

AN EXAMINATION OF RESPONSE RATES TO MAIL QUESTIONNAIRES
IN STUDIES CONDUCTED BY THE SOUTHERN BAPTIST
HOME MISSION BOARD

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This report attempts to examine the problem of nonresponse to mail questionnaires in studies conducted by the Baptist Home Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention. For the most part, this report will concern itself with studies conducted by the Planning Section of the Home Mission Board because only in selected studies conducted by this section has attention been given to the problem of nonresponse. Attention will not only be given to examining the nonresponse rate of past studies but also suggestions will be made to increase response rate.

Studies made by the Baptist Home Mission Board usually relate to different aspects of denominational life in the Southern Baptist Convention. Studies range from studying attitudes of the membership in the Southern Baptist Convention to studying cause and effect of church growth. Mail questionnaires are the most widely used instruments for collecting additional data although telephone surveys have been used upon occasion. Of course, nonresponse is a problem any time the mail questionnaire is used. Seemingly, one of the factors affecting response is the relationship between the organization sponsoring a questionnaire and the party filling it out. Thus it is instructive that a brief description of the hierarchy of the Southern Baptist Convention be given.

The unique thing about the Southern Baptist Convention is that there really is no hierarchy. The Southern Baptist Convention is loosely held together by cooperative agreements of churches located throughout the United States, and Canada, and Puerto Rico. Each church is an autonomous body. Each church is responsible for calling its own pastor, for establishing membership requirements, for supporting itself financially, and for establishing its

doctrines. Most all Southern Baptist churches do however require baptism as a prerequisite for membership. The only real requirement for a church to be a member of the Southern Baptist Convention is that it contribute financially to the Cooperative Program of the Southern Baptist Convention. The Cooperative Program is an arrangement whereby all churches pool some of their financial resources in order to support such things as seminaries, mission work, and hospitals. Just as groups of people organize themselves into churches, groups of churches organize themselves into associations. Geographical locations of associations usually correspond to counties, groups of counties, or parts of counties. Each association is responsible for its own membership requirements and they are organized in order to do missionizing activities that would normally be outside the scope of individual churches. Individual churches also organize themselves into state conventions. These state conventions usually but not always correspond to state boundaries. Here again the purpose of state conventions is to conduct missionizing activities outside the scope of the individual churches or associations of churches. State conventions also have the responsibility of providing services to individual churches and associations. Just as churches organize themselves into associations and into state conventions, churches have also organized themselves into the Southern Baptist Convention which is national in its geographical boundaries and responsibilities. As mentioned earlier the only requirement for being a member of the Southern Baptist Convention is that a church contributes to the Cooperative Program. We typically think of the Southern Baptist Convention as being made up of state conventions and state conventions as being made up of associations and associations as being made up of churches. But in actuality churches are the primary units at every level of organization.

Most all of the revenues of individual churches are received as contributions from its church members. Most of these revenues are kept within the local churches for local expenses. However, a specified percentage in most church budgets is sent directly on to the state conventions and a smaller percentage is given to the associations. At the state level again the money is divided. A large percentage is kept by the state convention for its expenses and a specified percentage is sent on to the Southern Baptist Convention. The Southern Baptist Convention has established many agencies or organizations in order to carry out church activities on a national and international basis. There are such agencies as the Foreign Mission Board, the Home Mission Board, the Baptist Sunday School Board, the Brotherhood Commission, the Christian Life Commission, the Southern Baptist seminaries, and Baptist colleges. As money is received from the state conventions at the Southern Baptist Convention level the Executive Committee allocates money to the different agencies. Of course there are exceptions to every rule. The Baptist Sunday School Board for example does not get any funds directly from the Cooperative Program because it is solely supported by its sales of religious literature. This process of individual churches sharing their revenues with the associations and sharing their revenues with the state conventions and the state conventions sharing their revenues with agencies of the Southern Baptist Convention is the Cooperative Program. Actually the financial arrangements are much more complicated than this simple discussion might suggest. For instance, churches in addition to their Cooperative Program giving also make special contributions to different agencies such as the Home Mission Board and Foreign Mission Board as well as to schools and seminaries. In addition agencies such as the Home Mission Board funnel some of its revenues back into state conventions and into some associations. As can be seen there is a com-

plicated network of interrelationships among the different levels of Southern Baptist life.

