

## **Pastors' Task Force on SBC Evangelistic Impact & Declining Baptisms**

A Pastors' Task Force was enlisted to assess and respond to stark patterns of decline in Southern Baptist evangelism and baptisms.

Al Gilbert (V. P. of Evangelism, North American Mission Board) selected pastors from a variety of geographic regions, ministry approaches, and ethnic backgrounds—and a few denominational leaders were asked to come alongside these pastors to assist.<sup>1</sup>

Ed Stetzer (President of LifeWay Research) assisted the Task Force by providing context and perspective from research.

The goals of the Task Force were simple—seek ways to help Southern Baptists own the problem and offer suggestions on how to start addressing the problem.

### **I. Task Force Process**

The Task Force first met on September 18, 2013, to outline its purpose and direction, agreeing on a meeting schedule.

Between meetings, Task Force members agreed to pray for God's direction while seeking input from fellow pastors and leaders within their ministry contexts. Facilitators agreed to seek input from various SBC leaders while analyzing statistical data.

The Task Force prayerfully submits the following report. We pray this will be the first step in a movement that encourages greater evangelistic impact and reverses the decline of baptisms in Southern Baptist churches.

### **II. Assessing the Problem**

**(1) Baptism Rates Are Sliding Down from the Plateau:** SBC baptisms reached a plateau in the 1950s, peaked in the 1970s, and have stayed fairly constant since that time. However, the last 6 years show a downward trend in both SBC church membership and baptisms. The problem is even greater than these numbers indicate. Considering how the North American population has increased substantially between the 1950s' baptism peak and today, these figures indicate how much ground we have lost and are losing.

**(2) Problems with Reporting:** More of our SBC churches in recent years fail to see the value of the annual reporting of statistics (Annual Church Profile). Although it would be convenient to blame declining baptisms on declining reporting, our statisticians concluded that we still have a steady decline in baptisms even when a lack of reporting is factored into the equation.

**(3) Recent Insights from the Annual Church Profile (ACP):** According to churches reporting in the 2012 ACP:

- 25% of Southern Baptist churches reported “0 baptisms”
- 60% reported no youth baptisms (age 12-17 bracket)
- 80% reported 0-1 young adult baptisms (age 18-29 bracket)
- The only consistently growing age group in baptisms is age five and under.

### **III. Owing the Problem and Seizing the Opportunity**

As pastors and members of this Task Force, we encourage our fellow SBC pastors to join us in owning this problem. Together, we can seize this opportunity to lead our churches and be part of the solution.

Each one of us must search our own hearts, reflect on our own leadership and evaluate our congregations. We must acknowledge this problem through repentance and prayer.

#### **We acknowledge:**

**We have a Spiritual Problem.** Many of our SBC pastors and churches are not effectively engaged in sharing the gospel and yet continue business as usual. We need a sense of brokenness and repentance over the spiritual climate of our churches and our nation.

**We have a Leadership Problem.** Many pastors have confessed to being overwhelmed in the operation and ministries of the church to the neglect of being involved in regular personal evangelism. This lack of leading by example is negatively impacting our church members' engagement in personal evangelism.

**We have a Discipleship Problem.** Many pastors have confessed to focusing on attendance while giving little attention to reproducing fruit-bearing disciples who are involved in intentional evangelism.

**We have a Next Generation Problem.** Although our churches have increasingly provided programs for children, students and young adults, we are not being effective in winning and discipling the next generation to follow Christ.

**We have a Celebration Problem.** Many of our churches have chosen to celebrate other things as a measure of their success rather than new believers following Christ in baptism. We have drifted into a loss of expectation.

### **IV. Addressing the Problem**

The Task Force members submit the following recommendations to address the problem.

#### **1. Pray for Spiritual Awakening.**

With urgency, we must join together in fervent and effective prayer for spiritual awakening in our churches and our nation.

#### **2. Model Personal Evangelism and Provide Pathways.**

As pastors we must intentionally model and prioritize personal evangelism while providing clear pathways\* for our congregations to follow.

#### **3. Create a Disciple-Making Culture.**

As pastors we must create a disciple-making culture—focusing on multiplying disciples who know how to grow in Christ and lead others to Christ.

#### **4. Serve the Next Generation.**

As pastors we must leverage our influence, activity and resources to reach and make disciples of the Next Generation. We must renew our focus on equipping parents and church leaders—challenging them to make the claims of Christ clear to the Next Generation.

## **5. Celebrate Evangelism and Baptism.**

As pastors we must celebrate new life in Christ as people publicly profess their faith through baptism. We must establish an ethos of joy that celebrates the practice of personal evangelism and its fruit.

*\*Provide a Clear Pathway:*

*Every pastor must find a way to train his congregation in personal evangelism. We encourage pastors to consider the North American Mission Board's new evangelism tool, "3 Circles: Life Conversation Guide," as a way to get started.*

## **V. Renewing Our Commitment**

As members of this Pastors' Task Force, we understand that we personally carry responsibility both for the problem and for the solution to our lack of evangelistic impact.

Therefore, we as a group commit to the following actions and invite other pastors and church leaders to join us.

1. Prayer: We will pray for spiritual awakening in our churches and culture.
2. Personal evangelism: We will share the gospel regularly and provide pathways for our congregations to follow.
3. Discipleship: We will spend time regularly making disciples who know how to share their faith.
4. Next Generation: We will intensify our efforts to reach and disciple the next generation.
5. Celebration: We will emphasize the celebration of baptism and rejoice with those who share their faith.

## **For More Information**

Anyone interested in reading more on this topic should consider the sources listed below.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Task Force Members:

Pastors:

**Andy Addis**, CrossPoint Church, Hutchinson, Kan.

**David Galvan**, New Life Hispanic Baptist, Dallas, Texas

**Dennis Manpoong Kim**, Global Mission Church, Silver Spring, Md.

**Jeff Lovingood**, Long Hollow Baptist Church, Tenn.

**Doug Melton**, Southern Hills Baptist Church, Oklahoma City, Okla.

**Carlos Navarro**, West Brownsville Hispanic Baptist, Brownsville, Texas

**Roger Spradlin**, Valley Baptist Church, Bakersfield, Calif.

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**Ted Traylor**, Olive Baptist Church, Pensacola, Fla.

**Keith Wieser**, Resonate Church, Pullman, Wash.

**K. Marshall Williams Sr.**, Nazarene Baptist Church, Philadelphia, Pa.

**Jay Wolf**, First Baptist Church, Montgomery, Ala.

**Benny Wong**, First Chinese Baptist Church, Los Angeles, Calif.

Denominational Workers:

**Milton Hollifield**, Executive Director, Baptist State Convention of North Carolina

**Wayne Jenkins**, State Director of Evangelism, Louisiana Baptist Convention

**Alvin Reid**, Evangelism Professor, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

<sup>2</sup> For more information

[www.EdSteter.com](http://www.EdSteter.com)

<http://thomrainer.com/2013/06/08/where-have-all-the-baptisms-gone/>

<http://www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?id=40451>

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2012/june/sbc-2011-statistical-realities--facts-are-our-friends-but.html>

<http://www.nobts.edu/publications/News/LeavellCentersidebar3-09.html>

<http://www.namb.net/nambblog1.aspx?id=12884907302&blogid=8589939695>

<http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/>

[www.Barna.org](http://www.Barna.org)

[www.thearda.com/rcms2010](http://www.thearda.com/rcms2010)