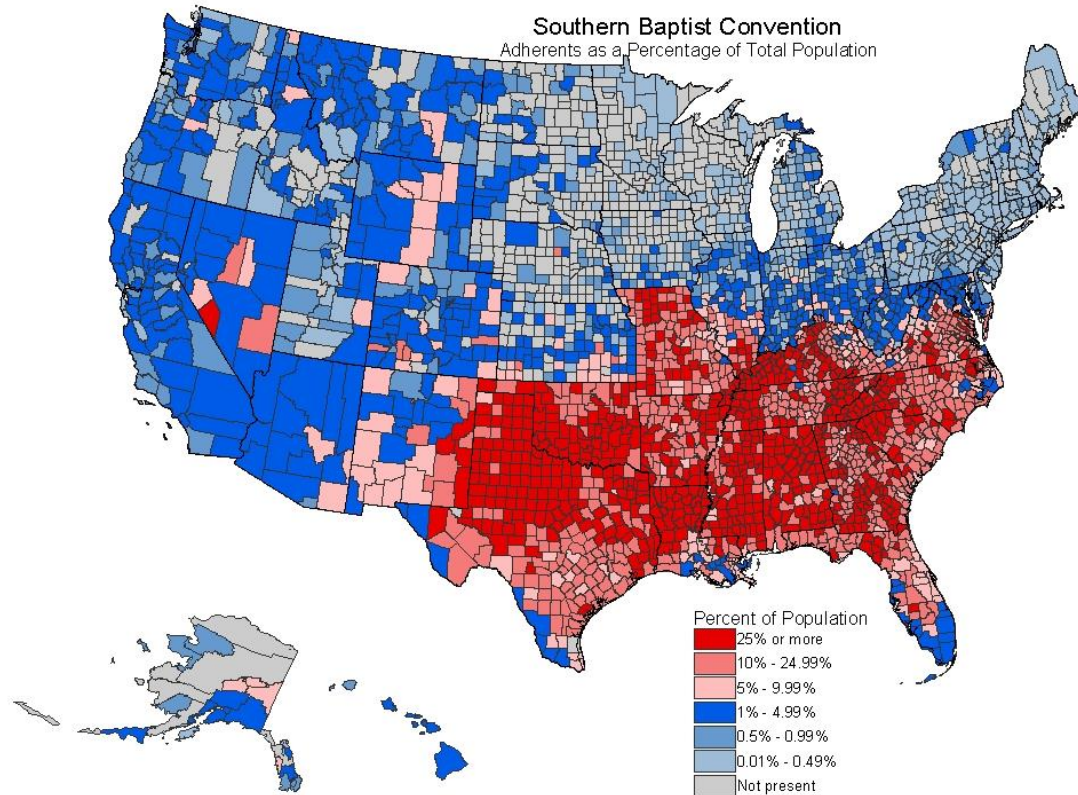


# SBC Expansion into the Upper Midwest

When you look at a national map of Southern Baptist Church members as a percentage of population by county, there are two major regions that jump out even to a casual observer. [See Glenmary map below.] The first is not a surprise: the New England States. The second probably was not as obvious before you took a peek at the map: the Upper Midwest.



Hopefully, the visual above has caused you to ask, Why are there so few Southern Baptists in the Upper Midwest? There are a variety of reasons, but the three most significant are the following:

- Those who originally settled the area have a strong ethnic identity tied to a national church.
- Southern Baptists are relatively new to the area.
- Southern Baptists have experienced significant mission strategy challenges.

Those who settled the area have a strong ethnic identity tied to a national church.

*To comprehend this issue, one needs to understand the history of the region.* The Upper Midwest is part of what residents fondly refer to as the Heartland. Another phrase heard

quite often in the area, but not in a positive light, is “Flyover Country.” The latter term is derived from the reality that people from the more populous east and west coasts fly over the area to get from one populated area to the other. Take that image back in history and you could have aptly referred to the region as “Travel Through Country.” As Americans began moving west from 1830-1870, they were focused on getting to the goldfields of California and to the fertile valleys of Washington and Oregon. The Oregon Trail, Mormon Trail, Pony Express, Red River Trails, and Transcontinental Railroad all traversed the area and were used to transport people and information from the east to the west coast. The cities along the historic trails were platted out in the early to mid 1800s; however, those beyond the major transportation corridors were not established until the late 1800s.

*This happened for a variety of reasons:*

- 1) The negative image of the area as portrayed by early explorers. Lewis and Clark’s Corps of Discovery (1804-1805) and the Pike Expedition (1805-1807) were both commissioned by President Thomas Jefferson to survey the Louisiana Purchase. Their report described much of the region as “The Great American Desert.”