The Home Mission Board as one of the agencies of the Southern Baptist Convention has as its responsibilities the development of mission programs within the United States, Canada and Puerto Rico. The Foreign Mission Board has, on the other hand, responsibilities outside of these areas. The Home Mission Board works with the leadership of state conventions and through the state conventions it works with associations and through the associations it works with individual churches. Oftentimes the Home Mission Board will rechannel some of its funds back into state conventions in order to fund or jointly fund certain projects that it considers to be essential. The Home Mission Board also provides operating funds for some underdeveloped state conventions or associations or churches. In most all of its activities the Home Mission Board works through the state conventions.

All of the studies involving questionnaires and reporting their response rates were conducted by the Planning Section of the Home Mission Board. One of the responsibilities of the Planning Section is to help state conventions establish long range planning processes. Since data gathering and evaluation is part of any long range planning process the Planning Section also offers research consultation to the state convention leadership. Thus the Planning Section has at its disposal information from many different sources. One of the most important sources of data for the Southern Baptist Convention comes from the Baptist Sunday School Board. The Baptist Sunday School Board with the aid of the state conventions and associations collect data on almost every church in the Southern Baptist Convention through the use of a questionnaire known as the Uniform Church Letter. The Church Letter contains such information

as church size, number of baptisms, Sunday School size, finances, and other data. This information is collected and key punched and made available on computer tape. The Planning Section of the Home Mission Board has copies of the computer tapes and the Uniform Church Letter provides much of the information that the Planning Section uses.

Oftentimes the Planning Section of the Home Mission Board has to send out questionnaires in order to supplement the data of the Uniform Church Letter. The Planning Section has kept up with response rate on some of its questionnaires since January of 1975. In January 1975 a report entitled An Outreach Study of the Southern Baptist General Convention of California was printed by the Planning Section. This report was based on data obtained from the 1973 Uniform Church Letter, the 1973 Evangelism Supplement Sheet which was a questionnaire collected by the California State Convention at the same time it collected the Uniform Church Letter, and data from a mail survey conducted among Southern Baptist churches in California during the fall of 1974. The California churches who completed the 1973 Uniform Church Letter were considered to be the population of all California Southern Baptist churches. The data from the Uniform Church Letter was used to calculate a baptism rate, baptisms per 100 resident members, for each California church. The churches were stratified into three groups according to whether they had a low, middle or high baptism rate. Samples from each of three groups were selected and questionnaires were mailed to each of these sample churches. The questionnaires were designed and printed by the Planning Section of the Home Mission Board. They consisted of seven pages of multiple choice, fill in the blank, and open ended questions. The questionnaires were then sent to the California State Convention. There they were sent out by the state convention offices with a return stamped envelope and a letter asking their participation by

filling out the questionnaires. A number was inconspicuously recorded on each questionnaire so that each returned questionnaire from a church could be matched up with its corresponding Uniform Church Letter data and Evangelism Supplement data. A follow-up letter with another questionnaire was sent to nonrespondents. The questionnaires were returned to the state convention and the state convention then returned all questionnaires to the Home Mission Board. An Outreach Study of Churches of the Southern Baptist General Convention of California states the following:

The mail survey had a good response rate of 54.7%. Because of the necessity to match and correlate churches as mentioned above there were a few questionnaires that were not able to be used, consequently, the actual response rate of usable questionnaires was 50.6%. This is still considered to be a good response rate for a questionnaire of this length (7 pages). A study was made of the response rate by date returned (wave of response) in order to detect any non-response bias that might be evident in the study. There were some differences noted on various questionnaires in regard to the response by wave. However, there was no definite trend in the answers. On some questions a more positive answer was given by the initial respondents whereas in other cases a more positive answer was given by the late respondents. Consequently there does not seem to be any serious non-response bias involved in the study.

