

Reflections on Southern Baptist Membership

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Some people use statistics like a drunk uses a light pole—for support rather than illumination.

Introduction

Southern Baptists secure two types of membership information from its congregations. These two measures are:

- (1) Total Members—Total of both Resident and Non-resident members added together.
 - (2) Resident Members—Members who live close enough to the congregation to attend.
- These two measures are very closely correlated ($r = .996$).

Findings

Figure 1 presents SBC Total Membership from 1950-2004 in graphic form. Examination of the curve reveals that the increase in Total Membership has been slowing. Figure 2 presents the percent change in Total Membership from year-to-year for the same time period. It very clearly indicates that the growth has been slowing. In fact, if the trend continues unchanged, the trendline would suggest that Southern Baptist would begin experiencing a decrease in membership soon.

Figure 1

Southern Baptist Total Membership--1950-2004

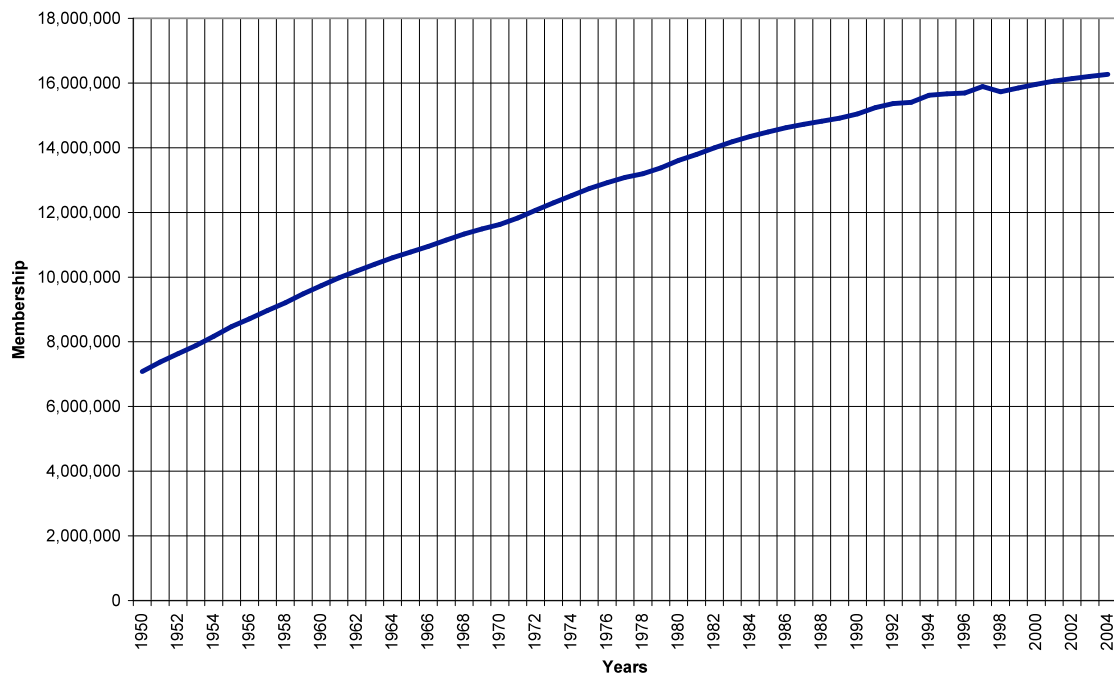


Figure 2

Annual % Change in Total Membership--1951-2004

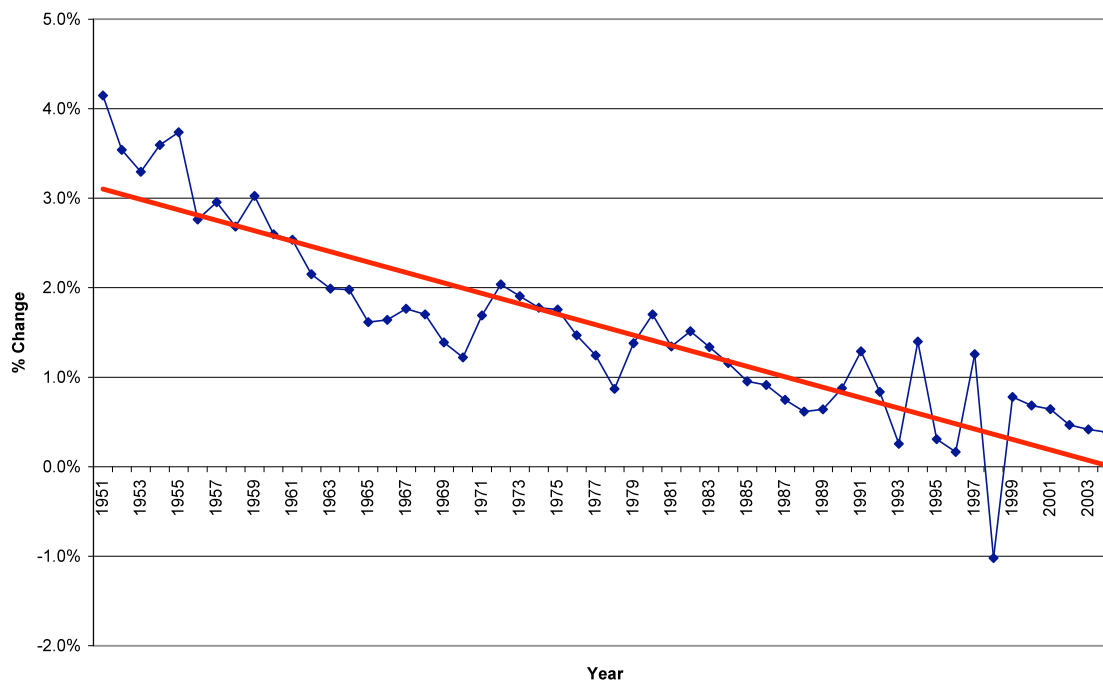


