



Photos courtesy Judy Pierce

Originally founded in 1903, Bellevue Baptist Church currently has approximately 29,000 members. The church moved to its present location in Cordova in eastern Shelby County in 1989. Above: The Bellevue Worship Center. Below: Three crosses mark the Bellevue campus along Interstate 40.



Doctrine, Demographics, and the Decline of the Southern Baptist Convention in Shelby County, Tennessee

By Andrew Trundle

Recent church membership statistics show that the Southern Baptist Convention is in decline in Shelby County. This paper argues that the increasingly conservative tilt of the national denomination in recent years, in addition to demographic factors specific to the county, explain this phenomenon. The size, strength, and national prominence of Memphis's Bellevue Baptist Church make Shelby County a particularly significant site for investigating membership trends in the Southern Baptist Convention

Sociological Theory

Sociologists have presented numerous theories regarding why particular religions or denominations grow and shrink or what specifically attracts adherents to or alienates them from a church or denomination. In *The Churching of America, 1776-1990*, sociologists Finke and Stark take an economic approach to religion, by treating religion as a commodity and individual churches and denominations as brands of the product.

Religious economies are like commercial economies in that they consist of a market made up of a set of current and potential customers and a set of firms seeking to serve that market. The fate of these firms will depend upon (1) aspects of their organizational structures, (2) their sales representatives, (3) their product, and (4) their marketing techniques. Translated into more religious language, the

relative success of religious bodies (especially when confronted with an unregulated economy) will depend upon their polity, their clergy, their religious doctrines, and their evangelism techniques.¹ Finke and Stark are quick to point out that they are not ignoring the content of religion but, instead, demonstrating the importance of doctrine in attracting or repelling members.²

Finke and Stark's economic model includes a unique cost/benefit relationship. They argue that the greater the "cost"—non-economic that is—of being a member of a particular church or denomination, the greater the benefit will be for individuals who accept these costs. Their reasoning is simple. Religion is a "*collectively produced commodity*" because most "emotional and psychic rewards of religion are greater to the degree that they are socially generated and experienced." Furthermore, because the greatest reward for religious adherents is typically supernatural and occurring in the future, people rely on others to help them weigh their particular benefits against the costs and risks.³ Larger groups, therefore, increase one's sense of awe and the resulting emotional response to the supernatural while providing support and reassurance for one's faith. For these effects to occur, however, all members of the group need to be strongly committed to the cause. Increased sacrifice and risk are therefore necessary to discourage "free riders," those who attempt to reap the benefits of the group without actively working toward the goals of the church. Such members reduce the average input into the collectively produced commodity of religion, thereby devaluing the experience for the more committed members of the group. Creating a stigma for the group or demanding particular sacrifices are the most common techniques for keeping free riders out of a denomination.⁴ Increased costs, for those willing to pay them, increase benefits spiritually and emotionally as well as physically and/or socially. There are, however, limits to this relationship, as a denomination could potentially raise the costs to the point that many members deem membership too

¹ Finke and Stark, *Churching of America*, 17.

² Finke and Stark, *Churching of America*, 17-18.

³ Finke and Stark, *Churching of America*, 249-52.

⁴ Finke and Stark, *Churching of America*, 252-54.

expensive. As a result, most churches do not increase costs over time.⁵

Michael Hout encourages the study of demographics as they relate to religion. The relative sizes of particular denominations, he reports, have changed due to differences in demographical statistics such as birth rate and life expectancy among the denominations. The focus of the demographer is rates of events and exposure for populations. Events are defined as those occurrences that change the size or make-up of a population. Exposure is the ability for a particular event to occur. For example, single people are not capable of divorce, so they are not counted among the exposed population for calculating the divorce rate. Relative rates will often affect an overall rate. If a particular rate varies greatly from one population to another, changes in the relative sizes of these populations within a region will affect the totals associated with the rate for the region. Hout uses, as an example, the death rate. The death rate is much higher among those in their sixties or seventies than among those in their twenties. If the population of an area shifts to include a greater percentage of sixty- and seventy-year-olds, the overall death rate will increase. Conversely, if the population shifts to include a greater percentage of twenty-year-olds, the overall death rate will drop.⁶ Along the same lines, and more directly related to the study of religion, is the connection between immigration and religious composition of an area. For example, Latin Americans are a strongly Catholic population. An influx of Latin American immigrants into an area, therefore, will logically raise the percentage of Catholics in that area. The increased market share of the Catholic Church in the United States (see Table 2) could reasonably be explained, in part, by the large number of immigrants from Latin American nations. If the influx of Latin American Catholics accounted for the entire increase in Catholic market share, sociologists have no need to explain the shift toward Catholicism in America. Hout writes, “When demography is the full explanation, theories about behavioral change are irrelevant.”⁷

⁵ Finke and Stark, *Churching of America*, 255.

⁶ Michael Hout, “Chapter Six: Demographic Methods for the Sociology of Religion,” *Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, Ed. Michele Dillon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 79-84.

⁷ Hout, “Demographic Methods,” 81.

The National Context

The Southern Baptist Convention has been the most populous Protestant denomination in the United States for the past four decades. During the 1960s and 1970s, the growth rates of many large denominations either slowed or reversed, but the Southern Baptist Convention continued its long upward trend. In fact, most conservative denominations have continued to grow throughout the latter half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century, while mainline churches have struggled to maintain their numbers.

During the 1970s, a mostly theologically moderate group of trustees and presidents led the Southern Baptist Convention. Though the group struggled to keep the conservative and liberal wings of the denomination together, it achieved a delicate balance within the divided denomination through the “Grand Compromise,” by which it was understood that no faction could take complete control of the SBC.⁸ Twenty-five years later, the Southern Baptist Convention stands out as the most prominent conservative denomination, often leading the fight in defense of conservative ideals. Over recent years, the denomination’s major target over has been homosexuality. The SBC began a much publicized boycott of Disney in 1997 as a result of the company’s promotion of what it described as “immoral ideologies,” such as homosexuality.⁹ More recently, the denomination has been encouraging support for the Federal Marriage Amendment, which would make homosexual marriage unconstitutional in the United States.¹⁰

The SBC’s shift from a moderate to a conservative leadership occurred over several

⁸ A conservative denomination is one that maintains a traditional doctrine, including a belief in the inerrancy of the Bible. This contrasts with mainline denominations, which have adapted their theologies in response to changes in secular culture. In *Acts of Faith*, sociologists Rodney Stark and Roger Finke include the Southern Baptist Convention in a list of conservative denominations and conclude that most groups of this type are growing. Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1992); Barry Hankings, *Uneasy in Babylon: Southern Baptist Conservatives and American Culture*, (Tuscaloosa, Ala.: University of Alabama Press, 2002), 4.

⁹ Art Toalston, “Advocates of Disney boycott say SBC Reflects Christian Attitude,” *BPNews*, 5, August, 1997. <<http://www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?ID=3721>> (July 12, 2004).

