

After 5 years, is there a Great Commission Resurgence?

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By Will Hall, Message Editor

When the gavel dropped to end the Southern Baptist Convention's annual meeting in Columbus, Ohio, it also marked the fifth anniversary of "a vision for a Great Commission Resurgence" that was adopted by messengers during the 2010 business sessions in Orlando, Fla.

In a nutshell, a blue ribbon task force – named by then SBC President Johnny Hunt, pastor of First Baptist Church, Woodstock, Ga., and led by Ronnie Floyd, pastor of Cross Church, Northwest Ark., who now serves as president of the Convention – developed seven components of a plan "to mobilize Southern Baptists as a Great Commission people" with the goal of "penetrating the lostness" in North America and around the world.

Theirs was a daunting task, given the extent of the growing lostness in our country and abroad, and the apparent waning effectiveness of Southern Baptists in sharing the Gospel.

But, after so much effort was expended to convince somewhat skeptical Southern Baptists (reports varied on whether the "show-of-hands" vote was 60-40, 80-20 or 3-1 in favor) that these actions were "of vital importance to the future of our denomination" and "key to making immediate progress toward a Great Commission Resurgence," it is reasonable for Southern Baptists to expect to see some timely positive results.

In the business world, the research literature suggests it takes 2-4 years to see the results of a strategic initiative in the performance of a company.

To be fair, the Southern Baptist Convention does not operate like the typical corporation with regard to the relationship it maintains with the nearly 46,500 congregations which cooperate at various levels (local, state and national) in missions and ministries. However, these autonomous local bodies support state and national causes believing the leadership at both levels makes a difference in the collective work of Southern Baptists. So, the five year mark seems a rational point to take a look at how far along the GCR national initiative has moved the Southern Baptist Convention.

COMPONENTS ONE AND TWO

The task force framed all of its recommendations in the context of a mission statement and core values designed to facilitate our convention of churches “working together more faithfully and effectively” in creating “a new and healthy culture.”

The eight core values (Christ-likeness, truth, unity, relationships, trust, future, local church and Kingdom) are well-stated ideals and actionable, but difficult to measure.

The mission statement (“... to present the Gospel of Jesus Christ to every person in the world and to make disciples of all the nations.”) essentially is a restatement of Matthew 28:19-20, except, it omits mention of baptism – which is a key measure of effectiveness in assessing mission success.

In 2010, LifeWay reported 331,008 baptisms in the United States and the International Mission Board announced 360,876 baptisms overseas.

Five years later, both disclosed fairly large drops in their respective data.

The number of conversions fell to 305,301 at home (a five-year loss of 25,707), according to the 2015 Annual Church Profile summary, and IMB’s 2015 Fast Facts show a dip to 190,957 spiritual births abroad. (However, it is not known how much of the 169,919 slump is due to an IMB procedural change started in 2010 to “no longer include reports from partner conventions and unions” in order to more accurately reflect “the board’s work and influence” in the field. Also, although overseas baptisms have fallen from 2010 levels, the 2015 total exceeds the 114,571 baptisms in 2014.)

COMPONENTS THREE, FOUR, SIX, SEVEN

Giving

Although the task force did not set specific goals related to evangelism and baptisms, in the four statements related to giving and funding, three contained benchmarks about finances.

Calling for “a new level of sacrificial giving” as part of COMPONENT THREE, the ad hoc committee urged churches “to increase the percentage of their Cooperative Program giving,” prevailed upon state conventions to forward a greater percentage of CP funds to national causes, and, asked SBC entities to maximize use of CP monies for taking the Gospel to the nations and leading SBC churches to do the same.

They also took action to “celebrate every dollar given” – another way of saying that churches, and pastors, should get credit for contributions to SBC work, even if outside the channels of the Cooperative Program and special mission offerings for the IMB and the North American Mission Board.

To this end, the panel crafted a special category, “Great Commission Giving,” into which the CP, Lottie Moon Christmas Offering and Annie Armstrong Easter Offering are lumped together with other designated gifts deemed as contributing to local, state or national Southern Baptist work.

This category did not replace Total Missions Expenditures but was added as a new measure of effectiveness.

Implemented in 2011, GCG amounted to \$695,694,322. It has varied during subsequent years, but was reported in 2015 as \$637,498,179, a \$58 million drop from its beginning (and a hefty decline from the \$777,452,820 recorded during the previous year).

As for CP, \$191,763,153 was contributed for the fiscal year ending September 30, 2010, compared with \$186,567,611 received during the fiscal year ending September 20, 2014 (although Baptist Press announced in June that receipts to this point in 2015 are 2 percent ahead of donations for the same time frame in 2014).

