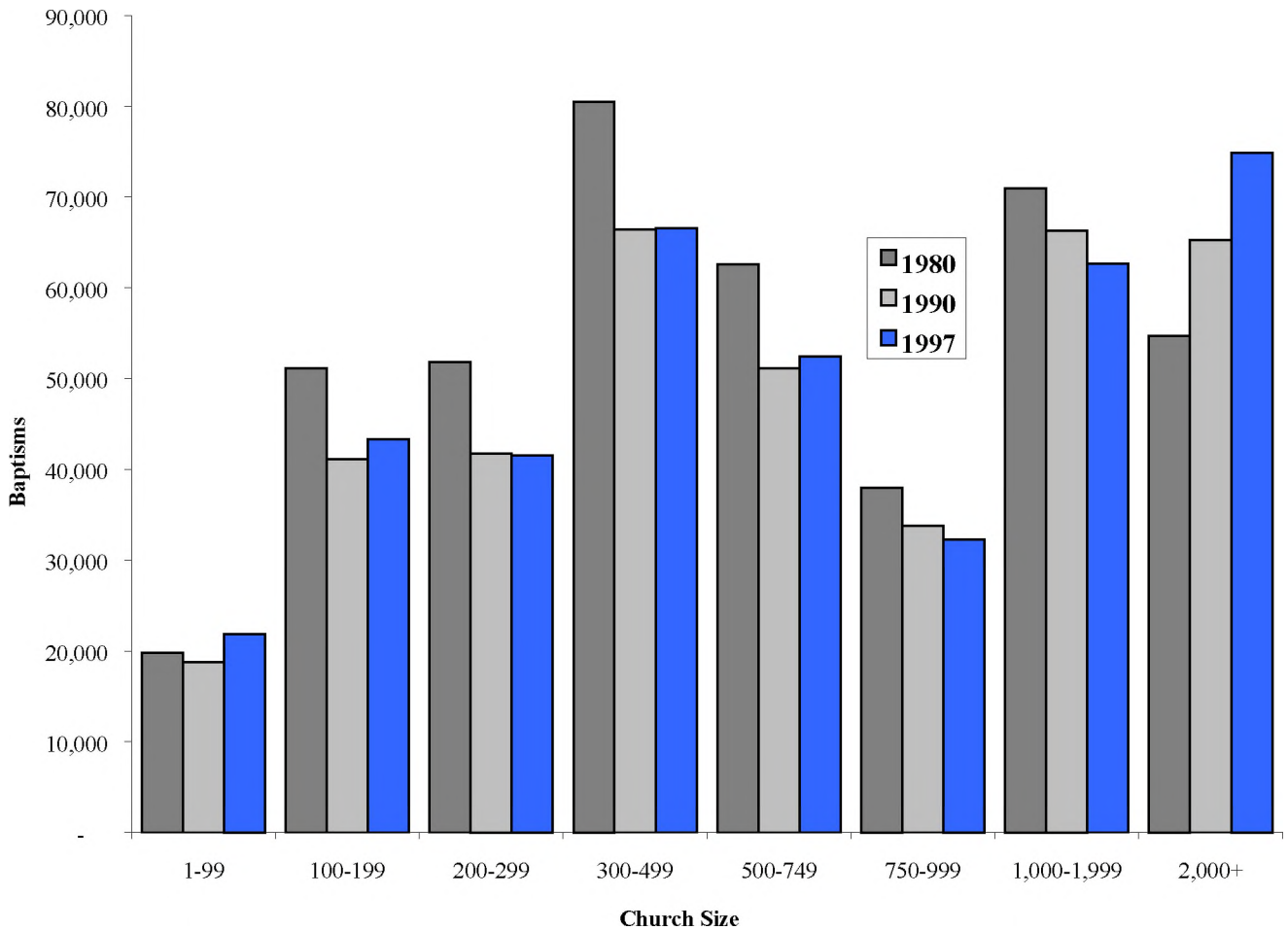
Observations:

In 1997, SBC churches and church-type missions reported 412,00 baptisms. This is the largest number of baptisms reported since 1980. The classification of baptisms by church size in figure 9 accounts for 96 percent of the baptisms reported in 1997.⁹

Baptisms by church size is also an asymmetrical distribution with baptisms being weighted toward large churches. Churches with more than 1,000 members report 35 percent of the baptisms while churches with 2,000 or more members report 19 percent.

⁹ The other baptisms are predominantly from church-type missions.

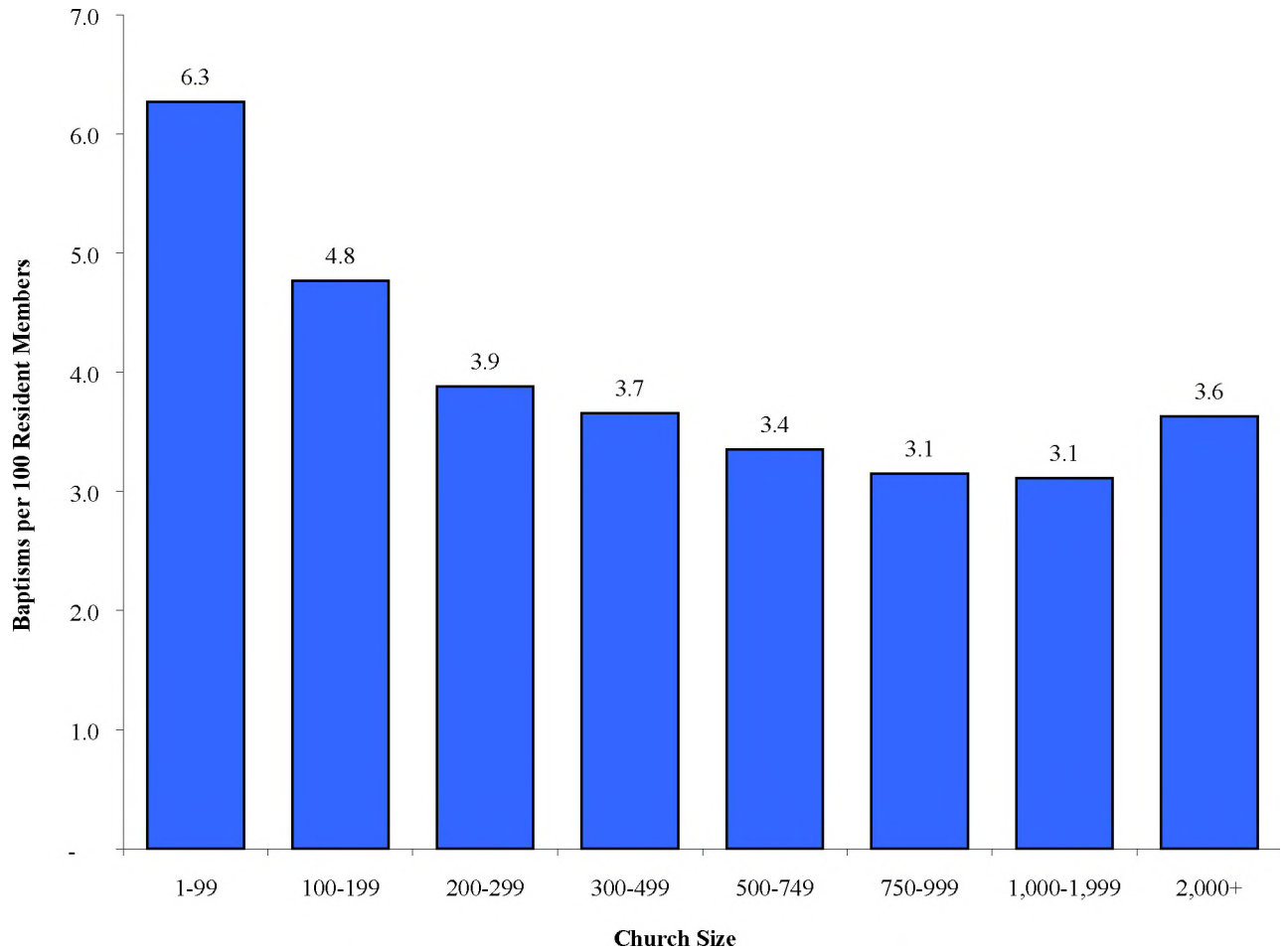
Figure 10—Baptisms by Church Size, 1980, 1990, and 1997



