

Trends in Church Health in African-American Baptist Churches

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As we look at churches in the United States today, it appears that churches of all protestant denominations and ethnicities have challenges that are affecting the health of their congregations in promoting the gospel of Jesus Christ and the Great Commission. Scripture gives support that these challenges are real and can be expected. Church doctrine is being challenged in many phases of practice. Additionally, the COVID pandemic has opened the doors to introspection and evaluation for churches and ministries across America.

Perspectives on Church Health in America

Regarding churches at large, there are numerous perspectives on church health in America today. Ed Stetzer in *Christianity Today* says, “The numbers of people who those of us in the church would say are committed Christians—those who are practicing a vibrant faith—are not dying off. *The Church is not dying. It is just being more clearly defined.*”¹ Soong-Chan Rah in his book, *The Next*

Evangelicalism, suggests that, contrary to popular opinion, “the church is not dying in America; it is alive and well, but it is alive and well among the immigrant and ethnic minority communities.”² Donald McGavran, the father of the Church Growth Movement and developer of the homogeneous unit principle, believed that little or no growth has marked most mainline denominations in the United States.³ Some biological and transfer growth has occurred, but conversion growth has been spotty and slight. Other factors may impact church health such as generational differences, increasingly individualistic world views and most recently the COVID variant. There are other areas that impact the life of African-American churches. Thabiti Anyabwile observes the political and theological roles in black churches in general:

Depending on where people sit politically or theologically, they tend to bring forward different measures of vitality or health. At that point, you're not even having the same conversation. You're talking about what the black church is, politically and theologically, before you even get to whether it's dead or alive.⁴

Theological challenges can arise from church traditions, church polity, leadership styles, and the impact of postmodernism. The Great Commission is God's mandate for the church today. The Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20) has a great impact on believers when they come to understand it. Yet, according to a 2018 Barna research survey, the Great Commission is not well known:

¹ Ed Stetzer, “The State of the Church in America: Hint: It's Not Dying” *Christianity Today*, October 1, 2013, accessed February 14, 2018, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2013/October/state-of-american-church.html>.

² Soong-Chan Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism: Releasing the Church from Western Cultural Captivity* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2009), 14.

³ Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, ed. C. Peter Wagner, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), xiii.

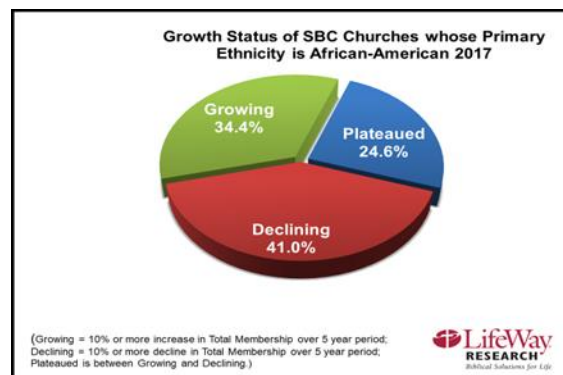
⁴ Thabiti Anyabwile in John C. Richards, “Tough Love for the Black Church,” *Christianity Today*, September 2015, 50, accessed November 2017, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2015/september/thabiti-anyabwile-tough-love-for-black-church.html>.

51% of churchgoers don't know of the Great Commission. . . . When asked if they had "heard of the Great Commission," half of U.S. churchgoers (51%) say they do not know this term. . . . The data indicates that churches are using the phrase less, which may reveal a lack of prioritizing or focusing on the work of the Great Commission, but may also indicate that the phrase, rather than the Scriptures or labor has simply fallen out of favor with some. . . . More than one-quarter of Elders (29%) and Boomers (26%) say they know the text, compared to 17 percent of Gen X and one in 10 Millennials (10%).⁵

The State of the African-American Baptist Church

In post-Civil War America, the black church has played a major role in strengthening African-American communities. A working knowledge of African-American church history is important when having conversations about church health. Given its many challenges, the landscape of the church has changed over the years. How are African-American Baptist churches addressing church health and revitalization in terms of growth, plateau, and decline? Some research has been done in the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) churches, however, in the Black Baptist church, the research is very limited and practically nonexistent in some cases. Church membership, along with other measures, is important to understanding the state of church health in the African-American church context. Other than theological measures, the political and social landscapes are other components of church health measured through the lens of Scripture.

The chart below represents data from a special 2017 report from LifeWay Research on the church growth status of African-American Baptist Churches in the Southern Baptist Convention.



The sample was based on 613 African-American churches that completed church profile surveys over a five-year period. The report shows a 10% growth increase or 10% decline for the period of five years. The data suggests that there are challenges regarding the health of African American Baptist Churches. According to this research, African-American Southern Baptist Churches are growing at 34.4%, plateauing at 24.6%, and declining at 41.0%.⁶ African-American Baptist Churches (AABC) are experiencing growth, plateau, and decline as other churches at large, but in different measures. According to one Pew Research Center's 2014 Religious Landscape Study, about half of all African-Americans (53 percent) were associated with historically black protestant churches. The research further suggests that African-Americans are markedly more religious on a variety of measures than the U.S. population, including their level of affiliation and attendance at religious services, the frequency of prayer, and the level of importance that religion plays in

⁵ Barna Research, "51% of Churchgoers Don't Know of the Great Commission," March 27, 2018, accessed September 9, 2018, <https://www.barna.com/research/half-churchgoers-not-heard-great-commission/>.