Figure 3 (on the next page) presents both Total and Resident Memberships in graphic form. One of the things evident in the figure is that the difference between Total Membership and Resident Membership has been increasing. This should be a concern as Resident Membership is generally considered to be more indicative of persons who are more active and involved. Total Membership, on the other hand, is often said to be inflated as congregations fail to keep their membership rolls up-to-date. This development may also be impacted by the mobility of our society.

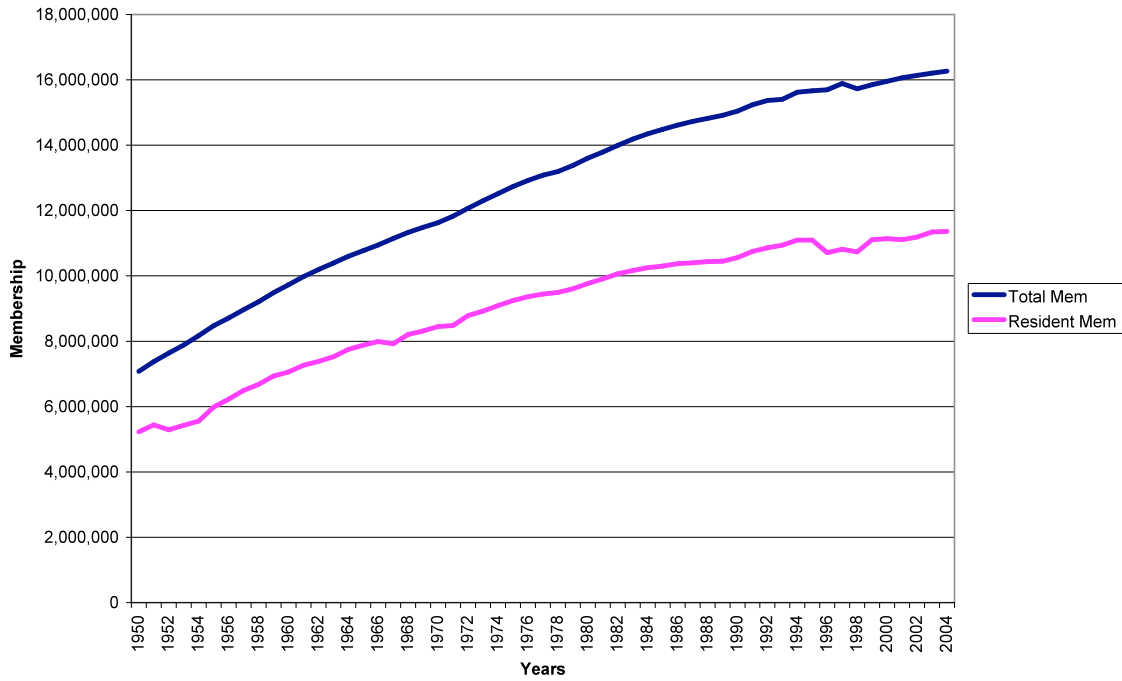
Membership is impacted from the following sources:

1. persons who have been baptized;
2. persons who have joined the membership by means other than baptism (letter or statement);
3. members of congregations already in existence who are affiliating with the SBC;
4. members of new congregations (churches and church-type missions).

Another document exploring the topic of Baptisms identifies that Total Baptisms have been plateaued since 1950 and that the number of Other Additions has been decreasing over the time-period.

Figure 3

Total and Resident Membership for SBC



Some Observations

1. Trends in Membership (both Total and Resident) are becoming very flat.
2. Total Membership is dangerously close to beginning to decrease.
3. The gap between Total Membership and Resident Membership is widening.