Observations:

This figure reports baptisms by church size for three points in time: 1980, 1990, and 1997. The baptism count for 1980 was 430,000 baptisms, for 1990 it was 385,000, and for 1997 the overall count was 412,000. Given this overall pattern, the patterns exhibited for the categories of churches with 100-199 members and with 500-749 should be the norm. However, baptisms reported for churches 750-999 and churches with 1,000 to 1,999 members show a consistent decline from 1980 to 1997. Only churches with 2,000 or more total members showed a consistent and substantial increase.

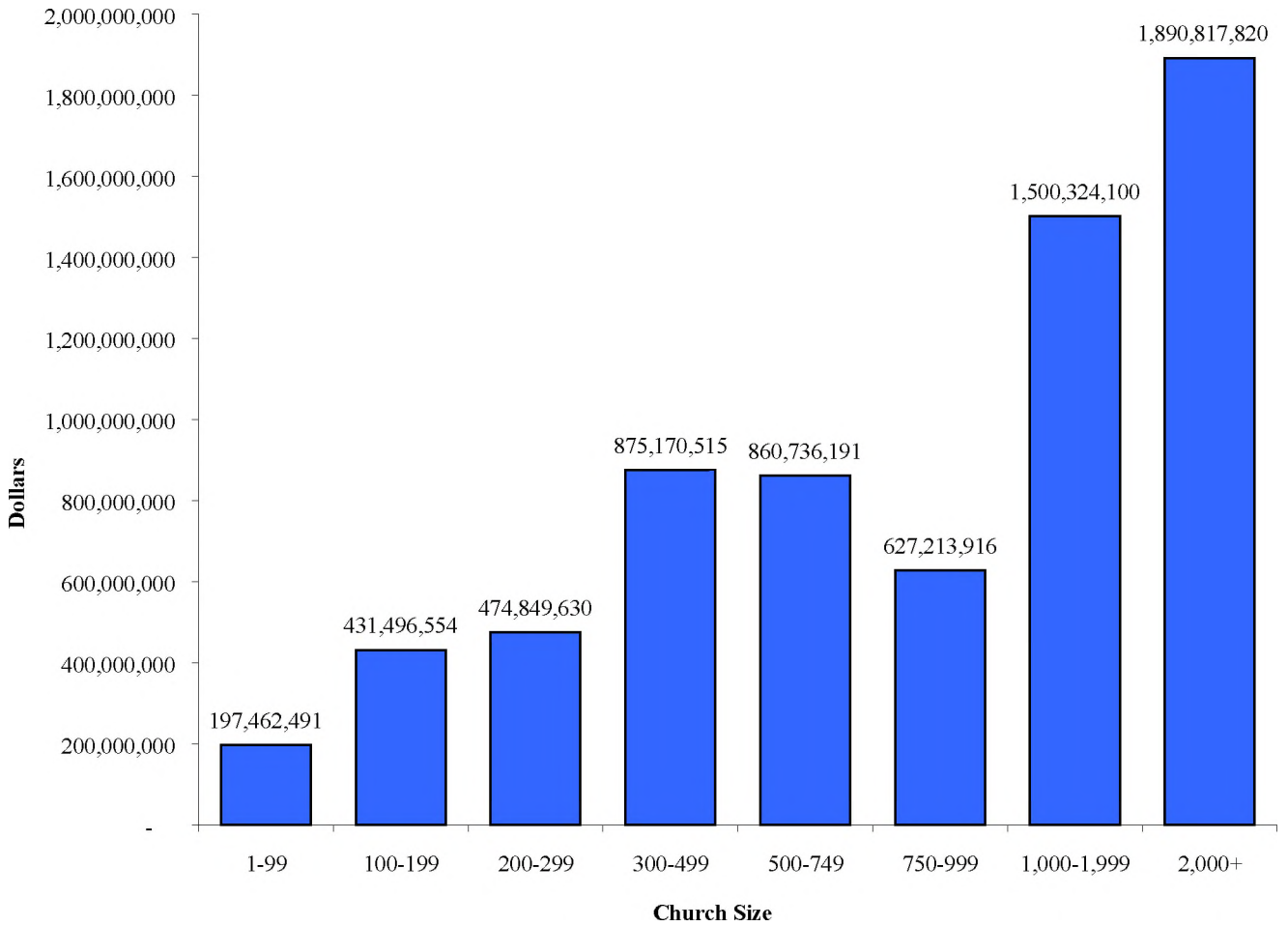
Figure 11—Baptism Rate per 100 Resident Members by Church Size, 1997



Observations:

Figure 11 displays the baptism rate for each church size category, i.e., the number of baptisms per 100 resident members. In 1997 the Convention reported 3.8 baptisms per 100 resident members. Churches with 1 to 99 total members had the highest rate of the church-size categories—6.3 baptisms per 100 resident members. Generally, the baptism rate decreases as the church-size category increases, indicating that larger churches are less efficient in baptizing people compared to their membership base. The exception is the category of churches with 2,000 or more members where the baptism rate is higher than for the 3 preceding categories.

