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SBC Leaders Hopeful Amidst
Downward Statistical Trends

by James Evans McReynolds

NASHVILLE (BP)--Reactions to the projected 1969 statistics prepared by the research and statistics department of the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board reflected some disappointment in the ministries of churches affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention.

Some SBC program leaders, however, reflected hope for a brighter future in the midst of annual downward trends in the areas of evangelism, Sunday School, Training Union, Brotherhood and Woman's Missionary Union.

The projected SBC statistics estimate revealed that Southern Baptist churches baptized 4,737 less persons in 1969 than in 1968.

"There is no simple explanation," said Ken Chafin, recently appointed secretary of evangelism, Southern Baptist Home Mission Board.

"First, we have tried to reap too long where we have not planted and cultivated. This statistic suggests the need to break new ground and to prepare soil for harvest.

"Second, we have failed to involve all of our churches in meaningful evangelism. It's at the congregational level that we do evangelism or fail to do it. A denominational evangelism program is worth nothing until it helps one congregation win people where it is.

"Third, this statistic dramatically points up how we have failed to harness the church's greatest resource, the laity. Any approach in the future that does not equip men and women and youth to do evangelism will fail. This does not mean that evangelism is dead, but it does mean that we must turn to the larger resources of our denomination to do evangelism," Chafin pointed out.

The relationship between baptisms and Sunday School enrollment was pointed out by A. V. Washburn, secretary of the Sunday School department, Southern Baptist Sunday School.

"The continual downward trend in Sunday School enrollment has a most urgent message for Southern Baptists," Washburn declared.

"There is a definite relationship between Sunday School enrollment and baptisms. When our churches turn the corner on reaching more people for Bible study, we will win more people to Christ.

"The new Sunday School program and curriculum materials for the 1970's will provide our churches a great opportunity for effective outreach," Washburn said.

Sunday School enrollment was estimated to be down nearly two per cent, or an estimated 140,347 less persons enrolled in Bible study in 1969 than were enrolled in 1968.

Philip B. Harris, secretary of the church training department, Sunday School Board, expressed an optimistic expectancy for new life in Training Union.

"Some loss is to be expected in an era of change and transition in society and in our churches," Harris pointed out.

"But I have an optimistic outlook about growth in the immediate future.

"Because of our new improved program, structures and curriculum materials, training will be expanded beyond all concepts of Training Union, Harris said. "Training will now permeate the entire life of the church."

"No doubt apathy has caused some of our decline. However, with the present thrust, new life and interest is in evidence." Harris continued.

The research and statistic department's estimated 1969 statistics revealed that a total of more than 75,000 less persons were included in the Training Union ongoing and cumulative enrollment in 1969 than were included in 1968.

Woman's Missionary Union (organization for missionary education of women and girls) experienced a loss of 116,415 according to the projection. The figure represents an 8.27 per cent decline.

Mrs. R. L. Mathis, elected president of the SBC Woman's Missionary Union, said the "loss was anticipated but the estimated number brought surprise," from the state WMU secretaries meeting in Nashville when the statistics were announced.

Reasons for the loss were judged to be: First, married women in rapidly increasing numbers accept positions outside the home, the loss of these affecting not only Woman's Missionary Societies, but missionary youth organizations for which they have been leaders.

"A second reason is the effect the increase in crime is having on attendance of women in many areas in night meetings," said Mrs. Mathis.

"A third reason is the cleaning of membership rolls at the time of transition to new patterns.

"Reports indicate many women did not want to choose a group rather than be assigned to a circle. These failed to see in the contemporary missions groups their second opportunity to study missions each month, just as they had in the circle plan, and they dropped out," she continued.

"There are still indications that church letters do not include a report from WMU and the statistics are drawn from church letters," Mrs. Mathis related.

The Brotherhood, the program of missionary education for boys and men, dropped to 15,661 less persons in enrollment during 1969 from the 1968 figure.

"Admittedly, these statistics are projections," George W. Schroeder, executive secretary of the SBC Brotherhood Commission, pointed out.

"If accurate, we are keenly disappointed that these 15,661 men and boys missed twelve months of opportunities to demonstrate their Christian love through missions.

"We are hopeful these men and boys, along with many others, will take advantage of the interesting new mission education opportunities being planned for them in the 1970's through Brotherhood," Schroeder said.

The church music ministry was the only SBC program to reflect an increase in the estimate made by the research and statistics department. Church music ministries in SBC churches attracted 27,515 more persons in 1969 than in 1968, according to the annual statistical estimate.

"Part of the increase can be attributed to the increase in youth choirs," said W. Hines Sims, secretary, church music department of the Sunday School Board.

"The number of choirs increased because of their activities in outreach and witnessing.

"There is a definite trend toward the involvement of young people in music because of the participation and performance, particularly in the area of evangelistic thrust through music," Sims explained.

"Another thing which brought growth is a continuing project by the department for individual churches to organize at least one new music group during the year."

The estimates prepared by the research and statistics department were based on projections of statistics involving the first 24,000 church letters received and processed by the department.

"The estimation should result in a degree of accuracy acceptable for planning and decision making purposes," said Martin Bradley, secretary, research and statistics department.

The final official statistics will be released by the research and statistics department in February.



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