¹⁰ Church Bulletin, Bellevue Baptist Church, June 26, 2004.

years as a result of a move in 1979 known either as the “Conservative Resurgence” or the “Conservative Takeover,” depending on one’s perspective. Barry Hankins describes the process in his book, *Uneasy in Babylon: Southern Baptist Conservatives and American Culture*. In short, several prominent conservative members of the Southern Baptist Convention felt the moderate leadership was allowing the denomination to grow increasingly accepting of secular trends, as the “mainline” denominations had done in recent decades. The architects of this movement were Paige Patterson, a biblical scholar, Paul Pressler, an appeals court judge and conservative activist, and Adrian Rogers, former pastor of Bellevue Baptist Church in Memphis, Tennessee. These men felt they represented a silent, conservative majority within the denomination and realized that to effect change they would need to gain control of the presidency of the convention. Once a conservative president won election, he could appoint conservative trustees to the several national boards. The trustees hold the real power within the SBC because they set the agenda for the denomination. Conservatives chose Rogers as the voice of the movement and placed him on the ballot for SBC president at the 1979 national meeting. Rogers won with over half of all votes in a six- man field. This was initially regarded as a fluke, but moderates have never won another presidency. This move began a decade of contention and argument within the denomination. Interest in national meetings grew along with the intensity of the struggle, and attendance by all sides skyrocketed. Nonetheless, conservatives continued to win, due in large part to rhetoric regarding their belief in the inerrancy of the Bible. Southern Baptists have long held this belief, and conservatives insinuated that the moderates and liberals were leading the denomination away from this doctrine. Conservative presidents replaced retiring moderate trustees with conservatives until they had achieved majorities on most major boards of the denomination.¹¹ By the late 1980s, the Southern Baptist Convention was distinctly in the hands of the conservatives.

A major argument of the conservatives has been that denominations that drift away from conservative theology lose members. The new leaders of the Southern

¹¹ Hankings, *Uneasy in Babylon*, 5-8.

Baptist Convention, therefore, believed that by maintaining their conservative, traditional characteristics they would continue to grow at the expense of the mainline denominations. For many years this occurred. Membership in the Episcopal Church, the United Methodist Church, and the Presbyterian Church (USA) continued its downward trend throughout most of the second half of the twentieth century, while the SBC (approximately sixteen million members) grew to nearly twice the size of the next largest protestant denomination (United Methodist with approximately eight and a half million members) by 1996.¹² The popular conception is that these trends are continuing at present. Recent scholarship continues to argue that the growth of the Southern Baptist Convention and other conservative denominations are growing, while more liberal denominations lose members.

These trends, however, are changing. In the early 1990s, membership in the Episcopal Church surged before dropping off again.¹³ Generally, however, the mainline Protestant denominations continue to decline in membership, although the rates may be slowing for some groups. In the meantime, the SBC experienced its first loss in membership in 1998 after over 70 years of gains. Growth has been slow since then, rising above one percent only once and failing to reach the level of growth the year before the decline.¹⁴ Finke and Stark argue that the health of any single denomination should be based on its market share of Christians rather than simple numerical growth. By this method, they show that most mainline denominations were in decline long before the “tumultuous sixties” (which is often blamed for triggering the decline of mainline churches) because such denominations had failed

¹² Edwin Scott Gauston and Philip L. Barlow, *New Historical Atlas of Religion in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 88, 226.

¹³ Gauston and Barlow, *Atlas of Religion*, 102.

¹⁴ Polly House, “Southern Baptist Convention Statistics for 2003 Show Growth in Membership, Churches,” April 12, 2004; Polly House, “2002 SBC Membership Reaches All-Time High of 16.2 Million,” April 22, 2003; Charles Willis, “SBC Membership Hits 16 Million,” April 19, 2002; Charles Willis, “Southern Baptist Church Membership Hits Record, Approaches 16 Million, April 16, 2001; Charles Willis, “Southern Baptist Church Membership Nearly 15.9 Million, Up From ‘98,” April 11, 2000; Linda Lawson, “Southern Baptist Church Membership Declines for First Time Since 1926,” April 15, 1999; Linda Lawson, “Baptisms, Churches Increase in 1997, According to Annual Church Profile,” April 30, 1998, all from *BPNews*, <www.bpnews.net> (July 17, 2004).

to maintain or increase their respective percentages of American Christians.¹⁵

Year	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003
Members	15891514	15729356	15851756	15960308	16052920	16247736	16315050
Change	197464	-162156	122400	108552	92612	194816	67314
% Change	1.30%	-1.02%	0.78%	0.68%	0.58%	1.21%	0.41%

They include a chart demonstrating that between 1940 and 1960 the market shares of mainline denominations—United Methodists, Presbyterian (USA), Episcopal, Christian (Disciples), and United Church of Christ (Congregationalists)—decreased, while those of Evangelicals (Southern Baptists, Assemblies of God, Church of the Nazarene, and Church of God (Cleveland, Tennessee) and Roman Catholics increased. These trends continued between 1960 and 1985.¹⁶ If the strength of a denomination is to be measured by market share, stagnant membership numbers during a period of overall growth, which would lead to a declining market share, must be an indicator of a denomination on the verge of decline. In fact, the Southern Baptist Convention’s market share dropped slightly between 1990 and 2000 (See Table 2).¹⁷

	Roman Catholic	Southern Baptist	United Methodist	Evangelical Lutheran	Mormon
1990	42.13%	14.95%	8.75%	4.12%	2.79%
2000	45.01%	14.43%	7.51%	3.71%	3.06%

A more dynamic trend is occurring in Shelby County, Tennessee, where Dr. Adrian Rogers recently retired from Bellevue Baptist Church. While Bellevue itself is growing rapidly, the total membership of Southern Baptist Churches in Shelby

¹⁵ Finke and Stark, *Churching of America*, 247.

¹⁶ Finke and Stark, *Churching of America*, 247.

¹⁷ “Religious Groupings: Full U.S. Report,” American Religion Data Archive <www.arida.tm> (July 21, 2004). It should be noted that the American Religion Data Archive bases its numbers on adherents, not members. This number includes adult members as well as children. “Using adherents allows for more meaningful comparisons between groups that count children as members (e.g., Catholics) and those that don’t (e.g. Baptists).” It should also be mentioned that, historically, African-American denominations were not included for 2000 and their numbers for 1990 were, therefore, disregarded to maintain statistical integrity.

County is falling. Whereas the total membership of the SBC rose five percent in the 1990s, the number of adherents in Shelby County dropped more than ten percent from 169,276 to 151,377.¹⁸ This does not represent a regional decline, however, as the Memphis Metropolitan Area (Shelby, Tipton, and Fayette Counties, TN, Crittenden County, AR, and De Soto County, MS) showed a slight increase overall in Southern Baptists (221,904 to 223,789; 0.85%) over the same time period.¹⁹

Changes in the Shelby County Southern Baptist Population

According to Hout, we must first determine whether demography is the full explanation for this decline in membership. The Southern Baptist Convention is, essentially, a white denomination. This is not a unique characteristic of the SBC. The memberships of most churches, if not most denominations, are comprised mostly of a single ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic demographic. Dr. Donald Dunavant writes in his dissertation, *Churches Confronting the Challenge of Changing Communities*, that, “it is improbable that a neighborhood church can grow and maintain a ministry of effective evangelism in a community of a different ethnic, racial, or socioeconomic population composition.”²⁰ This is not to say that churches are promoting discrimination. Rather, due to the strong personal connections individuals have with their religion, people desire to be comfortable in their churches. Persons tend to feel more comfortable among people with similar backgrounds and experiences, so they are likely to form nearly uniform congregations. This is not to suggest that all churches are entirely uniform, only that there is typically a dominant ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic profile for membership. This is not a new development. White Protestants in the nineteenth century South were distinctly divided along a socioeconomic hierarchy with Episcopalians at the top, followed by Presbyterians,

¹⁸ “Religious Groupings: County Report (Shelby, TN),” American Religion Data Archive, <<http://thearda.com/RCMS/2000/County/47157.htm>> (July 21, 2004). See note 10.

¹⁹ “Religious Groupings: Metro Area Report (Memphis, TN-AR-MS MSA),” American Religion Data Archive, <<http://www.thearda.com/RCMS/2000/Metro/4920.htm>> (July 21, 2004). See note 10.