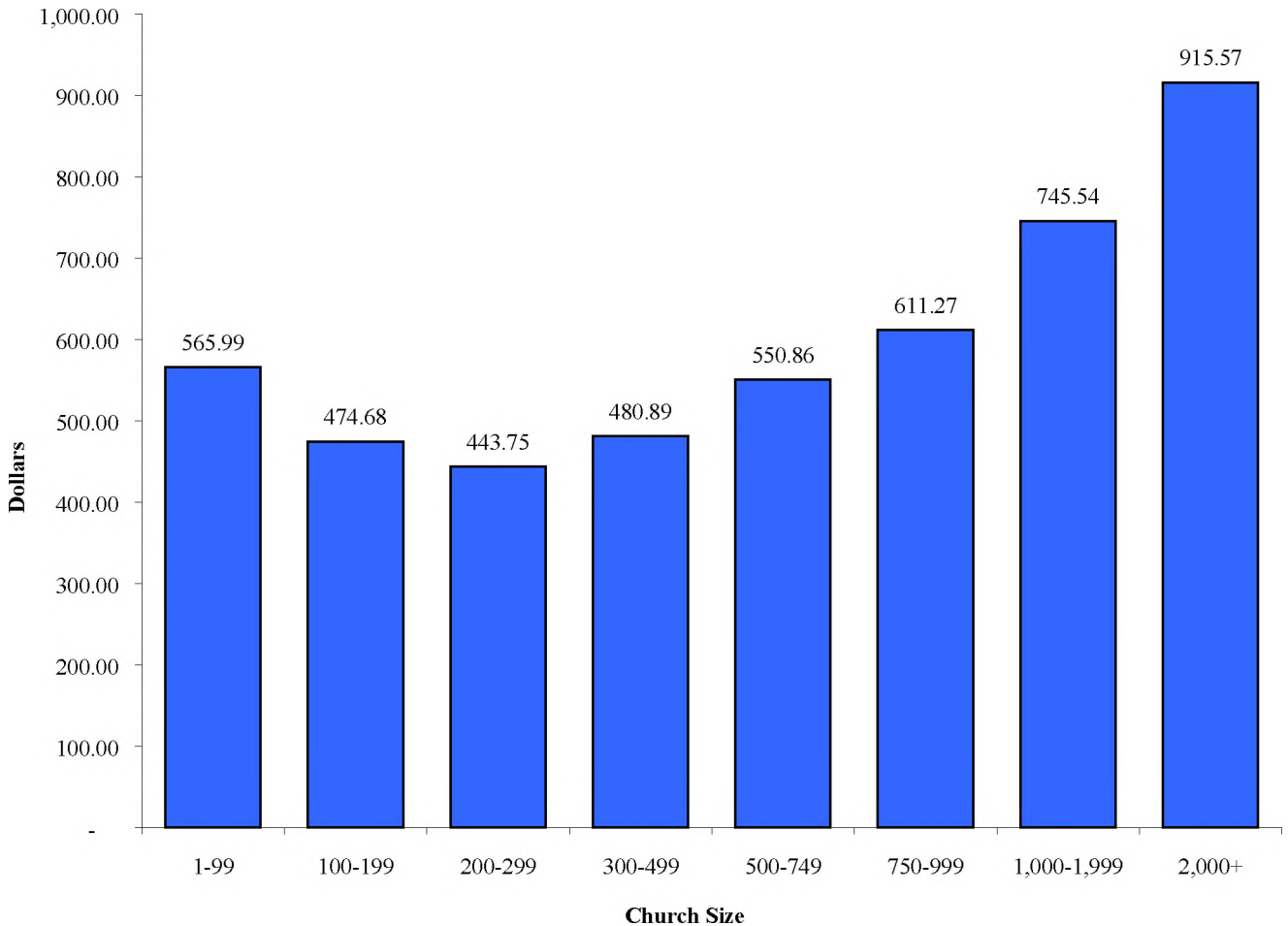
Figure 12—Total Receipts by Church Size, 1997



Observations:

In 1997, Southern Baptist churches reported 7 billion dollars in total receipts. As with the distributions of most other variables, total receipts tend to be more weighted toward large churches—only more so. Churches with 2,000 or more total members report 28 percent of the receipts of all SBC churches. Churches with 1,000 or more members report almost half the receipts of all churches. At the other extreme, churches with fewer than 200 members (which account for 44% of all churches) reported less than 10 percent of all receipts.

Figure 13—Per Capita Total Receipts by Church Size, 1997

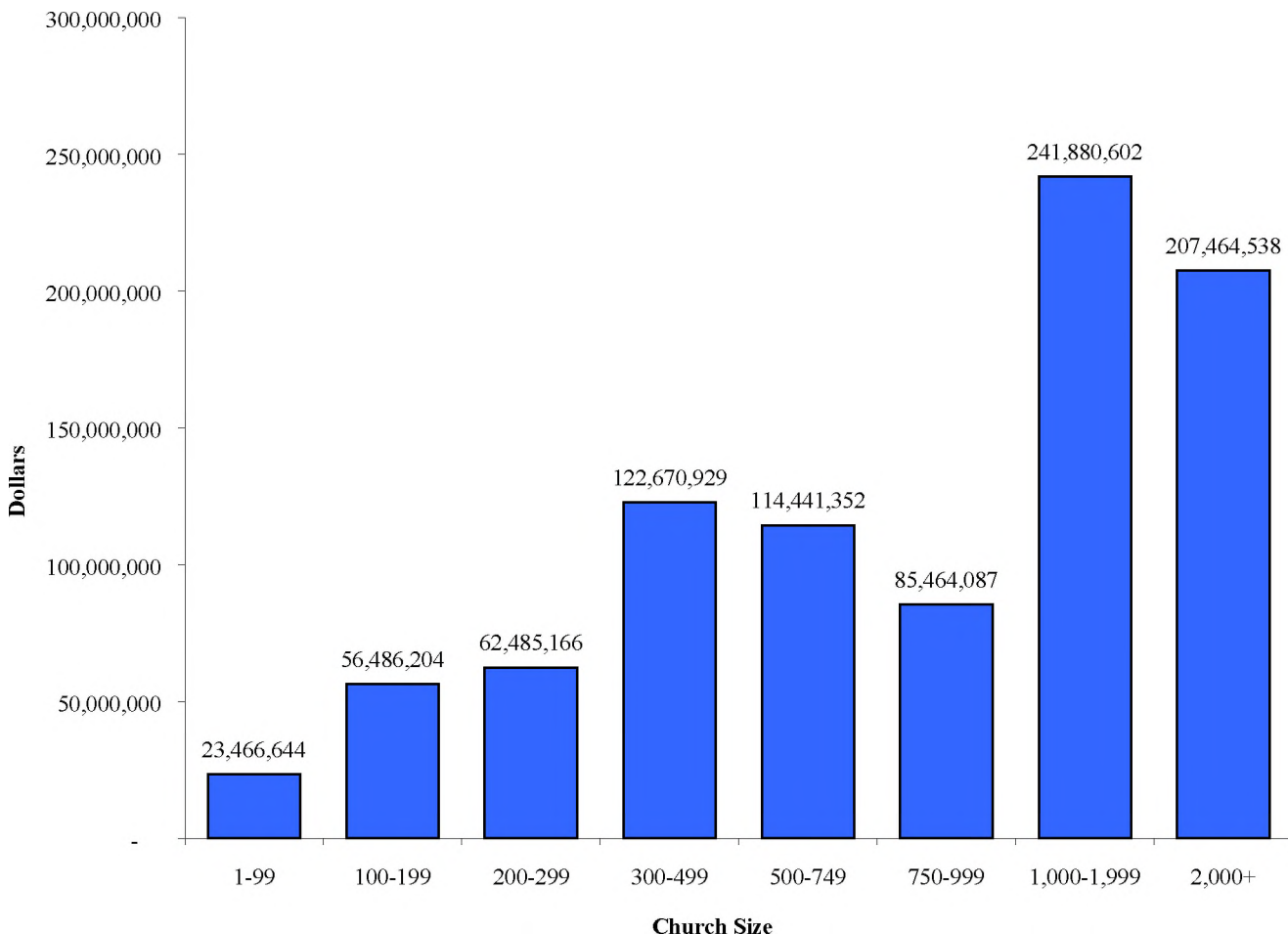


Observations:

Large churches not only have more financial resources in total dollars, they also have more dollars per member.¹⁰ The figure shows that churches with 200 to 299 members have the lowest per capita receipts of any of the church-size categories. It is not obvious why per capita receipts are lower than the per capita receipts for the two smaller church size categories. Past the category of churches with 200 to 299 members per capita receipts increase as church size increases. Churches with 2,000 or more members report double the per capita receipts of churches in the 200 to 299 category.

¹⁰ Per capita receipts is based on resident membership.