Obviously the researcher of this report felt that his response was representative of the entire population under consideration. Information was not given in the report as to how the response rate related to the performance of churches as measured by the baptism rate.

A study conducted for the Baptist State Convention of Michigan in the fall of 1975 was designed pretty much like the study for the state of California. The study used data from the 1974 Uniform Church Letter and a mail survey taken among selected Southern Baptist churches in the state of Michigan. The researcher does not go into detail as to how he selected his sample from all the churches in the state of Michigan but here again those churches completing the Uniform Church Letter for 1974 were taken as the population and probably a simple random sample was selected from this population. A questionnaire was

sent out that was three pages in length and consisted of yes or no, multiple choice, fill in the blank, and open ended questions. Again a serial number was inconspicuously coded on each questionnaire in order to match up completed questionnaires with the Uniform Church Letter data. The questionnaires were sent in bulk to the state convention and there they were mailed with a letter and a return self addressed stamped envelope. Completed questionnaires were returned to the state convention and the state convention in turn returned them to the Home Mission Board. In the report the researcher made the following comments:

The mail survey was conducted during the months of August and September. The mail survey had a response rate of 52.3%. A few questionnaires that were returned in the mail survey were not usable because the correct Uniform Church Letter data for these churches was not available. It was felt that it would be better not to use these churches in the analysis in order that the findings would reflect complete data from every church. Even though the response rate for this questionnaire was not as good as could have been desired, the rate is somewhat typical for this type study. The survey is considered adequate to present answers to the type questions that were asked.

At the end of the report the researcher added a section where he discussed the representativeness of the data. Because of the information on the Uniform Church letter he was able to compare those churches completing his questionnaires to all of the churches in the state. The researcher concluded

...that for all variables, except for one, the average for the churches in the survey was higher than the respective average for the complete state. This gives indication there was some non-response bias involved in the study since those churches that did not answer possibly are smaller or less active churches. This type of non-response bias was somewhat typical for mail surveys since the middle size or larger and more active churches are usually more likely to respond to a mail survey.

From the researchers conclusions the best performing churches - i.e. the middle size or larger and more active churches-are more likely to respond than poorer performing churches.

In the fall of 1975 and winter of 1976 extensive studies were made among the churches in the Florida Baptist Convention. Questionnaires were sent out to five different groups in the Florida Baptist Convention. The results of these surveys are contained in two reports A Survey of Evangelism and Mission Ministries in Churches of the Florida Baptist Convention March, 1976 and A Survey of Evangelism and Selected Group of Churches in the Florida Baptist Convention, March 1976. First of all, the data for all Florida churches were selected from the 1974 Uniform Church Letter tape. Using variables on this tape a Reaching Index was calculated for each church in order to study evangelism and a Missions Ministries Index was calculated in order to study mission activities for each church. Those churches scoring the very highest in the Reaching Index, 132 churches, were selected for further study. Those churches scoring the very lowest on the Reaching Index, 136, were also selected for further study. The Reaching Index was supposed to be some sort of measurement of the strength of the evangelism effort in the Florida churches. The state leadership of the Florida Baptist Convention felt that the strongest group of churches selected on the basis of the Reaching Index were really not the churches that they subjectively felt were actually the strongest churches in regards to evangelism. So a third group of churches were subjectively selected in order to do further analysis. On the basis of the 1974 Uniform Church Letter a Mission Ministries Index was also computed for each church in Florida. The top 134 churches scoring highest on the Mission Ministries Index were selected for further study. Also the lowest 115 churches on the Mission Ministries Index were selected for further study. The Mission Ministries Index was believed to be indicative of the performance of churches in conducting mission activities. A three page questionnaire was sent out to the group scoring highest on the Reaching Index, the group scoring lowest on the Reaching Index and the group of