²⁰ Donald Dunavant, *Churches Confronting the Challenge of Changing Communities: Selected Case Studies of Southern Baptist Churches Located in Transitional Neighborhoods in Memphis, Tennessee*, (1991), 170.

Methodists, and then Baptists. These denominations have undergone great changes since this period, but a church's membership continues to be based strongly on demographics. Some denominations have established individual congregations made up of a different population, such that the denomination's overall membership numbers reflect a greater diversity than those of the individual congregations. This is often reflected in the denomination's leadership. The United Methodists, for example, have, among their fifty bishops, fourteen African Americans, two Hispanics, one Asian American, and eleven women.²¹

Baptists, however, have been unable to do this. There are, of course, some predominantly African-American Southern Baptist churches, but the denomination is still overwhelmingly Caucasian. In fact, Baptists are the only major denomination to maintain the divisions that occurred along regional lines over the issue of slavery during the 1840s, hence the label, *Southern* Baptist.²² The Methodists were the first to reunite in 1939, and the Presbyterians did the same in 1983. (The Episcopal Church never split.)²³ In addition to Southern and Northern conventions (the Northern Baptists are now known as the American Baptists), there are also several large black Baptist denominations which have split from each other, such as the National Baptist Convention, USA, the National Baptist Convention in America, and the Progressive National Baptist Convention, USA. In 1996, these Black Baptist denominations made up roughly 43% of all Baptists in the United States, with the NBCUSA the largest of the three. The Southern Baptists made up 45%, and the American Baptists counted for 4%. The remaining 8% was comprised of the many other Baptist groups. (There are currently over sixty Baptist entities.)²⁴

While a large percentage of the black population in America is Baptist, few are Southern Baptist. In Shelby County, where the black population is large and growing, demographics could easily explain the shrinking size of the Southern Baptist

²¹ Stephen Drachler, "Quick Facts," United Methodist Church, <<http://www.umc.org/interior.asp?ptid=6&mid=2119>> (July 28, 2004).

²² Hankings, *Uneasy in Babylon*, 241.

²³ Gauston and Barlow, *Atlas of Religion*, 100, 136, 227.

²⁴ Gauston and Barlow, *Atlas of Religion*, 80-89.

Convention. In 1990, there were 360,083 African Americans in Shelby County, roughly 44% of the population. Whites accounted for 55% of the population with a total of 455,063. By 2000, the black population had grown to 435,824, comprising roughly 49% of the population, while at 424,834, the white segment of the population made up only 47% of the county.²⁵ With the white population of Shelby County actually shrinking by 19,239, it is possible that a small drop in the Southern Baptist population of the county could be explained simply by this change in demographics. The Southern Baptist population, however, shrank by 17,899. It is illogical to conclude that 93% of the white population exiting Shelby County was Southern Baptist when SBC adherents made up at most only 37% of the white population in 1990.²⁶ Demography, therefore, cannot fully explain the drop in the Southern Baptist population in Shelby County.

If demographics are not the full explanation, there must be some other cause for the drop in white membership. In terms of actual growth, most of the twentieth century was a period of great success for the Southern Baptists, both nationally and in Shelby County. The Southern Baptist market share has actually been in decline since the 1970s, but actual decline in membership did not occur until recently (See Table 3). This chart is based on numbers which do not include historically African-American denominations. This drop, therefore, means that the SBC actually lost part of its market share of white Christians in Shelby County. Until around 1990, the total number of Southern Baptists in Shelby County was always on the rise.

Table 3: Total Membership and Market Share of the SBC in Shelby County for the Twentieth Century²⁷							
Year	1926	1936	1952	1971	1980	1990	2000
Total Membership	14,413	16,346	68,760	149,853	152,617	169,276	151,377
Market Share	18.73%	23.32%	39.34%	50.02%	44.72%	44.40%	41.71%

²⁵ "Tennessee Quick Facts: Shelby County," U. S. Census Bureau, <<http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/47/47157.html>> (July 25, 2004).

²⁶ Calculations are based on the total number of Southern Baptist adherents in Shelby County in 1990 and the total white population of Shelby County in 1990.

This trend reversed itself in the last decade of the Baptist's century of growth. Membership numbers for all of the SBC churches in Shelby County are not readily available. The Shelby Baptist Association of Churches, however, has association membership numbers for almost the entire century. According to Ronnie Wilburn, Executive Director of the Shelby Baptist Association of Churches, he knows of no SBC churches in Shelby County that are not members of the SBAC.²⁸ Churches are not, however, required to report statistics to the organization. Chart 1 shows the growth and decline of the Shelby Baptist Association of Churches between 1905 and 2003. Chart 2 provides a more in-depth look at the decline that occurred beginning in 1988, by showing the actual number of members reported each year. Chart 1 shows consistent growth until 1990, but Chart 2 demonstrates that the actual numbers vary somewhat from year to year.

²⁷ T. F. Murphy and Leon E. Truesdell, *Religious Bodies: 1926*, Vol. 1, (Washington, D.C.: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1930), 675-78; T. F. Murphy, *Religious Bodies: 1936*, Vol. 1, (Washington: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1941), 820-23; *Churches and Church Membership in the United States: An Enumeration and Analysis by Counties, States, and Regions, Ser. A-E*, (New York: National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States Bureau of Research and Survey, 1956-58); Douglas W. Johnson, Paul R. Picard, and Bernard Quinn, *Churches and Church Membership in the United States: An Enumeration by Region, State, and County, 1971*, (Washington, Glenmary Research Center, 1974); Bernard Quinn, *Churches and Church Membership in the United States, 1980: An Enumeration by Region, State, and County, Based on Data Reported by 1111 Church Bodies*, (Atlanta: Glenmary Research Center, 1982), 260; "Religious Groupings: Full U.S. Report," American Religion Data Archive, www.ardata.com (July 21, 2004). Data on historically black denominations as well as Jewish denominations is inconsistently reported in these studies, so information for those denominations was disregarded when included for statistical integrity. The market shares reported in this table, therefore, refer solely to the historically white denominations of Christians. It is also noted that the reliability of some of the earlier surveys has been called into question in by several experts, but the more recent surveys are quite reliable.

²⁸ Ronnie Wilburn, Telephone Interview with author, 27 July, 2004.

Chart 1: Shelby Baptist Association of Churches Membership

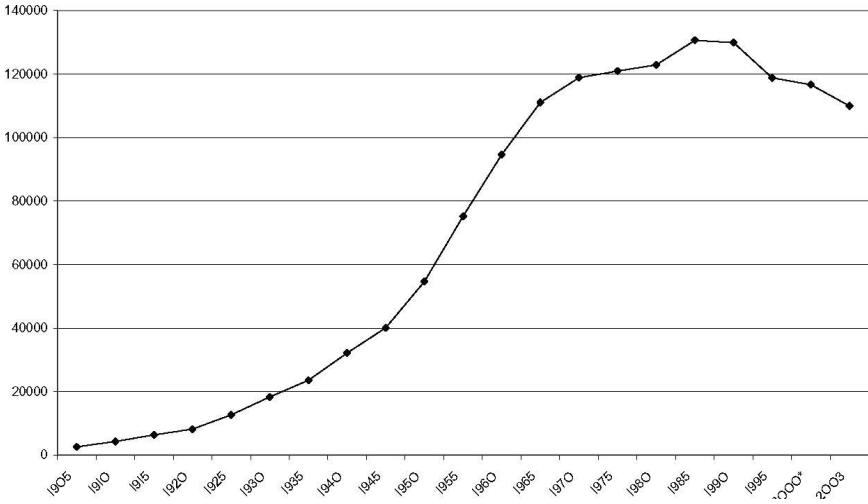
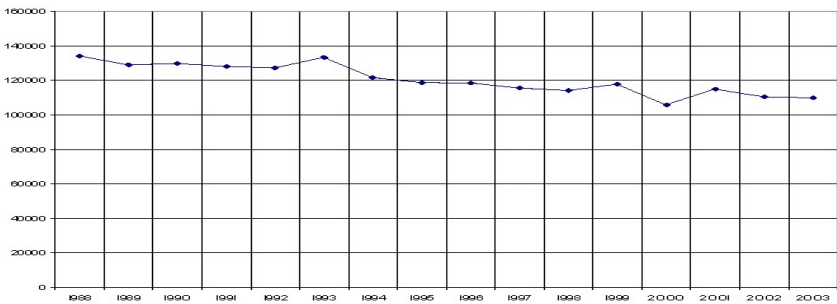