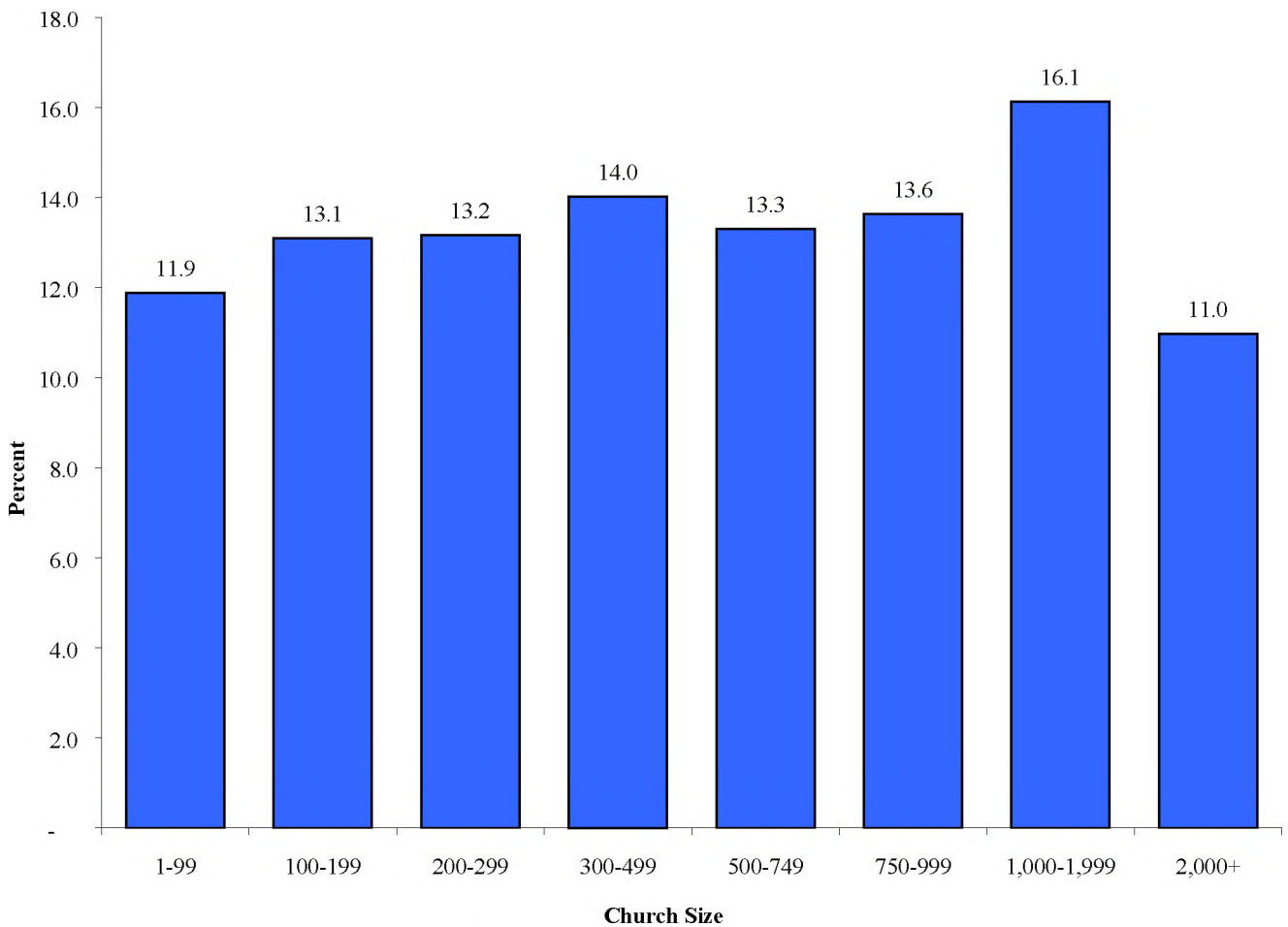
Figure 14—Total Mission Expenditures by Church Size, 1997



Observations:

Southern Baptist churches expended more than 900 million dollars on various mission causes in 1997. Large churches spent large sums of money on mission causes. Churches with 1,000 or more members reported almost half of all the mission dollars spent by Southern Baptist churches. Churches with 2,000 or more members account for 23 percent of all mission dollars spent.

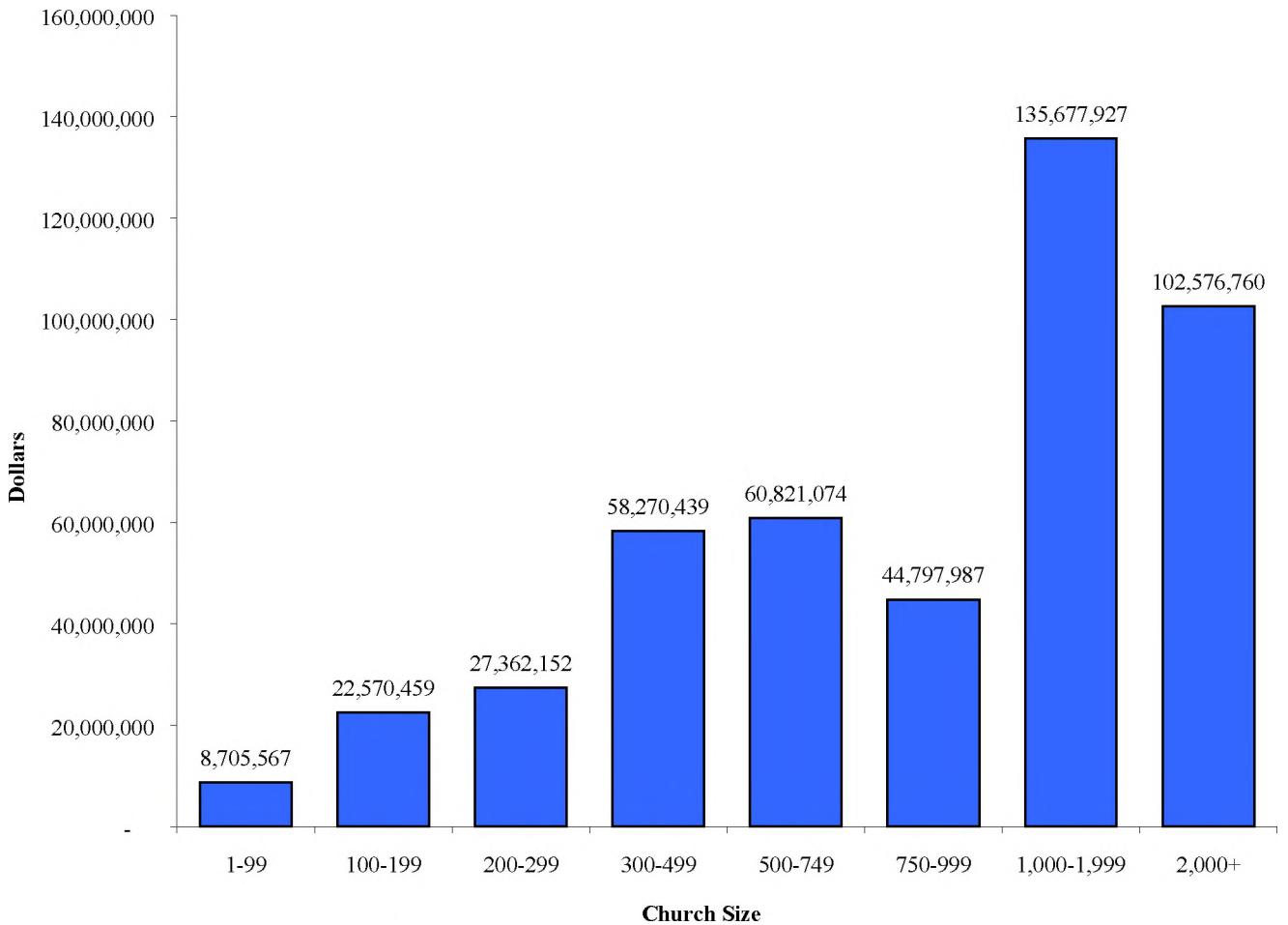
**Figure 15—Total Mission Expenditures as a Percentage of Total Receipts
by Church Size, 1997**



Observations:

Figure 15 compares the generosity of churches in contributing to mission causes based on the availability of their resources. Total mission expenditures for each category are calculated as a percentage of total receipts. For the entire Convention, 13.3 percent of total receipts was expended on mission causes. Churches with 2,000 or more members tend to give less of their resources to missions than the other church-size groups. At the same time, another group of large churches—those with 1,000 to 1,999 members—spent the largest percentage of their resources on missions.