⁶ LifeWay Research, *Growth Status of SBC Churches 2017* (Nashville: LifeWay, 2018). The LifeWay charts are

produced from SBC church ACP data. The charts are reproduced with permission. Percentages for the chart may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

life.⁷ Compared with other ethnic groups, African-Americans are among the most likely to report a formal religious affiliation, with 87 percent of African-Americans describing themselves as belonging to one religious group or another.

The LifeWay report does not take into consideration perceptions of why churches are growing, plateauing, and declining. A 2018 African-American church health perception survey of 113 participants revealed some interesting results on church growth, plateau, and decline.⁸ According to this study, African-American Southern Baptist churches were numerically growing at 29.0%, plateauing at 42.0%, and declining at 29.0%.⁹ A further breakdown of this report by pastoral leaders reveals AABC is growing at twenty-two percent, plateauing at forty-nine percent, and declining at a rate of twenty-nine percent. Behind the statistics of declining perceptions were various reasons cited by pastoral leaders and church members:

1. Young adults are leaving the church because of too many traditions.
2. Lack of adequate discipleship and evangelism.
3. Some AABC pastoral leaders believe church planting may have an impact on church health both favorably and unfavorably.
4. African-American Baptist Churches are plateauing as more multiracial churches evolve.
5. There are various perceptions on transfer growth versus new convert growth when

evaluating church health.

The African-American Council Report (2014) cited some significant demographic insights:¹⁰

- The African-American population will continue to grow faster than the general United States population despite the major undercounting of the people group.
- The southern United States will continue to be the region of choice for African-Americans.
- Non-traditional families and singles compose well over 50% of the African-American population.
- While great gains are being made in higher education for African-Americans, there are still many glass ceilings in American society based on race.
- African-Americans value large religious gatherings (revivals, crusades, conferences, etc.).
- African-Americans are 44% of the total prison/jail population while the African-American population is 13% of the total population.

According to a 2012 report from *SBC LIFE*, the African American Council of the Southern Baptist Convention met to identify the top needs of African-American Southern Baptists. The top needs identified were reaching men, leadership development, pastoral health, missions training, church planting, evangelism,

⁷ Pew Research, "A Religious Portrait of African-Americans," January 30, 2009, accessed September 14, 2018, <http://www.pewforum.org/2009/01/30/a-religious-portrait-of-african-americans/>.

⁸ Leon Moore, "Developing a Church Health and Revitalization Model to Engage Dialogue and Practice in

African-American Southern Baptist Churches" (Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2018), 95.

⁹ Ibid., 95-99.

¹⁰ Frank Page and Chris McNairy, *African American Council Report* (June 2014), 3.

and discipleship.¹¹ While these needs have been identified at the national level, there are biblical implications for measures facing the African-American Baptist churches at the local level. Lack of African-American male church attendance continues to be of concern in the churches. Typically, over half of African-American Baptist church congregants (AABC) are females. Women's perspectives probably will play a more critical role in dialoguing about church health and revitalization in the areas of worship, fellowship, and Bible teaching. The African American family continues to face social ills such as racism, poverty, incarceration, illnesses, and single-parent homes. In current times, the pandemic has had an impact on all churches.

These observations are regarding African-American Baptist Churches in the Southern Baptist Convention. Church perceptions of church health will need to be important considerations; therefore, a need for more dialogue and practice is needed to address the ongoing challenges in the churches. It should be noted that these challenges can occur in any church regardless of ethnicity.

CONCLUSION

Where do we go from here as we navigate through the pandemic? African-American Baptist churches are growing, plateauing, and declining as all churches at large in the Southern Baptist Convention. Plateau and decline are spiritual ailments that can be present in any church regardless of ethnicity. The perceptions as to why churches are growing, plateauing, and declining should be considered contextually from current trends such as church membership, perceptions, and biblical principles. Pastoral and church leaders will need to have ongoing strategic church assessments to review quantitative and qualitative measures to help

sustain a healthy church. The current question for today's pastor to consider is how AABC will handle church plateau and decline, particularly after the pandemic. Finally, there are limited resources written on church health and revitalization in African-American Baptist churches. Much needed fresh contributions to this critical field of study are sorely needed.

Therefore, it is recommended that more African-Americans consider exploring this area for further research and evaluation. This area plays a strategic part in building God's Kingdom.

Some Final Words

Hebrews 10: 23—Let us hold on to the confession of our hope without wavering since he who promised is faithful.²⁴ And let us consider one another in order to provoke love and good works,²⁵ not neglecting to gather together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging each other, and all the more as you see the day approaching.

¹¹ Roger Oldham, "Advisory Council Identifies Top Needs of Black Southern Baptists," *SBC LIFE*, 2012, 8.