A later expedition by Major Stephen Long (1819-20) up the Missouri and Platte Rivers reinforced the images portrayed by the Corps of Discovery and Pike. Long wrote of the area, “I do not hesitate in giving the opinion, that it is almost wholly unfit for cultivation, and of course, uninhabitable by a people depending upon agriculture for their subsistence. Although tracts of fertile land considerably extensive are occasionally to be met with, yet the scarcity of wood and water, almost uniformly prevalent, will prove an insuperable obstacle in the way of settling the country.”

Long’s subsequent expedition down the Red River of the North (1823) encouraged continued fur trading in what is now Minnesota, North Dakota, and Manitoba and led to the development of the Red River Trails. These oxcart trails formed a trade route connecting the head of navigation on the Mississippi with Fort Gary (Winnipeg). But the worlds of the fur trader and that of the settler were vastly different.

- 2) The marshy nature of much of Iowa, Minnesota, and parts of Missouri and the harshness of the winters discouraged settlement. The region provided wonderful waterfowl and beaver habitat but it was too wet to farm. That is until the area became the “last frontier” for immigrants who tilled and drained the wet lands so it could be farmed. The net result has been some of the most fertile farming ground in the world. And those who settled the area were predominantly from northern and eastern Europe so the winters were not an obstacle.
- 3) The areas in the region that were not marshy offered few trees and limited fresh water supply. Sod homes became the way of the plains, but they were quickly replaced by traditional wooden frame homes as soon as settlers could import and afford the materials. This did not begin to happen until the completion of the

transcontinental railroad in 1869 and subsequent rail construction in the region was completed in the years that followed.

*The major cities were all platted out in the mid to late 1800s.* Although there was considerable travel and trade in the area by European explorers, fur trappers, and pioneers dating back to the early 1600s, at the time of the American Civil War, the region was still primarily a frontier area. Formal settlement of major cities on I-29 (which cuts through the heart of the area) are as follows:

- St. Joseph, Missouri, was a fur trading post in 1823 before it was platted in 1843.
- Bellevue, Nebraska, (the state's oldest continuously settled city) was a fur trading post from 1822-1832. Baptist missionaries Moses and Eliza Merrill arrived in 1833 to minister to the Native Americans. In 1835 the Merrills moved with the Otoe tribe about eight miles to the west, where they established what was known as the Otoe or Moses Merrill Mission. The trading post was abandoned about 1839-1842, and the city of Bellevue was not incorporated until 1855.
- Council Bluffs, Iowa, (across the river from Bellevue) was founded in 1838 by Sauganash (Irish father and Mohawk mother) and his Potawatomi band of Native Americans. Missionary De Smet, a Jesuit missionary, founded a mission there in 1838-39. In 1848 Mormons platted the town and named it Kanessville. In 1852 the majority of the Mormons moved west and the town was renamed Council Bluffs to acknowledge the area where Lewis and Clark had their first formal encounter with Plains Indians.
- Omaha, Nebraska, was not formally founded until July 4, 1854. The historic Union Stockyards were established in the 1870s, and it became the primary livestock market place for the region and for years the largest in the world.
- Sioux City, Iowa, was founded in 1854 as a trading point for fur traders and Native Americans. On April 29, 1869, Rev. Sheldon Jackson, Rev. T.H. Cleland and Rev. J. C. Elliott, climbed a high bluff overlooking the town, the Missouri river, and the surrounding vicinity. Standing on that Iowa bluff they could look across the river into what is now Nebraska and up river they saw the tip of present day South Dakota. There they prayed together and then set out to win the west for Christ.
- Sioux Falls, South Dakota, is on the site of Fort Dakota, established in May 1865. It was formally incorporated as a city in 1876.
- Fargo, North Dakota, was not founded until 1871 even though the French had a fur trading post in the area in the 1740s. It was later a stop on the Red River Trail between St. Paul, MN and Ft. Gary (Winnipeg).
- Winnipeg, Manitoba, boasts the oldest recorded European settlement. A French officer arrived in the area in 1738 and built the first fur trading post on the site: Fort Rouge. However, Winnipeg was not actually incorporated until November 1873

*The area's major period of settlement did not begin until 1870, and those who moved to the region were primarily fresh European immigrants who brought their families, their culture, their language, and their churches.* And most came from countries with an established state church. In other words, to be Norwegian meant you were Lutheran and to be Irish meant you were Catholic.