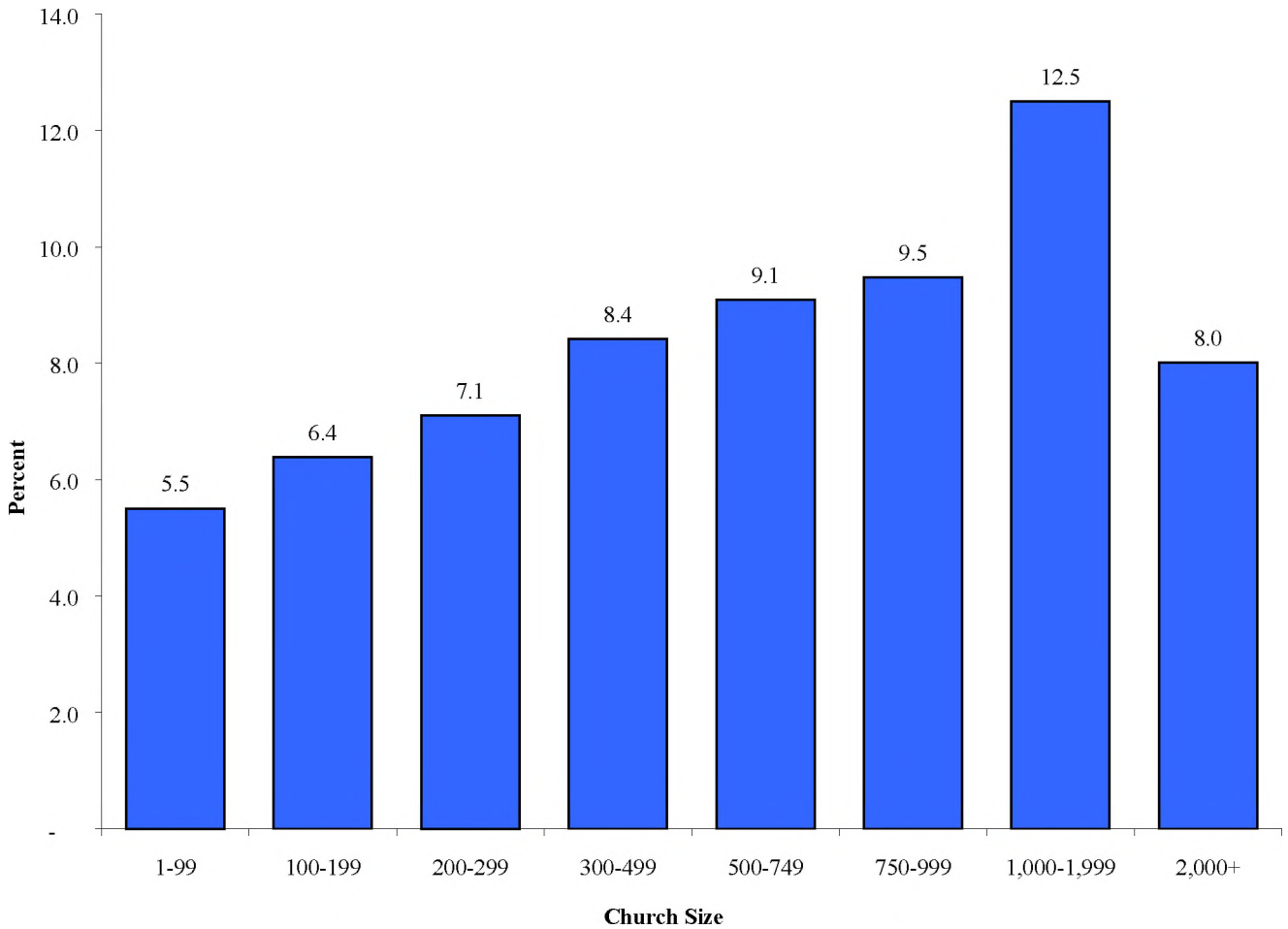
Figure 16—Cooperative Program by Church Size, 1997



Observations:

The approximately 37,000 churches under consideration in this analysis reported giving more than 460 million dollars to the Cooperative Program in 1997. Churches with more than 1,000 members reported over half of these dollars. Churches with more than 2,000 members reported giving 22 percent of the total Cooperative gifts. Compared to their relatively small numbers, large churches make a disproportionately large financial contribution to the denomination.

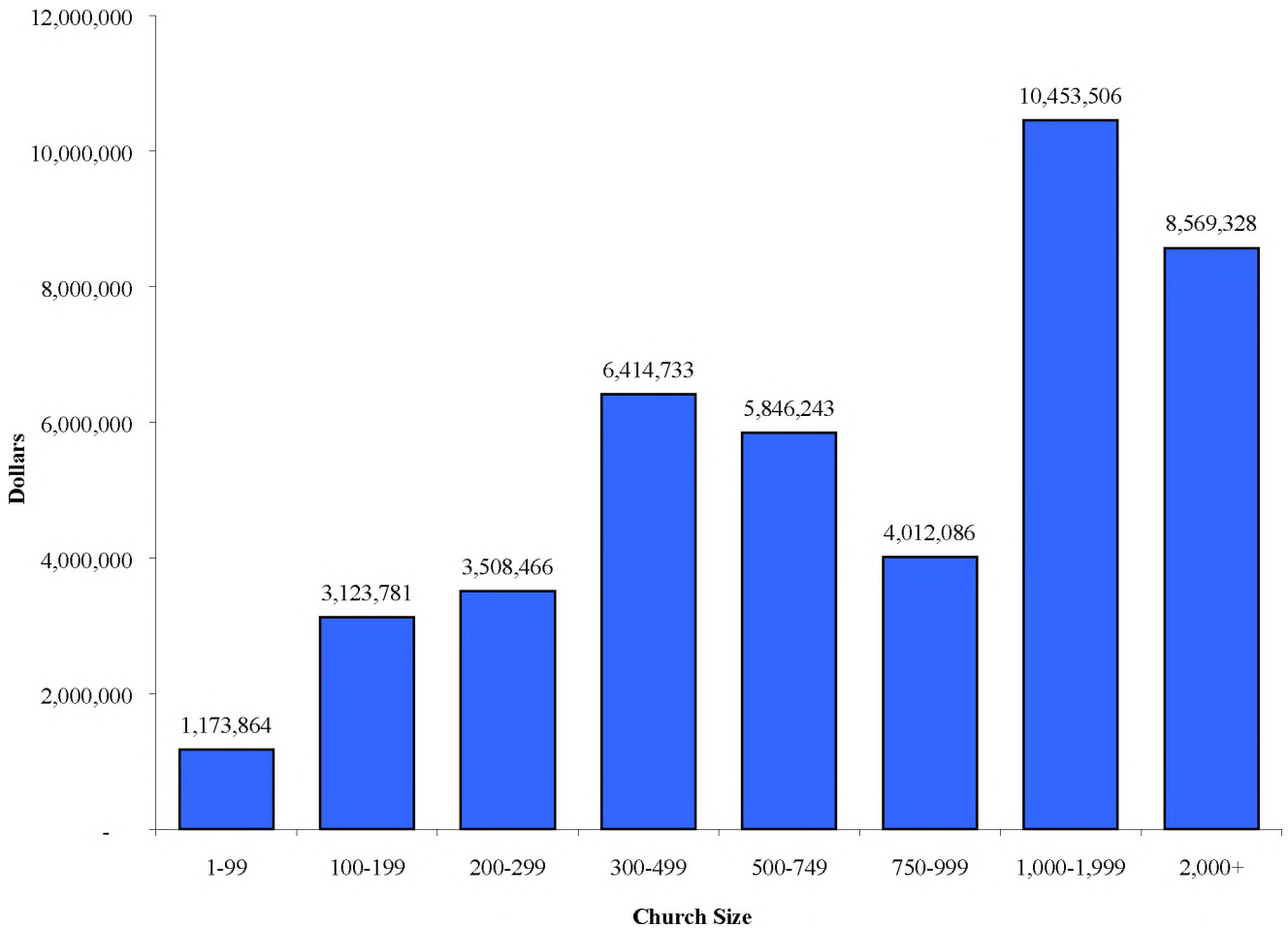
**Figure 17—Cooperative Program as a Percentage of Undesignated Receipts
by Church Size, 1997**



