

# RESEARCH REPORT

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SUMMER 2002

## *U.S. Congregational Life Survey:* **CONVERSION AND WITNESSING AMONG SOUTHERN BAPTISTS**

*In April of 2001, nearly 300,000 worshipers, age 15 and older, in more than 2,000 congregations in the United States participated in the U.S. Congregational Life Survey. This study includes information for nearly 20,000 Southern Baptist worshipers in approximately 200 Southern Baptist congregations. A randomly selected subset of 2,000 worshipers in Southern Baptist congregations answered a supplemental set of questions designed specifically for Southern Baptists relating to conversion and witnessing.*

### INTRODUCTION

Approximately 5.2 million people attend worship services in Southern Baptist churches and missions on a typical Sunday morning.<sup>1</sup> In the U.S. Congregational Life survey, churches and participants were selected to be representative of these worship service attendees. Based on responses to the survey, 81.7 percent of worship service attendees in Southern Baptist congregations are members of the church where they were surveyed. Given that they were both members and attendees, these respondents are primarily active Southern Baptist members. Another 7.4 percent of survey respondents indicated that while they were not members, they did regularly participate at the church and still another 2.2 percent indicated they were in the process of becoming a member. Thus, 91.4 percent of worship service attendees are members or

regular participants in the congregation where enumerated. The remaining attendees either were not members and not regular participants (5.6%), or did not respond to the question (3.1%).<sup>2</sup>

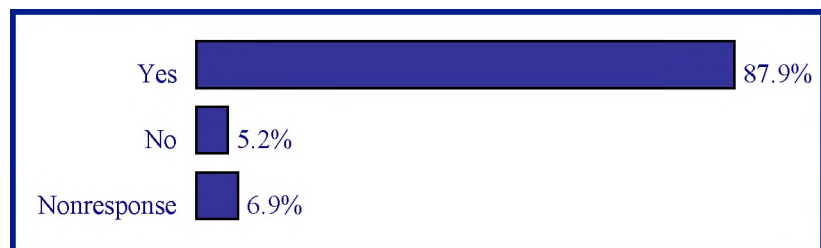
### 1 IN 8 IN THE WORSHIP SERVICE IS LOST

Almost 9 of 10 worship service attendees (87.9%) affirmed that they "...have had a conversion experience—that is, a turning point in your

life when you committed yourself to Christ and accepted Him as your Lord and Savior."

The remainder specifically responded "no" to this question (5.2%) or did not respond at all (6.9%). Presumably, the lack of response is also a "no" response. Thus, about 1 out of every 8 worship service attendees in a Southern Baptist congregation is lost. (See figure 1.)

**Figure 1—Would you say you have had a conversion experience—that is, a turning point in your life when you committed yourself to Christ and accepted Him as your Lord and Savior?**



<sup>1</sup> 1999 Annual Church Profile, LifeWay Christian Resources, Nashville, Tenn.

<sup>2</sup> This particular question was asked of all 20,000 worship service attendees in Southern Baptist congregations.

## CONVERSION LESS LIKELY AFTER AGE 12

For respondents having experienced conversion, a follow-up question inquired about the age at which they accepted Christ. Responses ranged from 3 to 91 years old. The age distribution for conversion is displayed in figure 2. Half of all respondents indicated their conversion experience occurred at age 12 or younger. Not only is age 12 the middle of the distribution, but more respondents indicated their conversion took place when they were 12 years old than any other single year—16.5 percent of respondents. Beyond age 12, the per-

centage of conversions steadily decreases. The conclusion is that beyond age 12 the likelihood of a conversion experience decreases. Seventy-five percent of conversions occur at age 20 and younger and 90 percent of conversions occur at age 32 and younger.