churches hand selected by the Florida Baptist Convention state leadership. A two page questionnaire was sent out to the group scoring highest on the Missions Ministries Index and the group scoring lowest on the same index. In addition to the questionnaires, the mailout to each of the groups of churches contained a letter from the state leadership in the state of Florida requesting participation in the study. Also included was a self-addressed stamped return envelope. A number was inconspicuously coded on the back of each questionnaire in order to match returned questionnaires with data from the 1974 Uniform Church Letter. A follow-up letter with another questionnaire was sent to nonrespondents. The response rate of the hand selected group of churches which was administered the evangelism survey was 79%. The researcher concluded that "this response rate was considered very good and should give a good representation of this group of churches". In looking at the highest Reaching Index group, out of the 132 high churches originally selected only 68 responded to his questionnaire. This is a response rate of 51.5%. Out of the 136 churches in the low group as measured by the index only 45 responded. This is a response rate of 33.1%. This is a combined response rate of 42.2%. Of the 134 churches in the high group as measured by the Mission Ministries Index 103 returned their questionnaires. This is a response rate of 76.9%. Of the 115 churches in the low group as measured by the Mission Ministries Index only 39 returned their questionnaires which was a response rate of 33.9%. This gave a combined response rate for the high and low groups of the Mission Ministries Index of 57%. The researcher did not report whether he used the data from the Uniform Church Letter in order to determine if there were any differences between the churches responding to the questionnaire and the churches not responding to the questionnaire in each of the five groups. However, some information can be drawn from the data as we have it. The group with the highest response rates were those churches that were hand selected by the leadership of the Florida Baptist Convention. A

couple of things might account for this high response rate. This group of churches as viewed by the state convention leadership represented those churches they felt to be performing the most effectively in the area of evangelism. Therefore it seems probable that churches who view themselves and are viewed by others as doing their job most effectively would probably be most likely to return a questionnaire which investigates their performance. Also these churches probably had closer relationships to the convention leadership than other churches, therefore they would be more likely to fill out questionnaires at their request. In looking at the response rates for high and low groups on both the evangelism questionnaire and mission ministries questionnaire, the higher scoring groups had higher response rates. Here again this seems to support the hypothesis that the churches who are performing more effectively are more willing to fill out questionnaires dealing with their performance.

In the fall of 1975 a mail questionnaire was administered to selected churches in the Baptist General Convention of Oklahoma. A Teaching Index and a Baptism Index were computed for each church in Oklahoma from the 1974 Uniform Church Letter. Those churches scoring highest on the Teaching Index, 93, and those scoring lowest, 99, were selected for further study. The 109 churches scoring highest on the Baptism Index and 153 churches scoring lowest were also selected for further study. An additional group of 188 churches was randomly selected from all churches in the state. Four page questionnaires designed by the Planning Section of the Home Mission Board were forwarded to the Baptist General Convention of Oklahoma. There they were sent out with a letter from the state leadership requesting participation and with a self-addressed stamped envelope. A follow-up letter with another questionnaire was sent to nonrespondents. An inconspicuous number was placed on each questionnaire in order to match up the returned questionnaires with the appropriate Uniform Church Letter data.

The highest scoring group on the Teaching Index had a response rate of 35.5% while the lowest scoring group had a response rate of 26.3%. The highest scoring group on the Baptism Index had a response rate of 34.9% while the lowest scoring group had a response rate of 22.9%. The response rate for the random sample was 39.9%. Assuming that the above two indices are measurements of performance, the highest performing churches are more likely to respond to a mail questionnaire than poorer performing churches. There is no apparent reason why the randomly selected group had the highest response rate of all. However, when descriptive statistics of the Uniform Church Letter were computed for the respondents of the randomly sampled group and compared against statistics for all churches in the state, the responding churches were above average on all of the statistics. The responding group were larger churches, they had more baptisms, larger Sunday School enrollments, and larger financial receipts. Again the better performing churches responded to the questionnaires.