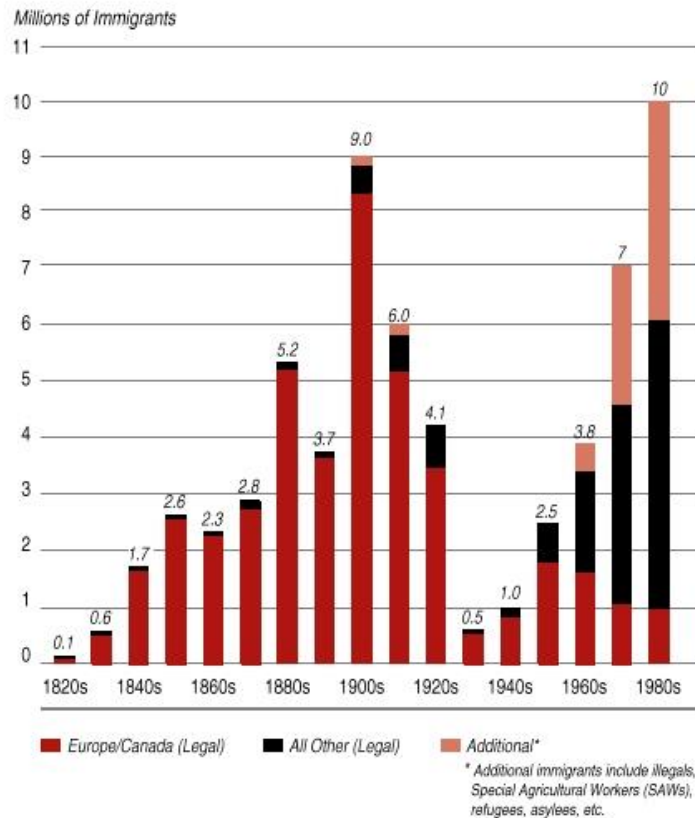
By the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, America, which had been historically protestant, suddenly found the Roman Catholic Church to be its largest denomination. For decades, Baptist missionaries like the Merrills and Presbyterian missionaries like Jackson, Cleveland, and Elliott worked among the Native Americans.

For decades, passionate, evangelical, circuit riding, Methodist lay-pastors and passionate men like the Andover Eleven who started hundreds of evangelical churches among the early settlers in Iowa led the way. Suddenly, a radical shift occurred that filled the region with Catholics, Lutherans, and a sprinkling of other evangelicals all of whom spoke very little, if any, English. It is said that a picture is worth a thousand words. The chart above pictures the U.S. immigration pattern. Only in recent decades have we experienced the immigration levels encountered in the late 1800s and early 1900s. What magnifies the impact in the 1800s is the fact that in 1880 the total U.S. population was only 50 million compared to 308 million in 2010. The magnitude of the impact on the culture of the Upper Midwest is almost impossible to comprehend—that is unless you are living in a U.S. community where first generation immigrants are today transforming the culture.

*To say that the landscape of the Upper Midwest changed during the late 1800s is an understatement.* Suddenly, entire cities were incorporated and established with clearly identifiable ethnic and religious identities. For example, the motto of Sioux County Iowa is, “If you ain’t Dutch, you ain’t much,” reflecting its strong Dutch Reformed history. The Orange City High School band marches in wooden shoes and the community attracts thousands to its annual Tulip Festival. These very strong ethnic ties built barriers to those from the “outside” with its residents looking back to their European origins to maintain their cultural identity. For example, Emmetsburg, Iowa, was settled by Irish immigrants who celebrate every year with a three day St. Patrick’s Day Celebration that has featured members of the Irish Parliament as parade marshal.

Only in recent decades, with the advent of the television era and the mobility of the American population, have some of these longstanding ethnic barriers begun to dissolve.

**Figure 1** Immigration to the U.S., by Decade, 1821–1830 through 1981—1990



Source: Urban Institute and Immigration and Naturalization Service estimates.

These changes have opened the door for more effective evangelism and church planting by Southern Baptists.

### Southern Baptists are Relatively New to the Area

The earliest Baptists in the region were missionaries like Moses and Eliza Merrill, who were the first missionary residents in Nebraska and who served among the Otoes. The early Baptist churches in the region were primarily affiliated with what is now known as the American Baptist Churches USA (formerly Northern Baptists and prior to that Triennial Convention). As Southern Baptists, we share a common historical ancestry through the Triennial Convention until the 1845 establishment of the SBC. In the late 1800s a series of Comity Agreements between the American Baptist Home Mission Society and the Home Mission Board of the SBC were used to identify the states and territories in which each board would place missionaries.