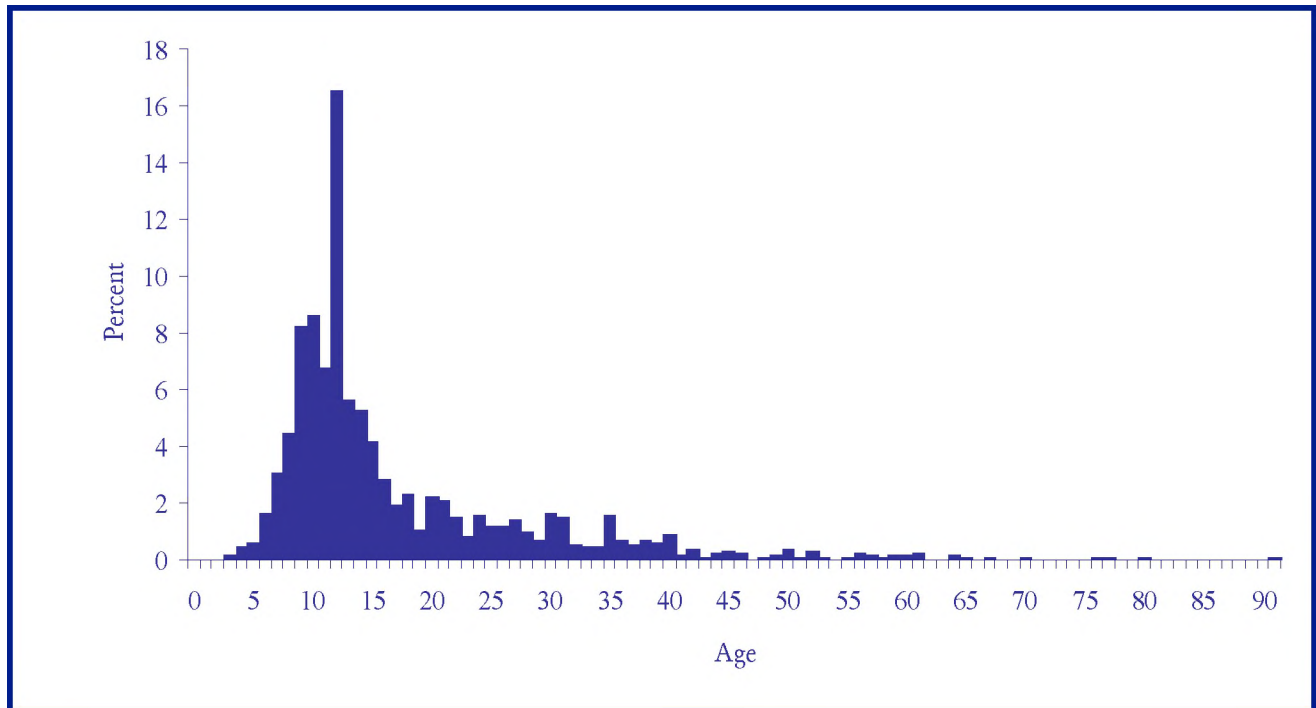
Figure 2 clearly illustrates the importance of nurturing children and youth in the faith. Ages 7 through 16 are critical years for spiritual development. Two-thirds of worship service attendees who have a personal relationship with Christ, indicate that their relationship was established during these formative years.

## MOST WILLING TO SHARE FAITH

A series of questions was asked about participants' willingness to share their personal faith and specifically about the witnessing activities in which they have engaged. The first question asked about person's propensity to share their faith.<sup>3</sup> Figure 3 displays the responses to this question and the corresponding frequency of occurrence for active Southern Baptist church members.

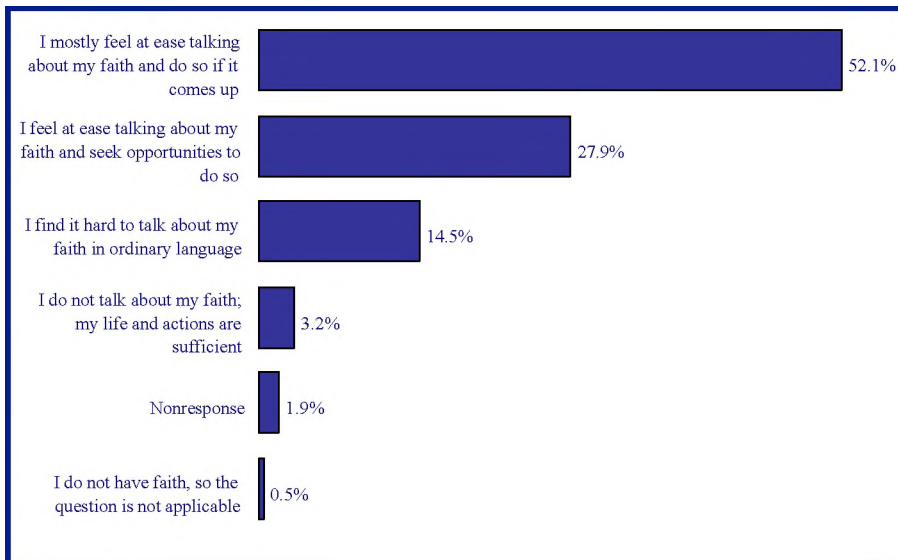
It appears that most Southern Baptists (80%) are willing to share their faith. However, it appears that only 1 in 4 are intentional about sharing their faith. Most Southern

**Figure 2—[If you have had a conversion experience] How old were you when you made your commitment to Christ, that is when you were saved or when you accepted Christ as your Savior?**



<sup>3</sup> This particular question, which was included on the core questionnaire, was asked of nearly 20,000 worship service attendees in Southern Baptist congregations. The percentages in figure 3 are limited to the approximately 16,000 attendees who are members of the Southern Baptist churches where surveyed.