Observations:

Generally, the percentage of undesignated receipts that churches pass on to the denomination through the Cooperative Program increases as church size increases. The big exception to this is churches with 2,000 or more resident members—their percentage is considerably lower. Interestingly, churches with 1,000 to 1,999 members are the most generous givers to the Cooperative Program.

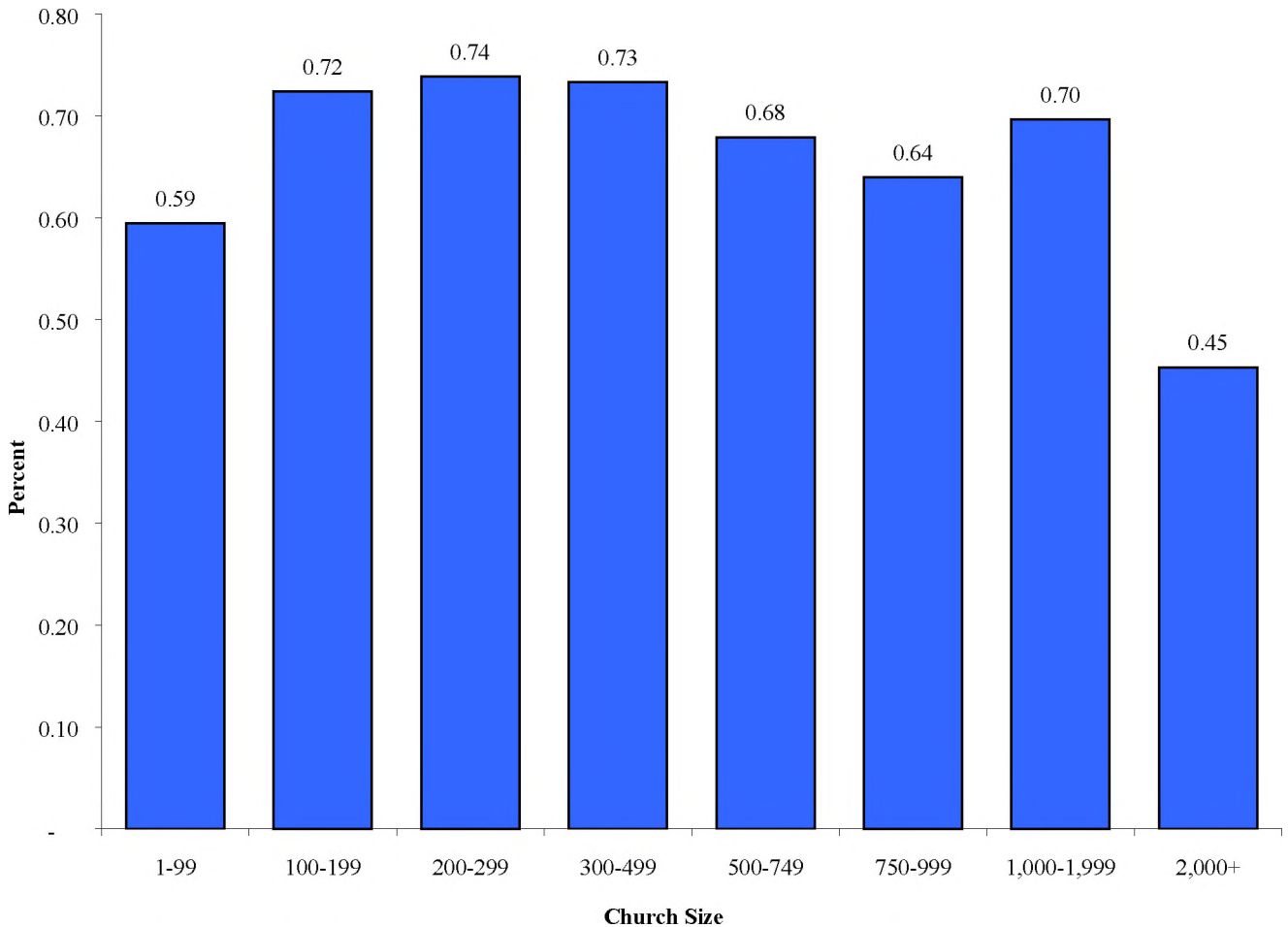
Figure 18—Annie Armstrong Easter Offering by Church Size, 1997



Observations:

As with most other mission giving, large churches are major contributors to the Annie Armstrong Easter Offering (AAEO). The 8 percent of churches with 1,000 or more members contributes 44 percent of total Annie Armstrong Easter Offering funds. The 2 percent of churches with 2,000 or more members contributes 20 percent of the offering.