The final report also called on Southern Baptists to adopt giving goals “no less than \$200 million annually” for the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering and “\$100 million annually” through the Annie Armstrong Easter Offering.

The LMCO goal has remained steady at \$175 million from 2010 through 2015, but the annual collection reached a record \$154 million two years ago before dropping by about \$1 million last year.

The AAEO undulated between \$54 million and \$56 million, or so, from 2010-2013 before reaching \$57 million during the last fiscal year. Meanwhile, trustees dropped the annual goal from the \$70 million mark for 2010 to the \$60 million target for 2015.

Planting

COMPONENT FOUR was crafted with the priority of “liberating NAMB to conduct and direct a strategy for reaching the United States and Canada with the Gospel and planting Gospel churches.”

The key recommendation that emerged from this discussion was the “phasing out of Cooperative Agreements” with state conventions, affecting about \$51 million in funding. In essence, these funds were redirected from state conventions, and, NAMB’s role for nurturing pioneer state conventions was “left” for the larger state conventions to pick up.

NAMB did not actually add \$51 million to its budget. But essentially, that was the effect.

Meanwhile, NAMB missionaries would no longer receive support from states—meaning they would report solely to NAMB and not be jointly supported with state conventions.

So how has church planting improved?

The data does not allow assessment of whether NAMB has succeeded in reprioritizing “to reach metropolitan areas and underserved people groups” as called for by the task force. However, the numbers show that churches planted after the adoption of the GCR recommendations essentially are as healthy as they historically have been in the SBC.

For instance, NAMB shared in 2015 that the “church planting class of 2010” started with 943 church plants with 757 surviving through 2013 (the latest ACP report at the time) – or about 80 percent.

According to findings from the Church Survivability and Health Study 2007, about 81 percent of church plants survive through year three. So the class of 2010 is on target with regard to this metric.

In its 2015 statement, NAMB did not release actual numbers for worship attendance, membership and CP giving for the class of 2010, opting instead to cite percent changes in the averages from year two to year three. But, it is possible to make comparisons with the CSHS 2007 church planting data:

- 7 percent growth in membership (membership information was not assessed in the CSHS 2007 research)

- 20 percent jump in attendance (compared to an estimated 18 percentage point increase, or 33 percent jump, for the average church plant in the CSHS 2007 report)

- a ratio of one baptism for every 13 members (church plants in the CSHS 2007 study typically baptized 13 people in year three while averaging about 73 in worship service, for a ratio of about 1:6)

NAMB also shared that altogether, the class of 2010 contributed \$3.3 million to missions (up 12 percent for the year), or just under \$4,360 of giving per church plant (through the Cooperative Program, LMCO and AAEO, combined).

Total receipts for church plants in the CSHS 2007 averaged \$70,000 per congregation, but there was no data showing how much each church plant spent on cooperative ministries and missions.

Except for baptism-to-attendance ratios, the class of 2010 appears to be on par with previous church planting year groups. That’s not to dismiss the importance of this metric – it’s an essential measure of evangelistic effectiveness. But a single year of low baptism data may not point to trouble.

If the class of 2010 continues to lag their peer groups, Southern Baptists might have cause for concern. Likewise, if the classes of 2011-2015 aren’t keeping pace, then it would be reasonable to suspect something systemic might be amiss.

As for Louisiana church plants, among the seven that are members of the class of 2010, two submitted worship attendance and baptism information for 2013. One reported a ratio of 1:28. But The Covenant Church in Benton tallied 20 baptisms while averaging 150 in worship services, a 1:8 ratio, during its third year (the reference point for NAMB’s class of 2010).

In any case, even with good news about the 2010 cohort, the 757 church plants still existing today do not come close to meeting the need that existed in 2010, and our church plant numbers in subsequent years have not kept up with the needs that have expanded each year since.

The population of the United States increased by 11 million people from 2010 through the start of this year (about half the growth was the result of immigration), creating the need for an estimated 110,000 new churches (based on an average of 100 members per congregation).

Altogether, an estimated 30 percent of the U.S. population is not Christian – about 96 million – meaning we need about 960,000 new church plants, if that is going to be our main means of evangelizing the lost.

Shifting Locus and Funding

The task force used COMPONENT SIX to state their belief that “the state conventions must take the lead” in stewardship education and promotion of the Cooperative Program.

Specifically, their recommendation encouraged the SBC Executive Committee, which has responsibility for both ministry assignments, “to work with the state conventions ... in developing a strategy for encouraging our churches to greater participation and investment in the Cooperative Program.”