**Figure 3—Which of the following best describes your readiness to talk to others about your faith?**



Baptists (52.1%) appear to be comfortable in talking about their faith if it comes up in conversation, but seem reluctant to take initiative in witnessing. Furthermore, 1 in 5 Southern Baptists have difficulty or are unwilling to talk about their faith even it comes up in natural conversation.<sup>4</sup>

A similar question focused not on willingness to witness but on whether they had actually engaged in talking with someone about Jesus with the intention of conversion—“Have you ever talked to someone about believing in Jesus Christ or accepting Him as personal savior in the hopes of leading that person to Christ?”<sup>5</sup> Out of those attendees who are active Southern Baptist members, 86.5 percent indicated they have, at some time, talked with someone about accepting Christ.

## 600,000 LED OTHERS TO CHRIST

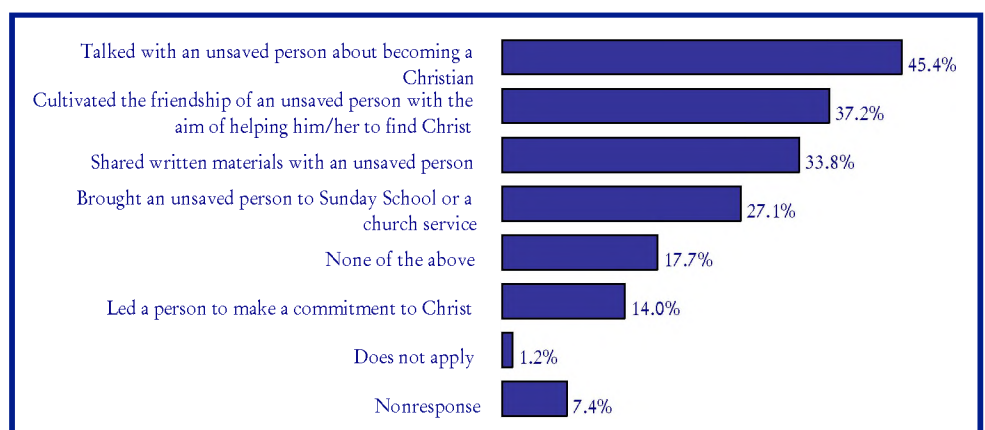
A third question narrowed the time frame by asking about the witnessing experiences in which they have been involved during the previous year.

The results of this line of questioning are included in figure 4. Surprisingly,

45.4 percent of Southern Baptist members indicated they had talked with someone about becoming a Christian within the preceding twelve months. Obviously, some of these Southern Baptists had talked to others about Christ even though they had not previously indicated on the questionnaire that they feel at ease talking about their faith and that they intentionally seek opportunities to do so. Either witnessing opportunities naturally arose for them, or they overcame their initial reluctance. The end result is that 14 percent of Southern Baptist members reported they led someone to make a commitment to Christ within the past year. This translates into nearly 600,000 Southern Baptist members who have been instrumental in bringing people to Christ during the past year.

The question regarding witnessing experiences was broadened beyond sharing a verbal witness. Over a third cultivated the friendship of an unsaved person in an effort to lead them to Christ, while a third had

**Figure 4—Which, if any, of the following “witnessing” experiences have you, personally, engaged in during the past year? (Mark all that apply.)**



<sup>4</sup> The fraction of a percent of Southern Baptist members who indicate they have no faith may indeed be baptized members of a Southern Baptist church but now feel they are not believers; or this may be spurious information, i.e., reporting error.

<sup>5</sup> This question and the remainder of questions in this report were part of the subset of questions designed specifically for Southern Baptists and were asked of nearly 2,000 worship service attendees in Southern Baptist congregations. Unless specified other, percentages reported are for the subset of 1,621 respondents who indicated they were members of the churches in which they were surveyed.