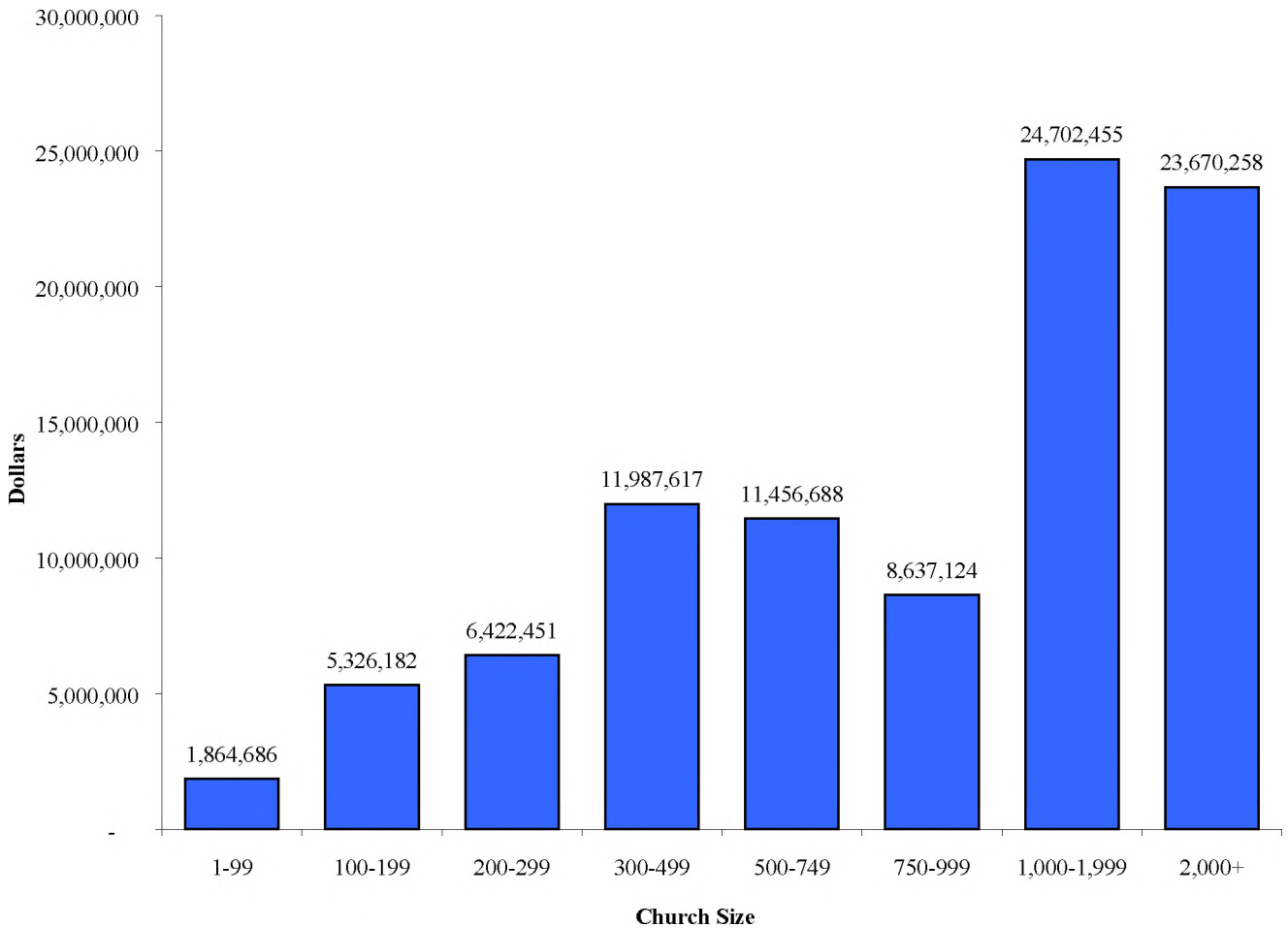
**Figure 19—Annie Armstrong Easter Offering as a Percentage of Total Receipts
by Church Size, 1997**



Observations:

Computing the Annie Armstrong Easter Offering as a percentage of total receipts, reveals that churches spanning the categories of 100 to 499 members contribute the largest percentages of their resources to the offering. Churches with 2,000 or more members give the lowest percentage of their total receipts to North American missions. Both figures 18 and 19 indicate churches with 2,000 or more members may need special attention in the area of offering promotion.

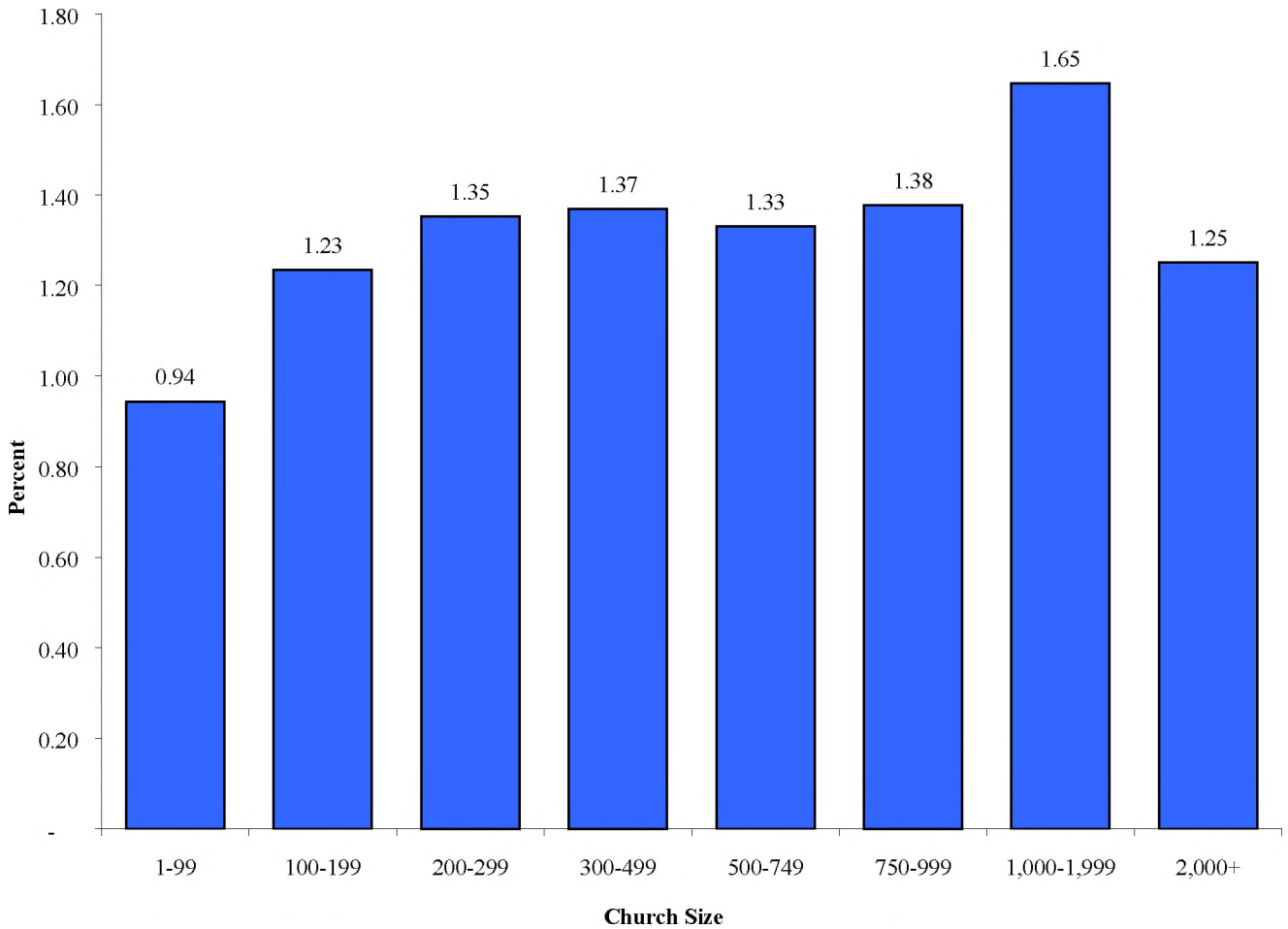
Figure 20—Lottie Moon Christmas Offering by Church Size, 1997



Observations:

Churches with 2,000 or more total members contributed 25 percent of the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering (LMCO), versus 20 percent of the AAEO. Churches with 1,000 or more members contributed 52 percent of the LMCO. Like most of the other ACP variables, the offering for international missions is heavily biased toward large churches.