Chart 2: Shelby Baptist Association of Churches Membership (1988-2003)



Some churches report numbers inconsistently, causing significant fluctuation in the numbers from year to year. East Acres Baptist Church, for example, reported its numbers in 1999, but not in 2000. Their numbers were again counted in 2001 and 2002, but not for 2003. An unusually large number of churches did not report their data for 2000. If 2000 data had been used for Chart 1, the graph would have appeared to show a rebound after 2000. An average was used instead (see note 27). Chart 2 shows that, despite a great amount of fluctuation, the membership of the Southern Baptist Convention in Shelby County is, in fact, shrinking.²⁹

Doctrinal Disagreements

If the Southern Baptist Convention is indeed shrinking in Shelby County and demographics are not the full explanation, what is the cause? Why are people leaving the Southern Baptist Convention? The answer seems to lie in the SBC doctrine. The “Conservative Resurgence” solidified the conservative faction’s control over the Southern Baptist Convention throughout the 1980s to the point that there has been little competition in the elections at the annual meetings in recent years. Moderates stopped running candidates after the 1990 election, and often a single conservative candidate runs unopposed.³⁰ As a result, the doctrine of the denomination has grown increasingly conservative. In 2000, Dr. Adrian Rogers served as the chairman of a committee that produced a new Baptist Faith and Message. The Baptist Faith and Message serves as the denomination’s statement of faith, although individual

²⁹ The numbers for these charts can be found in: Richard C. Strub, “Annual Totals—All Churches,” *Shelby Baptist Association 1903-2003: 100 Years, A Century of Missions*, (Southaven, Miss.: King’s Press, 2003). The 2003 numbers are from the 2003 Minutes of the Shelby Baptist Association of Churches. Since Southern Baptists practice adult Baptism, the number of members reported will be much lower than the number of adherents reported in the national surveys (see note 27). Churches are not, however, required to report their numbers, so actual totals for the county will be somewhat higher. The SBAC actually reported 105,901 members for 2000, but this number appeared anomalous. An investigation of the 2003 Minutes of the Shelby Baptist Association of Churches showed an unusually high number of churches not reporting their membership for this year. As a result, the average of the totals for 1999 and 2001 (116,648) was used for this calculation as well as for Chart 1.

³⁰ Marv Knox, “Welch Wins Contested SBC Presidency, Prescribes Evangelism for SBC Decline,” *Associated Baptist Press*, 17 July, 2004, <http://abpnews.com/news/news_detail.cfm?NEWS_ID=68> (July 26, 2004).

congregations are not required to adopt changes to the document. Rogers outlines the major changes in the creed, including stronger language against female pastors, “abortion, homosexuality, euthanasia, and all manner of deviant and pagan sexuality” in a letter addressed to the denomination.³¹ Such statements represent the conservative majority of the denomination, but they work to alienate the more moderate congregations and members of the Southern Baptist Convention.

The presence of Dr. Rogers at Bellevue has had a strong impact on the churches of the Southern Baptist Convention in Shelby County. He is a three-time Southern Baptist Convention President (1979, 1986, and 1987) and one of the most captivating and widely admired men in the denomination. His influence reaches far beyond his pulpit at Bellevue Baptist Church which, with 28,837 members in 2003, accounted for over 26% of the Southern Baptists reported in Shelby County.³² He also has strong political connections, as well as radio and television broadcasts with a potential audience of 135 million in 2002.³³ Rev. Carlton Cobb of Speedway Terrace described Dr. Rogers as, “one of those...voices that everybody pays attention to because he’s been very active in the... movements within the Southern Baptist Convention that resonate with Southern Baptists.”³⁴ Dr. Robert Pitman of Kirby Woods Baptist Church states that “he’s had a very positive impact. Bellevue is of course the flagship...not only of Shelby County, it’s one of the flagships of our denomination, and Dr. Rogers is one of the greatest preachers, one of the greatest pastors. He’s a real statesman of the Christian Faith....I would say Dr. Rogers has had an impact on our denomination like no other one man.”³⁵ Rogers has worked closely with the Shelby Baptist Association of Churches, through which he can encourage other SBC churches to adopt the conservative agenda of the denominational

³¹ Adrian Rogers, “From the Chairman of the Committee on the Baptist Faith and Message,” Southern Baptist Convention, <http://www.sbc.net/bfm/bfmchairman.asp> (August 5, 2004).

³² Number based on the total membership of Bellevue and the total number of members of reporting Southern Baptist churches as reported in the 2003 Minutes of the Shelby Baptist Association of Churches.

³³ Hankings, *Uneasy in Babylon*, 67.

³⁴ Carlton Cobb, Interview with author, 28 July, 2004.

³⁵ Robert Pitman, Interview with author, 27 July, 2004.

leadership. He has, according to Germantown Baptist Pastor of Discipleship Gerry Peak, exerted his influence and led churches in the area to be more conservative than they possibly otherwise would be.³⁶

Congregations that do not wish to adopt the denomination's conservative agenda are free to ignore resolutions passed by the national meetings. Many churches, despite disagreeing with the denomination, remain affiliated with the SBC and continue to send some money to the Convention. Gerry Peak believes that "there [will] be more and more churches that may stay affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention, but they [are] really going to be doing their own thing."³⁷ Germantown Baptist, which has the second highest SBC membership total in the county behind Bellevue, has not adopted the new Baptist Faith and Message. Peak states that, "a church of our diversity...has so many different opinions about what has happened to the Baptist Faith and Message that we have not added those changes in our statement of faith."³⁸ Nonetheless, Germantown Baptist continues to be a dutiful member church of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Other churches have taken a different approach. A number of churches have concluded that the conservative image and doctrine of the Southern Baptist Convention is too burdensome for their congregations. Several churches within Shelby County have left the Southern Baptist Convention. The "All-Time Member Churches" section of *Shelby Baptist Association 1903-2003: 100 Years, A Century of Missions* lists three churches that withdrew from the association during the 1990s: Church of the Living Word in 1994, Old Salem in 1997, and Rose Hill in 1998.³⁹ Prescott Memorial Baptist Church, which was disenfranchised by the Shelby Baptist Association of Churches in 1987 for ordaining a female pastor, remained a member of the Southern Baptist Convention until 1994. At that time, the church decided to withdraw due to the denomination's increasing hostility toward female pastors and homosexuals.⁴⁰ Moderate Baptists feel uncomfortable in the Southern Baptist

³⁶ Gerry Peak, Interview with author, 20 July, 2004. Dr. Rogers was, unfortunately, unavailable for interview for this essay.

³⁷ Peak, Interview.

³⁸ Peak, Interview.

³⁹ Strub, *Shelby Baptist Association*, 178-85.

Convention. Greg Warner of the Associated Baptist Press writes that, “Past headlines about Southern Baptists’ boycott of Disney, evangelization of Jews, wifely submission or condemnation of Islam have put moderate Baptist churches on the defensive.”⁴¹ If entire congregations are choosing to leave the Southern Baptist Convention, it is logical to conclude that many individuals are also choosing to leave their Southern Baptist churches for other less conservative denominations, thereby decreasing the SBC membership in Shelby County.