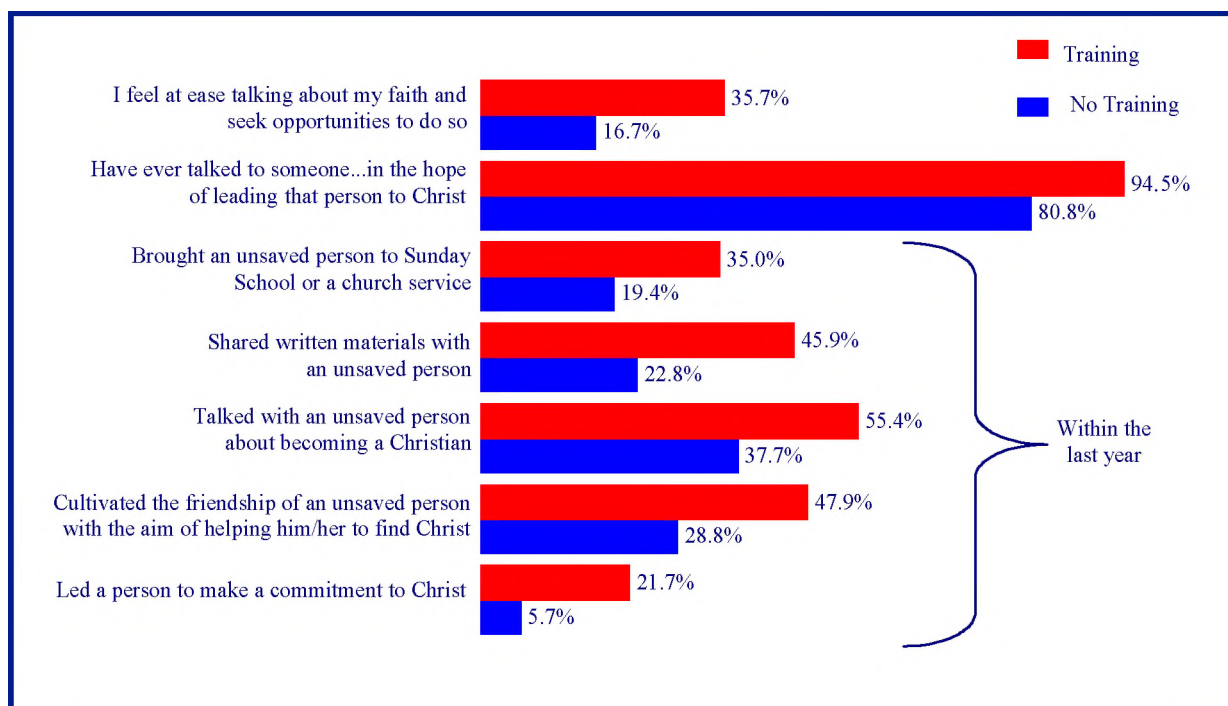
shared written materials with an unsaved person, and 1 in 4 Southern Baptist members brought an unsaved person to a worship service or to Sunday School. Overall, 3 of 4 Southern Baptists were actively engaged in witnessing activities during the prior year. Assuming that not responding to this question is an indication a member has not engaged in witnessing, it appears that 1 in 4 Southern Baptist members has not made an effort to lead people to Christ.<sup>6</sup>

## WITNESS TRAINING MAKES A DIFFERENCE

A follow-up question asked if attendees had been either formally or informally trained in sharing their faith. Half of Southern Baptist members, 52.3 percent, indicated they had received training in sharing their faith. This training makes a difference in the extent that Southern Baptist members actively engage in witnessing. Members who have been trained were more likely to feel at ease in sharing their faith, more likely to

engage in witnessing activities, and substantially more likely to have led someone to make a profession of faith. Figure 5 illustrates the differences between active Southern Baptist members who have received training versus those who have not been trained. In general, persons who have received training are twice as likely to be comfortable in sharing their faith, roughly twice as likely to engage in witnessing activities, and about four times as likely to have led someone to Christ within the past year.

**Figure 5—Southern Baptist members having received training in sharing their faith versus those without training**



<sup>6</sup> These question and response categories were replicated from the 1990 and 1986 Constituency Studies conducted by the Sunday School Board, SBC. The responses for the U.S. Congregational Life Survey are higher than responses provided in the original studies. The greater incidence of reported witnessing activities is probably partially due to the current study being more representative of active Southern Baptist membership than the earlier constituency studies.

## IMPLICATIONS:

- A call for commitment should be an essential part of every worship service. While most people in Southern Baptist worship services have already made a decision for Christ, 1 of 8 in attendance has not done so.
- The spiritual development and nurture of children and youth should be the top priority for most Southern Baptist congregations. Churches should allocate a significant portion of their resources for education and ministry on these young age groups. Some of the best leaders and teachers should be recruited to work with them. Furthermore, these leaders should be trained in the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual development of children and youth and in developmentally appropriate methods of sharing the Gospel. If people are not reached and discipled as children and youth, the likelihood of doing so after they become adults greatly decreases.
- Witness training substantially increases the comfort level that people have in sharing their faith and helps them to be more productive in their witnessing. Most Southern Baptists understand the importance of sharing their faith and do so on occasion. However, the majority of Southern Baptists are reluctant to take initiative in this matter.

*U.S. Congregations, a religious research group staffed by religious researchers and sociologists, and funded by the Lilly Endowment and the Louisville Institute and supported by the Presbyterian Church (USA), conducted the U.S. Congregational Life Survey. The Research Team of the the North American Mission Board, SBC, assisted in recruiting Southern Baptist congregations for the study. Findings from the national study are posted at <http://www.uscongregations.org>, while results for Southern Baptists are posted at <http://www.namb.net/research>.*



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