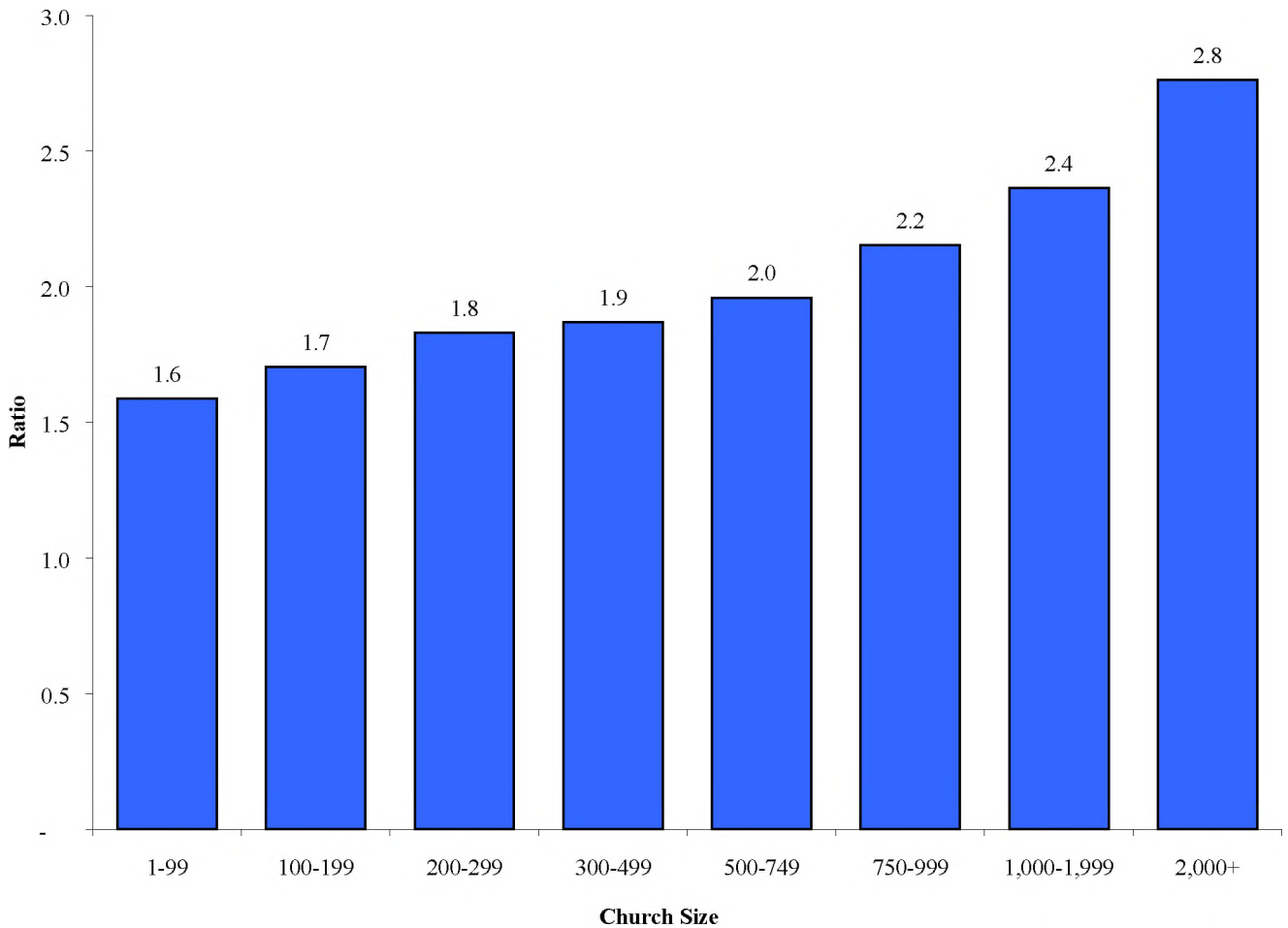
**Figure 21—Lottie Moon Christmas Offering as a Percentage of Total Receipts
by Church Size, 1997**



Observations:

The category of churches with 1,000 to 1,999 members, contributes the highest percentage of financial resources to the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering. Interestingly, the percentage contributed by churches with 2,000 or more members is considerably less.

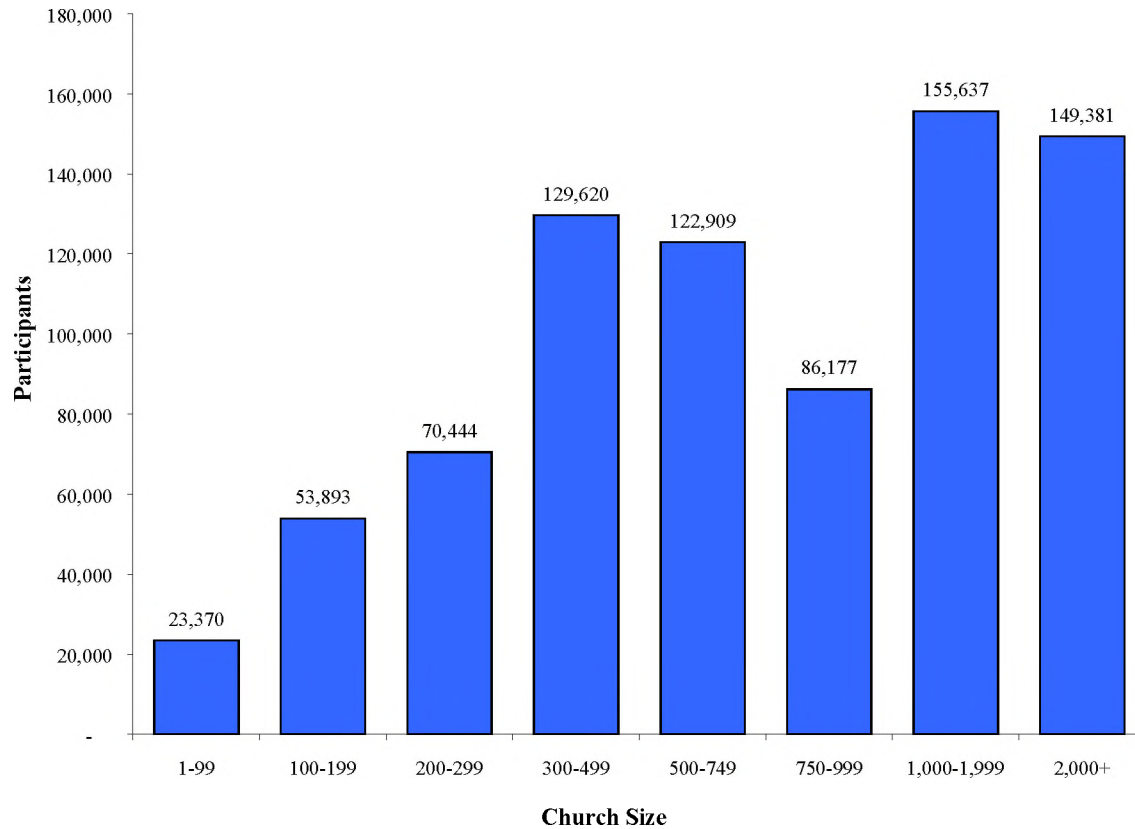
Figure 22—Ratio of LMCO to AAEO by Church Size, 1997



Observations:

Figure 22 is computed by dividing the total Lottie Moon Christmas Offering dollars by the total Annie Armstrong Easter Offering dollars contributed by the churches in each category. Overall, SBC churches contribute 2.2 dollars to LMCO for every 1 dollar given to AAEO. This ratio is not uniform across church size. The ratio increases as church size increases. Compared to smaller churches, larger churches disproportionately favor the offering for international missions as compared to the offering for North American missions. Specifically, churches with 2,000 or more total members contribute almost three times as much to international missions as to North American missions.

Figure 23—Participants in Volunteer Missions by Church Size, 1997



Observations:

The pattern of the distribution of missions volunteers by church size is similar to that for the distribution of members. Churches with 1,000 or more members provide 39 percent of missions volunteers. Churches with 2,000 or more members provide 19 percent of volunteers.