The mere fact that a church has chosen to leave the Southern Baptist Convention, however, does not assure the congregation of complete dissolution of its ties to the denomination. Many churches are counted among the members despite the fact they have left the Convention. No one is sure how many churches nationwide fall into this category. SBC Spokesman Jack Wilkerson, however, believes that “out of 43,000, the number is quite miniscule.”⁴² The difficulties associated with actually having a withdrawal or, in some cases, a complete lack of membership acknowledged by the Southern Baptist Convention complicate the process of discovering which churches in Shelby County have left the denomination. For example, three of the four churches mentioned above as having withdrawn from the SBC (Old Salem, Rose Hill, and Prescott Memorial) can still be found on the Southern Baptist Convention website’s “ChurchSearch.”⁴³ Other churches may fall into this category. When asked about which Shelby County churches have left the Southern Baptist Convention since 1990, SBAC Executive Director Ronnie Wilburn named only two, Prescott Memorial and Rose Hill.⁴⁴ It is safe to say, therefore, that other churches could have left the Southern Baptist Convention without the SBAC’s knowledge.

⁴⁰ “The History of Prescott Memorial Baptist Church,” <<http://prescottchurch.org/History/history.html>> (July 26, 2004).

⁴¹ Greg Warner, “Leaving the SBC Behind Proves Hard for Some Churches,” Associated Baptist Press, 26 June, 2004, <http://www.abpnews.com/news/news_detail.cfm?NEWS_ID=27> (July 28, 2004).

⁴² Greg Warner, “Leaving the SBC.”

⁴³ “ChurchSearch,” Southern Baptist Convention, <<http://www.sbc.net/churchsearch>> (July 28, 2004).

⁴⁴ Wilburn, Interview.

Many moderate churches also feel that it is not worth the trouble of actually withdrawing, despite the fact that they do disagree with much of what the Convention declares.⁴⁵ Dr. Kenneth Corr of First Baptist Church of Memphis notes that, “Our reasons for remaining Southern Baptists have been historical and traditional. The church has a long history of involvement and we have been slow to sever those historical ties. The Baptist tradition is larger than the SBC. Our connection[s] with Baptist’s distinctives are important to many in this congregation. Many of us believe that it is the SBC that has lost connection with what it means to be a Baptist, i.e., the traditional meaning of being Baptist.”⁴⁶ As a result of the difficulties associated with identifying which churches have withdrawn from the denomination and which churches are now only minimally associated with the Convention, it is difficult to estimate how many Southern Baptists fit into this category. It is also unclear which churches that fit in this category are being counted for statistical purposes by the Southern Baptist Convention. Therefore, despite assurances that this number is “minimal,” one must assume that the total number of unreserved, practicing Southern Baptists is less than the total number of members reported, and that this difference could in fact be significant.

For Christians who have left the Southern Baptist Convention, either as individuals or through their congregations, the burden of an increasingly conservative doctrine and agenda was just too much. In Fink’s and Stark’s economic model, the cost of being a Southern Baptist became too much for them. They no longer find the benefit of the “collectively produced commodity” of religion to be worth the stigma associated with being a Southern Baptist. Those who have left for doctrinal reasons are no longer willing to support these positions, financially or otherwise. Former President Jimmy Carter, “Southern Baptists’ most famous layman,” publicly left the SBC in 2000, citing the fact that “leaders of the convention have adopted an increasingly rigid creed.”⁴⁷ Richard Kremer, pastor of St. John’s Baptist Church

⁴⁵ Warner, “Leaving the SBC.”

⁴⁶ Kenneth Corr, E-mail Interview, 28 July, 2004.

⁴⁷ Greg Warner, “Jimmy Carter Says He Can ‘No Longer Be Associated’ With the SBC,” *Associated Baptist Press* as reprinted in *Baptist Standard*, <http://www.baptiststandard.com/2000/10_23/pages/carter.html> (July 28, 2004).

in Charlotte, North Carolina, has even pondered dropping the term “Baptist” from his church’s name after leaving the SBC in 1997. He states, “Our people are tired of saying, ‘We’re Baptist, but . . .’”⁴⁸ This reaction to increased costs supports Fink’s and Stark’s economic model. Part of the losses of Southern Baptist members in Shelby County, therefore, can be explained by disagreement over doctrine.

Losses due to disagreements over doctrine are unlikely to be remedied. The SBC leadership has no intention of easing off on its conservative agenda, and the influence of Adrian Rogers makes this especially true for Shelby County. As a result, moderates will likely continue to leave the denomination as the Convention vocally clarifies its stances on issues such as homosexuality and women in the pulpit. Shifting toward a more moderate agenda would appeal to some in the denomination, but the conservative nature of the SBC is what attracts and holds the majority. New SBC President Bobby Welch of the First Baptist Church of Daytona Beach, Florida, encourages the denomination to recast its position in terms of what it promotes, not what it opposes. “The world knows what Southern Baptists are against. . . . But the world needs to know what we are for—sharing the love of Christ with everybody who does not know him.”⁴⁹ Leaders of the “Conservative Resurgence” refuse to acknowledge that the shift has caused any decline. Rather, they believe the decline is just the residual effect of the influence of liberals and moderates prior to the event. Paige Patterson, now the president of the Southwestern Baptist Theological Institute, views the effects of liberal theology on the Convention as cancerous. He states, “Some of the effects of radiation sickness in the vicinity of Chernobyl were immediate. Others have manifested themselves only with the passing of the years. But, the ill effects, short-term or long-term, are not the responsibility of these who did their best to save life and limit danger. . . . It is too early to tell all of the effects of the conservative renaissance. Wait twenty more years, and we will have a better view.”⁵⁰ Nonetheless, many people have left the Southern Baptist Convention due to the conservative shift, and others have decreased their participation.

⁴⁸ Warner, “Leaving the SBC.”

⁴⁹ Knox, “Welch Wins.”

⁵⁰ Marus, “SBC Stats.”

Aging Membership

Although a shift towards greater conservatism explains part of the drop in Southern Baptist Convention membership in Shelby County, much of the reason for declining numbers is demographic. The first element of the demographic explanation is age. Southern Baptists, in general, are an older population than the general public. Many major denominations face the same issue, but it is a distinct problem for Southern Baptists in Shelby County. Gerry Peak states that the average member of Germantown Baptist Church is in his or her forties, and that this age is younger than the average age of Southern Baptist Church members in the area.⁵¹ By comparison, the average age of a person in the United States in 2000 was 35.3, and the average age in Shelby County was 32.9.⁵² Dr. Pitman stated that the major issue facing the SBC was the hesitancy of the older generation to pass the torch to the young pastors and to inspire the younger generation. He states, “I think at our last convention Dr. Jimmy Draper put his thumb on the pulse of a real need when he said that there are a lot of the younger...Southern Baptists who do not feel as strong a tie to the Convention as some of us older ones do.”⁵³ When the membership of a church continues to age, eventually membership will decrease due to death. This has been the case in some SBC churches in Shelby County. Rev. Cobb stated that much of the membership loss for Speedway Terrace Baptist Church, which went from 1,203 members in 1991 to 266 members in 2003, has been due to older members passing away.⁵⁴

The SBC needs to appeal to a younger demographic. Churches with younger, growing memberships often include worship services with contemporary or blended music formats. Programs directed at certain demographics (teens, newlyweds, college students, etc) can also keep younger members in a church.⁵⁵ On a national level, the Convention needs to incorporate more young ministers into its operations. Many

⁵¹ Peak, Interview.