A final study for our consideration is a study of churches in the Arizona Baptist Convention. Again a similar type study was made in Arizona as in previous states. A churches Strength Index was computed for each church in the Arizona Southern Baptist Convention based on the 1975 Uniform Church Letter data. On the basis of this church Strength Index the 48 highest scoring churches were considered for further study. On the basis of the same index the 99 lowest scoring churches were selected for further study. A two page questionnaire was sent out to each of the churches in each of these two groups. The questionnaire was developed and printed by the Planning Section of the Home Mission Board then sent to the Arizona Southern Baptist Convention for distribution. There they were mailed along with a letter requesting participation and a self-addressed stamped envelope. Of the 48 churches in the high group 36

responded thus giving a response rate of 75% for this group. Of the 99 churches in the weak group only 32 churches responded giving a response rate of 32.3%. This gave a combined response rate of 46.3%. No further investigations were made concerning the differences between the respondents and non-respondents. Here again those churches that were the best performing - i.e. the strongest - were much more willing to complete a questionnaire that was designed to investigate the performance of a church.

Out of all the surveys examined in this report, only one factor stands out as affecting the response rate of churches filling out their questionnaires. That factor is the performance of churches which are being measured. Sampling response ranged from 35% to 79% among the groups of highest performing churches while sampling response ranged from 23% to 34% of the poorest performing churches. A good performing church is more likely to fill out a questionnaire than its poorer performing counterpart. The Home Mission Board needs to take steps to improve its response rate since results of the mail questionnaires will be biased in favor of the best performing churches.

One factor that I had theorized as possibly playing an important role in the response rate of churches to questionnaires is the relationship that the state convention leadership has to churches located within its convention. I had theorized that in state conventions such as California and Arizona there would be a much closer relationship between the state leadership and the individual churches. This difference in relationship would be due to the fact that these conventions are much smaller than older established state conventions, such as Florida and Oklahoma. There is also a big difference in the way these states were organized. A state such as California and Arizona are much newer conventions. Rather than a lot of churches coming together and forming the state convention a few churches came together and formed a state convention.

The state convention was then instrumental in establishing a lot of its other churches. As such there is natural sort of relationship between state conventions and churches in these new areas. Whereas on the other hand, in the older states like Oklahoma the churches were formed without any help from the state convention for the most part. The churches are much more independent of the state convention and probably less willing to cooperate with the state leadership in some ways. The information obtained from the reports as to surveys done by the Planning Section of the Home Mission Board did not lend themselves necessarily to this type of interpretation. Different designs and more indepth analysis will be necessary to prove this hypothesis. Maybe the relationship between a state convention and its churches is an important factor in response rate but age of the convention does not necessarily determine the relationship between a convention and its churches.

Other factors may also be working as to whether or not churches respond to questionnaires. These include such things as length of the questionnaire, type of questions asked, the type of cover sheet sent out with each questionnaire, and the different type of follow-up. There might be a different response if the Home Mission Board sent out the cover sheet and the questionnaire rather than the state convention. Possibly this might increase response if the churches feel like there is more anonymity. However the increased distance between the Home Mission Board and individual churches may result in a decreased response because there is less personal involvement between the two. The literature suggests that there is higher rate of response if the respondents have links with the survey organization. Although the Home Mission Board and individual churches have a link between them still their relationship is more distant than that of state convention to individual churches. Although the type of letter sent with each questionnaire requesting participation in filling out the question-

naire was not indicated in any of the reports which I was able to find, the literature on nonresponse sampling indicates that the letter should be as personal as possible, there should be a promise to share the results of the survey and there should be communication to the respondent that the results of the survey are ultimately going to help him. One suggestion made in some of the literature dealing with nonresponse of questionnaires suggested that a follow-up phone call be made in order to solicit nonrespondents to respond. Although somewhat expensive and difficult to do still it might be possible for personnel in the state convention level to call nonrespondent churches and make a personal plea for them to fill out the questionnaire. This might be the most effective way to eliminate nonresponse bias in religious surveys of the Home Mission Board.