Citing urgency, they set a deadline of 2013.

The 2011 SBC Annual documents that the SBC EC adopted a recommendation that year “stating it will pursue an enhanced relationship among and between the state conventions, the associations, the entities and the Executive Committee for the purpose of developing an holistic and unified approach in promoting the entire Cooperative Program and stewardship education across the Southern Baptist Convention.”

COMPONENT SEVEN had a more tangible impact on the SBC EC.

The 23 members of the GCR panel expressed hope “to see Southern Baptists break the ‘50 percent barrier’” by taking one percentage point from the Executive Committee’s allocation of 3.4 percent of the CP budget for national entities, and redirecting it to the IMB.

In real terms, that meant just under a \$2 million loss for the Executive Committee, which had a 2010 budget of about \$6.9 million (including funds from all sources).

To date, the Executive Committee has reduced its CP allotment to 2.99 percent, boosting the IMB’s share of the SBC Cooperative Program Allocation Budget to 50.41 percent.

No other national entity has contributed any portion of their respective CP allocation to the IMB.

But, the IMB also receives about 69 percent of all designated funds given to national causes, and its \$300 million operating budget is significantly more than any other national entity which receives CP support.

COMPONENT FIVE

The suggestion to blur the divide between “home” and “foreign” missions by letting the IMB expand its ministry assignment to include “reaching unreached and underserved people groups without regard to any geographic limitation,” raised suspicions of a move to merge the NAMB with the IMB – particularly in light of comments a year earlier by NAMB’s chairman of trustees that Southern Baptists should have “a singular world mission agency.”

But what actually resulted was a change in the IMB’s ministry assignments to allow them to “provide specialized, defined and agreed upon assistance to the North American Mission Board in assisting churches to reach unreached and underserved people groups within the United States and Canada.”

News articles have highlighted how teams from the two missions groups already have met at least twice “to trade ideas,” and, for “cross-pollination” which could “multiply the effectiveness of reaching the unreached wherever they are.”

MOVING FORWARD

Unfortunately, despite the broad scope of recommendations by the Great Commission Task Force, as yet, these reforms have not turned around the negative trends identified as signs the “Great Commission commitment is diminishing among us.”

So what are Southern Baptists to do?

En Masse

Mass evangelism might be one answer.

At the heart of the matter, it’s simple math.

If we desire mass baptisms, we should be emphasizing mass evangelism efforts.

Naysayers have criticized that “a program of evangelism” like mass evangelism is a great approach “if the fifties come back.”

But Billy Graham proved it can work in major urban settings—3.2 million professions of faith over the course of 417 crusades. Other Southern Baptist evangelists like Georgia’s Rick Gage have shown it continues to work in small towns, too—about 2,900 salvation decisions during eight U.S. campaigns, 2013-2014; and, Louisiana’s Bill Britt has proved its effectiveness overseas, at least 70 times, recording 20,000 salvation decisions during a four-day outreach in Kenya in 2005, for example.

Moreover, all of these evangelists emphasize discipleship in prepping churches for the work that takes place after each campaign.

On Fertile Ground

Likewise, perhaps we should consider the proposal by Robin Dale Hadaway, professor of missions at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City, Missouri.

In October 2014, Hadaway offered that part of the problem with international missions has been a focus on reaching resistant people groups at the expense of a harvest among receptive populations.

He argued for at least a balance in where we concentrate our resources, suggesting we are leaving sheaves of crops in the fields while trying to gather a few grains among thistles. He did not recommend Southern Baptists abandon such countries, but reasoned that we should at least consider whether our strategy based on reaching people groups is the best approach for reaching more lost individuals.

His proposal to focus more on “receptive” regions and less on “resistant” ones might even have value for how we do evangelism in the U.S.

Identify and Engage the Experts

There are some real evangelism experts out there, experienced soul winners with track records to prove it, and we should be listening to them.

These aren't necessarily personalities who grace conference platforms, year in and year out, nor prolific writers with multiple titles on the shelves of LifeWay's stores, or consultants with hyperworded biographies.

They simply are men and women gifted by God and committed to the task of evangelism.

We don't need to take them out of the field, where they are desperately needed. But we can ask them to help us develop a plan for reaching the lost on the scale we know is required. Besides, before committing significant resources to whatever plan they might suggest, we can follow Daniel's example and test the concept.

Naaman, the commanding general of the Syrian army, resisted when Elisha sent word for him to wash in the Jordan seven times in order to be healed. That is, until a servant asked Naaman if he would have complied if the prophet had told him to do something great.

The lesson?

It doesn't take something grand to make a big difference, just do what works.