⁵² 2000 “Demographic Profile for U.S.” and “General Demographic Statistics” for Shelby County, U.S. Census Bureau, <www.census.gov> (July 30, 2004).

⁵³ Pitman, Interview.

⁵⁴ Cobb, Interview; numbers from the 1991 and 2003 Minutes of the Shelby Baptist Association of Churches.

of the current leaders are celebrating three decades or more in the ministry. Young voices need to be heard to attract young members.⁵⁶

“White Flight”

The major demographic cause for decline in Southern Baptist membership in Shelby County, however, has been racial. Memphis and Shelby County have long had a significant African-American population. As noted earlier, the African-American population surpassed the white population in number during the 1990s. Today, the black population continues to grow while some of the white population is leaving. Southern Baptists and Southern Baptist churches have played a significant role in the “white flight” plaguing Shelby County. A comparison of the membership numbers for churches reporting in 1991 and 2003 to the Shelby Baptist Association of Churches demonstrates this point.⁵⁷ Most of the SBC churches inside the city, especially those inside the Interstate-240 loop, are shrinking. Most of the larger churches are located outside of this loop. The only SBC church with more than four thousand members that is located within the I-240 loop, Leawood Baptist Church, shrank roughly twenty percent during this period. The other three churches with more than four thousand members—Bellevue Baptist with 28,837 members, First Baptist, Millington, with 5,589 members, and Germantown Baptist with 7,988 members—are all located outside of the city of Memphis in the suburbs of Cordova, Millington, and Germantown, respectively. With a combined membership of 42,414 in 2003, these three churches account for 39% of all Southern Baptists reported by the Shelby Baptist Association of Churches for that year. At the same time, there is a collection of churches with memberships below one hundred in the western center of the city of Memphis. The eastern half of the city has much larger churches.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Peak, Interview; Visit to Bellevue Baptist Church.

⁵⁶ Pitman, Interview.

⁵⁷ Membership numbers were taken from the 1991 and 2003 Minutes of the Shelby Baptist Association of Churches. Addresses were found in either the 2004 Memphis/Shelby County phone book or on the Southern Baptist Convention’s website.

⁵⁸ Analysis is based on a map created using the membership numbers in both the 2003 Minutes of the Shelby Baptist Association of Churches and the SBC website church locator, with addresses found in the same manner as mentioned above. See note 57.

As the white population of Shelby County has shifted eastward, the churches have followed. Gerry Peak analyzed the situation as follows: “So many of the churches began inside of Memphis, inside the...[I-]240 loop, and, as the city has changed racially and economically, people have fled from the city.” He goes on to mention that “Germantown [Baptist] Church...grew a lot from white flight.”⁵⁹ Southern Baptist churches throughout the city have pondered moving east. First Baptist Church of Memphis split in half in 1994, with half of the congregation and the senior pastor founding Trinity Baptist Church in Cordova. Current First Baptist of Memphis pastor Dr. Kenneth Corr states that “The former pastor at FBC, Dr. Earl Davis, was convinced that the church needed to move to the suburbs in order to survive.” The church has yet to recover either financially or in terms of its congregational size.⁶⁰ A number of other churches have either moved east or been founded in the eastern part of the city or outside of the city limits. Twenty-five churches relocated between 1988 and 2003. Most relocated further east within the county, but many also moved to Mississippi.⁶¹

Mississippi, especially De Soto County, was a major destination for Southern Baptists and whites in general leaving Shelby County. Growth within De Soto County was the greatest factor offsetting losses in Shelby County for the Southern Baptist Convention within the Memphis Metropolitan Area between 1990 and 2000 (See Table 4). Shelby County saw a drop of 17,899 Southern Baptists, while De Soto County saw an 18,129 adherent increase. Fayette County, Tennessee, also saw a significant rise in its Southern Baptist population, which increased by over twenty percent. Losses in Crittenden County, Arkansas, prevented a larger increase in the overall Memphis Metropolitan Area. The Shelby Baptist Association of Churches, perhaps in light of the fact that many Southern Baptists were moving from Shelby County into the surrounding counties, began admitting churches in other counties. Hope Baptist Church in Olive Branch, Mississippi, was admitted to the association in 1998 after having left the county several years earlier. Piperton First Baptist

⁵⁹ Peak, Interview.

⁶⁰ Corr, Interview.

⁶¹ Strub, *Shelby Baptist Association*, 120-54.

Church in Fayette County, Tennessee, was likewise admitted in 1999.⁶² This was the beginning of the association’s expansion beyond the county. The group is now looking to expand to form a large, Mid-South association of Southern Baptist churches which would include congregations in seven states.⁶³ Shelby Baptist Association’s home county, however, remains in trouble.

Table 4: Changes Within the Memphis Metropolitan Area Between 1990 and 2000 by County⁶⁴					
County Name	Shelby County, TN	Fayette County, TN	Tipton County, TN	Crittenden County, AR	De Soto County, MS
1990 Total Population	826,330	25,559	37,568	49,939	67,910
1990 Percent White	55.1	55.6	75.7	56.4	86.7
1990 SBC Adherents	169,276	6,293	9,435	12,915	23,985
2000 Total Population	897,472	28,806	51,271	50,866	107,199
Percent Change	8.6	12.7	36.5	1.9	57.9
2000 Percent White	47.3	62.5	77.9	50.9	85.8
2000 SBC Adherents	151,377	6,446	11,479	12,373	42,114
Percent Change	-10.6	2.4	21.7	-4.2	75.6

⁶² Strub, *Shelby Baptist Association*, 120-54.

⁶³ Bob Allen, “Memphis-based Association Eyes Expansion into Regional Group,” *Biblical Recorder*, 15 April, 2004, <http://www.biblicalrecorder.org/content/news/2004/4_15_2004/ne150404memphis.shtml> (July 29, 2004).

⁶⁴ This chart was made using 1990 “General Population and Housing Statistics” and 2000 “General Demographic Statistics,” US Dept. of Census, viewed 29 July, 2004, www.census.gov, and “Religious Grouping: County Reports,” American Religion Data Archive, <www.arda.tm>, for Shelby County, Fayette County, and Tipton County, TN, Crittenden County, AR, and De Soto County, MS (July 29, 2004).

The churches should not necessarily be condemned for moving away from their original locations in the heart of the city. In general, these churches were following the trend set by their members. The leaders of these churches believed they had to move to survive, and the churches that chose not to move may be proving this belief correct. Some of the churches that stayed behind have had difficulty surviving. Rev. Cobb of Speedway Terrace said the congregation of his church “did [not] really want to follow the trend of some of the other Midtown churches and bail out. Somebody needs to stay, and they have elected to be that somebody. Unfortunately they [have] disconnected from the community.”⁶⁵ It is often difficult for a church to survive when the neighborhood around it changes. Churches have not reached out to the communities moving into their neighborhoods, and this fact is causing the demise of many churches in the city. Gerry Peak states,

When the neighborhood changes, you need to continue to reach out to people who are there....If you [are] going to have more Hispanics, or if you [are] going to have more African Americans, you need to start reaching out to those kinds of people....The people who are in those churches are not open to that....The doors are open, but the church does [not] go out in the community and knock on the door and say ‘hey, come to our church. We want to have you no matter what your color or income is.’ I think that’s the primary reason why so many of our Baptist churches inside the loop are not growing; they [have] not reached out to the people who live around them now. That [is] why they [are] in trouble.⁶⁶

While everyone is in favor of reaching out to the incoming populations, some disagree with the idea of staying in place and trying to minister to the new populations. Dr. Donald Dunavant studied several Southern Baptist churches in Shelby County in “transitional neighborhoods” where the racial makeup of the area was rapidly changing. In his, *Churches Confronting the Challenge of Changing*

⁶⁵ Cobb, Interview.

