

# SBC Membership Change in the Metropolitan South

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associational planning and meetings that allows these things to be addressed. The association must constantly fine-tune itself to meet the changing times. An analogy can be drawn from auto racing. Racers do not use the same set of tires for every race or every track. Tires are changed in a single race to meet the different characteristics of the track, the temperature, weather conditions and even the car itself. Likewise, one set of programs will not meet the needs of an association all the time. A director of missions should adjust programs and planning, speaking to the situation as it is now, not what it was, and making projections as to what it may be.

He has no crystal ball or Urim and Thummim to forecast the future. However, he does have the information, experience, access to specialists and the time and opportunity to attempt to make some sense from all that impacts his churches and community. From this he is to speak to the churches and to assist them in knowing what is happening in their world.

Through the director of missions' leadership the association helps the churches to understand, adjust to and accept the change that is taking place. Change is a natural part of history. It is neither good nor bad. Change is. It is not to be feared or fought, but it is to be reckoned with in a rational and careful way. It is the director of missions' responsibility to help churches understand this. In so doing he can help alleviate some of the fear of the unknown and doubt about the future, and he can help the churches prepare themselves to fulfill their mission in a changing context.

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Southern Baptists had difficulty coping with the racial shifts in population during the past decade. Four factors were studied in selected southern states to get a look at growth or decline in SBC work in the metropolitan areas. White, black and Hispanic population figures were compared to church and resident membership figures for Southern Baptists living within the counties defined by the government as Standard Metropolitan Statistical Areas (SMSAs).

In general, the report *SBC Membership Change in the Metropolitan South* (Research Division, HMB, July 1981) revealed serious declines in the number of members and churches in most SMSAs. When data by races were compared to growth and decline in churches, significant relationships were noted. In counties where large increases of blacks occurred, Southern Baptists experienced net losses in number of churches. Second, in counties where growth in white population was most rapid, SBC resident membership grew most rapidly. Third, in practically every county in these SMSAs where the ratio of population per SBC member was most favorable in 1970, Southern Baptists lost ground most rapidly. Finally, it is interesting to note that in those counties which had the largest average number of members per church (the largest average size churches), population growth exceeded church membership growth more rapidly than in those counties

where the average number of members per church was smaller.

These data lead us to conclude that Southern Baptists are "in trouble" in the large cities, primarily because of the racial change. In response to racial change, Southern Baptists no longer start new churches. Smaller churches in the path of this racial change die; larger churches survive by encouraging commuter families. For example, in one of the larger suburban counties in the early stages of racial change, no net gain in churches was experienced but there was an increase in average church size of one-third. The associational director of missions in that county indicated vigorous opposition by "large-church pastors" to the starting of new churches.

Two things seem clear from this report. First, Southern Baptist churches will continue to die wherever the black population increases unless radical changes in attitudes by both whites and blacks occur regarding the ministries and function of SBC churches. Second, people are reached for Christ by both large and small churches, by both new and older established congregations. In many counties, the data seem to indicate an "obsession with largeness" to the exclusion of starting new work. The greatest successes of the past decade occurred wherever a balance was maintained.

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