⁶⁶ Peak, Interview.

Communities: Selected Case Studies of Southern Baptist Churches Located in Transitional Neighborhoods in Memphis, Tennessee, Dunavant concludes that the most effective action a church can take towards incorporating new members of a population into a church is to set up a new church of the same denomination at the old location for the incoming population and then move to where the previous membership has relocated.⁶⁷

If a church is already struggling and anticipating a tumultuous future, such a move may be advisable for survival. This was not the situation of Bellevue Baptist Church, which moved from Midtown to the suburb of Cordova in 1989. Adrian Rogers' congregation, by far the largest in Shelby County and one of the largest in the Southern Baptist Convention, certainly needed to move to an area with more space to accommodate further growth. The congregation did not, however, need to move out to the suburbs to build a new, 376 acre church campus complete with multiple baseball and soccer fields.⁶⁸ The church certainly had the means, and Dr. Rogers certainly had the appeal, to successfully relocate within the city. Dr. Rogers could have made a point by staying in town and embracing the changes in the city's population. Instead, his church became the largest monument to Southern Baptist white flight in Shelby County.

Appealing to Non-White Populations

White flight would not necessarily be a problem for the Southern Baptist Convention in Shelby County if the denomination could attract an equal portion of all races of populations moving into the city of Memphis. Within Shelby County, however, the SBC remains a largely white organization. This is not to say that it is not trying to reach out to the African-American, Hispanic, and Asian-American populations. The roll of churches in the 2003 Minutes of the Shelby Baptist Association of Churches lists several ethnically focused churches and missions. Asian-American churches include Cambodian Mission, First Chinese, Germantown

⁶⁷ Dunavant, *Churches Confronting the Challenge of Changing Communities*.

⁶⁸ Hankings, *Uneasy in Babylon*, 67.

Korean, Korean, Laotian First, and Vietnamese. Five SBC churches have Spanish names and may, therefore, be assumed to minister to the Hispanic population: Iglesia La Buena Esperanza, Iglesia Bella Vista, Iglesia Hispana Internacional de Tchulahoma, Iglesia Nueva Vida, and Mision Hispana Bautista.⁶⁹ Ronnie Wilburn of the Shelby Baptist Association of Churches also identified fifteen African-American churches on the SBAC roll.⁷⁰ Many of these churches share buildings with each other or with previously established Southern Baptist Churches. First Baptist of Memphis and Laotian First Baptist Churches are both located at 200 East Parkway. Iglesia La Buena Esperanza is located with Leawood Baptist Church at 3638 Macon Road. Thessalonians and Zoe Baptist Churches are both located at 3747 Knight Arnold Road. Most of these ethnic churches were started up in the past fifteen years.⁷¹ The Shelby Baptist Association of Churches has made reaching out to the incoming populations a priority through church planting. For example, Speedway Terrace Baptist Church, which is located in Midtown, is currently in the process of planting three new churches in its existing building, two African-American and one Hispanic.⁷²

As mentioned previously, most ethnic churches have been founded in the past fifteen years, several in the past five. As a result, membership data is not readily available. Of the twenty-six ethnic churches in the 2003 Minutes of the SBAC, only nine reported membership numbers. These nine have a total of 1,488 members, an average size of just 165. This represents just 1.35% of the Southern Baptists reported by the SBAC in 2003. This, of course, does not mean that only 1.35% of the Southern Baptists in Shelby County are non-white, as congregations are not entirely homogenous. Kirby Woods pastor Dr. Robert Pitman stated that his church, one of the fastest growing in the county, had a “significant” number of black members, as well as specific ministries to Koreans and Hispanics, including a director of Hispanic

⁶⁹ 2003 Minutes of the Shelby Baptist Association of Churches.

⁷⁰ Ardmore Terrace, Chief Cornerstone, Faith Mission East, Grace Thru Faith, Lamar Terrace, Living Water, Monument of Love, Mountain Terrace, New and Living Way, New Dimensions, New Life, New Vineyard, True Fellowship, Thessalonians, and Zoe. Wilburn interview.

⁷¹ Addresses and founding dates found on the SBC ChurchSearch website (see note 43).

⁷² Cobb, Interview.

ministries. The church even has a minister for the deaf population of Shelby County.⁷³ Furthermore, since 2000, two black Southern Baptist pastors have begun working at predominantly white SBC churches in Shelby County.⁷⁴ Nevertheless, the non-white population of the Southern Baptist churches in Shelby County is clearly far less than the 52.7% of the total population of the county that is non-white.

There may be a sincere effort to reach out to these non-white populations, but most agree that there is some hesitancy on the part of the churches to commit to outreach programs. Gerry Peak cites the difficult situation of the pastor. He must decide either to minister to the existing membership or focus on outreach, but, regardless of the decision, he must keep the existing members happy. If the membership is uncomfortable with or unwilling to minister to the incoming ethnic populations, it is difficult for a pastor to ignore this and reach out anyway. Doing so risks producing decreased attendance, membership, and donations. A church cannot bring the African-American or Hispanic population into its congregation if the existing membership is unwelcoming, yet if the community around a church changes and the church does not incorporate that new community, the church will die. “The only hope for any church is that it will seek to reach the people that live around it,” argues Peak.⁷⁵

This is not a problem unique to Shelby County, only more prevalent due to the racial makeup of the county. The Southern Baptist Convention has difficulty attracting non-whites throughout the United States, a problem that is increasingly troubling as the African-American, Asian-American, and Hispanic populations of the United States grow at a rate much higher than that of the white population. Cliff Tharp, the SBC’s top statistician, analyzes the trend. “There has been a dramatic increase in the Hispanic population and black population, and while Southern Baptists have work in those areas, we have not been keeping pace in those areas at the way the population’s been increasing. Southern Baptists are still heavily Anglo, and that is not the portion of the U.S. population that has been experiencing rapid

⁷³ Pitman, Interview.

⁷⁴ Strub, *Shelby Baptist Association*, 147.

⁷⁵ Peak, Interview.

growth.”⁷⁶

There are several reasons the Southern Baptist Convention has difficulty attracting nonwhite members, particularly African Americans. The main reason is the image of the Southern Baptist Convention. Ellen Rosenberg describes the major reason for this in her book, *The Southern Baptists: A Subculture in Transition*. She first quotes social historian George Kelsey, who says, “It [is] not a strain to say that the moral aspects of Southern culture have by and large been provided by Southern Baptists.” Rosenberg continues by defining this culture.

To be southern is to be hyper-American: hyper-rural, because of the late industrialization; hyper-patriotic, with its chauvinistic and authoritarian connotations; hyper- also in indifference to history and anti-intellectualism with consequent vulnerability to mass culture,... and hyper-racist and –sexist, these two related organically in the southern psyche.⁷⁷

This is, by extension, a description of the Southern Baptist Convention. This review of the denomination would prove to be a difficult selling point to any minority population, not to mention to women. However, the characterization, especially concerning racism, rings true with many.

The Southern Baptist Convention was begun in response to an antislavery stance from the Board of the Triennial Convention (a national society of Baptist churches formed mostly for missionary purposes) in 1845. This proslavery stance has been called the Convention’s “original sin.”⁷⁸ The Southern Baptist Convention’s record of racism stretches well into the civil rights era, Barry Hankins declares that “most of the leaders of the opposition to desegregation were Southern Baptists.”⁷⁹ Some SBC leaders simply refused to speak up for African Americans, while others actively fought to defend segregation. In 1956, W. A. Criswell, one of the most influential

⁷⁷ Ellen Rosenberg, *The Southern Baptists: A Subculture in Transition* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989), 4-5.

⁷⁸ Hankings, *Uneasy in Babylon*, 241.

⁷⁹ Hankings, *Uneasy in Babylon*, 242-43.

leaders in the history of the Southern Baptist Convention, referred to blacks fighting for desegregation as “infidels, dying from the neck up.” Southern legislators, many of whom were Southern Baptists, followed such teachings by fighting court orders and federal laws.⁸⁰

The “Conservative Resurgence” has had a positive influence on the Southern Baptist Convention’s method of addressing racism. Conservative leaders have actively sought a progressive agenda on the issue of race. On other social issues, SBC leaders have maintained a countercultural stance, but a trend toward racial inclusiveness began slowly during the 1970s and has progressed ever since. For example, Dr. Adrian Rogers told his congregation at Bellevue, then located within the heart of the city of Memphis, that he was glad they had voted to desegregate because he would have resigned if they had refused to do so. Nonetheless, vestiges of racism continued within the denomination. In 1988, Curtis Caine Sr., who worked for the SBC’s Christian Life Commission, called Martin Luther King Jr., a fraud and lauded the apartheid system of South Africa. The statement was, by then, a minority opinion within the Convention, but ill feelings remained. In hopes of improving the situation, the Southern Baptist Convention passed in 1995 a resolution apologizing for opposing civil rights for African Americans and for perpetuating racism. There was some praise for the move, but there was also criticism. The resolution was too little, too late for many blacks. Some argued that it made no sense to support racial reconciliation while denouncing government policies and laws, such as affirmative action, intended to accomplish this goal. Furthermore, Paul Delaney argues that,

Southern Baptists [still] have to deal with a number of troubles: strong anti-black feelings among many in the SBC ranks; local and national policies that stand against blacks; institutions, such as segregated academies, that offend blacks; and Confederate battle flags that ‘perpetuate racial superiority and stereotypes and foster racial animosity.’⁸¹

Clearly, a strained racial tension continues within the Convention. The

⁸⁰ Hankings, *Uneasy in Babylon*, 242.

⁸¹ Hankings, *Uneasy in Babylon*, 243-49, 269.

overall conservatism of the denomination is often at odds with the stated desire to be progressive on the issue of race, and there has simply not been enough change since the resolution to impress the critics. Many African Americans will not accept that the SBC has sincerely changed until there is a significant presence of blacks in positions of power within the Convention. Nonetheless, by 2000 it is estimated that the Southern Baptist Convention could claim twelve hundred predominantly black congregations and around 800,000 non-whites, including 500,000 blacks. There has also been some progress on African Americans holding office. Blacks have been appointed to the North American Mission Board and are also gaining ground in state and local associations, where African-Americans hold increasingly important posts. Some had even predicted an African-American president of the Southern Baptist Convention. This now appears unlikely, but progress is slowly being made.⁸²

In Shelby County, race is constantly an issue. History and demographics assure this fact. If the Southern Baptist Convention cannot adequately minister to the African-American community, it will increasingly lose its presence in the county. The Southern Baptist churches that have moved, merged with other churches, left the SBC, or disbanded within Shelby County are concentrated within the heart of the city, where the black and other non-white populations are growing. Such changes have rarely occurred outside the Memphis city limits.⁸³ All fifteen of the black SBC churches in Shelby County are located within the city limits or just beyond, but they are still relatively small. They have yet to establish a strong presence, but church planting efforts by the Shelby Baptist Association of Churches and individual congregations concentrates heavily on this strategy. Time will tell if the churches can overcome the SBC's racist image and incorporate a large portion of the non-white church-going population of Shelby County. As the population of the nation grows more diverse, the fate of the denomination will rest on its ability to recruit non-white members and to eradicate its reputation as a racist denomination.

Race is the largest issue facing the SBC in Shelby County. White churches must

⁸² Hankings, *Uneasy in Babylon*, 249-70.

⁸³ This was determined by using descriptions of occurrences and addresses found in Strub, *Shelby Baptist Association*.

stop moving away when the surrounding neighborhoods grow too diverse. Instead, church leaders need to work to make the church membership resemble the neighborhood population. Separate congregations for different ethnicities may cause a short-term rise in non-white membership, but it is not healthy for the denomination in the long-term. Congregations of different races should merge together. The installation of black ministers into two predominantly white SBC churches in Shelby County is a step in the right direction. African Americans and other ethnic groups need to be incorporated into the Southern Baptist Convention, both nationwide and within individual congregations. A concerted effort must be made to promote minorities within the power structure. To further its claim that it wants to be progressive on the issue of race, the SBC needs to support racially progressive legislation. Recent efforts to diversity are on the right track, but their overall effectiveness cannot yet be judged. If the Southern Baptist Convention cannot attain greater ethnic diversity, its market share will continue to drop.

Conclusions

The Southern Baptist Convention is in decline in Shelby County, Tennessee. Nationwide numbers may not be far behind. Eudora Baptist Church, located in the heart of Memphis, is on the verge of disbanding, as several churches in the area have done recently. Richard Johnson, the pastor of the church, states, “If things don’t change, we’ve probably got a year left....Heritage is great, but you’ve got to move past that because it’s not going to do a thing for your future.” The church is reaching out. It is planning a contemporary service. It has increased its diversity. Now the members must wait for the results.⁸⁴ Eudora Baptist could be another in a long line of failing inner-city churches or a turning point for a troubled denomination.

Robert Marus of the Associated Baptist Press recently studied the success of the Southern Baptist Convention during the twenty-five years since the “Conservative Resurgence” using statistics reported by the SBC. He points out that the rates of growth and of evangelism have both declined during the period and that the growth

⁸⁴ James Dowd, “Room For Change: Historic Eudora Baptist Seeks a Vision for its Future,” *The Commercial Appeal*, 31 July, 2004.

rate has been below that of the general United States population. Marus argues that the conservative shift has not statistically improved the denomination, although it may not have significantly hurt it, either. Demographic issues of both age and race are mentioned as reasons to explain the denomination's slowing growth rate. Baptist historian Bill Leonard notes that large, growing "mega-churches," such as Bellevue, are greatly outnumbered by smaller churches in inner cities, small towns, and rural areas that are dying out, sometimes literally. Leonard states,

Because of the cultural and denominational disconnects, whoever was in charge of the SBC would have seen this kind of decline in some form or another. . . . It was hubris for the conservatives to say they saved the denomination numerically. They may have saved it theologically, from their point of view, but they haven't saved it numerically.⁸⁵

The Southern Baptist Convention must take steps now to regain its footing and improve its growth rates, or the denomination could follow the trend of decline begun by the "mainstream" denominations. The leadership of the congregation is now aware of the problems. Newly-elected SBC President Bobby Welch announced a multi-faceted program to reverse the denomination's decline. Recognizing the SBC's decline and announcing the onset of a transitional period, Welch stated, "We can[not] tolerate the same-old, same-old. . . . To say we [are] plateaued is a compliment. I mean, we [are] declining."⁸⁶

To achieve his goal of halting declines in membership, Welch and future leaders need to address the issues causing this decline. They will remain conservative, but they must put a more positive spin on the SBC's conservative theology. Furthermore, the SBC needs to attract a larger portion of younger people. Mainly, though, the Southern Baptist Convention must reach out to minority populations and fully incorporate them into its leadership, conventions, and congregations. This is a critical juncture for the denomination. With the right course of action, the Southern Baptist Convention could once again achieve rapid growth. If it fails to address contemporary challenges, however, the denomination could fall into a decline from which it is unable to recover.

⁸⁵ Marus, "SBC Stats."

⁸⁶ Knox, "Welch Wins."