*The states in the Upper Midwest were the responsibility of the American Baptist Home Mission Society.* The first agreement between the two boards was the 1894 Fortress Monroe Comity Agreement. Held at Fortress Monroe, VA it stated:

We believe that, for the promotion of fraternal feelings and of the best interests of the Redeemer's kingdom, it is inexpedient for two different organizations of Baptists to solicit contributions, or to establish missions in the same localities, and for this reason we recommend to the Home Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention and to the American Baptist Home Mission Society, that in the prosecution of their work already begun on contiguous fields, or on the same field, that all antagonisms be avoided, and that their officers and employees be instructed to cooperate in all practical ways in the spirit of Christ. That we further recommend to these bodies and their agents, in opening new work, to direct their efforts to localities not already occupied by the other.

This initial Comity Agreement was doomed to failure. At the 1894 SBC meeting a resolution was made and approved that stated New Mexico should be entered as a mission field. New Mexico was a state where the American Baptist Home Mission Society not the Home Mission Board supported missionaries. Later in that same meeting a resolution was passed that led to the Fortress Monroe Conference. After the conference the Home Mission Board was directed to not enter New Mexico. The New Mexico issue was not resolved and subsequent conferences were held in Washington, D. C. in 1909, Old Point Comfort, VA in 1911, and in Hot Springs, AR in 1912 to address the issue. The net result was that Baptist work in New Mexico began to affiliate with Southern Baptists.

Although the various comity agreements failed to eliminate conflicts as southerners moved into traditional northern Baptist areas it did codify some principles that have relevance for today:

- Giving financial aid by a denominational body should not impair the autonomy of any church.

- Denominational organizations should carefully regard the rights of sister organizations and of the churches, to the end that unity and harmony and respect for the liberties of others should be promoted.
- Baptist bodies should never in any way injure the work of any other Baptist group.

In 1907 Baptist work in Oklahoma was unified into a dually aligned state convention. In 1914 the convention became solely aligned with Southern Baptists. The depression and the dust bowl migrations resulted in SBC leaning churches being planted in California. Their desire to affiliate with SBC life led to a decision at the 1942 SBC Convention in San Antonio to recognize California. It took three national conventions, 1946-1948, and a floor amendment reversing the recommendation of a committee appointed at the 1947 convention to “Consider the Kansas Application” before the Kansas Convention was accepted. The SBC action in 1948 opened the door to further national expansion over the next two decades.

Migration from historical SBC areas during and following World War II to fill jobs in the more industrialized northern states, to staff the military bases many of which were outside the south, and to explore the oil and mineral rich areas in northern and western states led to a more national vision on the part of Southern Baptists. The first Southern Baptist Church in the south was FBC Charleston, South Carolina, and it was established in 1682. By contrast, the first SBC churches in the Upper Midwest are as follows:

North Dakota—First Southern Baptist Church, Ray (later disbanded), 1953

Iowa—Fairview Baptist Church, Anamosa in 1954

Nebraska—First Southern Baptist Church, Lincoln (now Southview), September 1955

South Dakota—First Southern Baptist Church, Rapid City (now Calvary), 1955

Minnesota—Southtown Baptist Church, Bloomington in 1956

Manitoba—Friendship Baptist Church Winnipeg (now New Life Sanctuary) in 1973

An interesting part of history is that we can “sometimes” see our blind spots better with hindsight. In 1950 Northern Baptists voted to change their name to American Baptists—a name that a committee appointed by the SBC to study a name change was going to suggest at the next convention meeting. Southerners regarded the name change as an aggressive act, but seemed less aware that their own convention meeting sites in Chicago in 1950 and San Francisco in 1951 were viewed by Baptists in the north as overly aggressive.

A resolution passed at the 1951 convention was a “shot across the bow:”

Whereas the Southern Baptist Convention has defined its territorial position in reports to the Convention in 1944 and 1949 by removing territorial limitations, and whereas the Northern Baptist Convention has changed its name so that it is continental in scope, the Home Mission Board and all other Southern Baptist boards and agencies be free to serve as a source of blessing to any community or any people anywhere in the United States.

*When you read the history of the Upper Midwest, you encounter Baptist groups not found in traditional SBC regions. They include The North American Baptist Conference that traces its roots to German immigrants. They have seminaries in Sioux Falls, SD, and Edmonton, Canada. Another is Converge Worldwide, formerly the Baptist General Conference, which sprang out of the Swedish Pietistic movement in the mid 1800s. They have a seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota. The General Association of Regular Baptists (GARB) was formed in 1932 (former Baptist Bible Union 1923) as a conservative splinter group formed out of the American Baptist Churches USA. Although there are no longer formal ties, Faith Baptist Bible College and Seminary in Ankeny, Iowa, was formed by GARB church leaders.*

*Other evangelical groups have a historical presence in the region: the Evangelical Free Church of America (EFCA), the Evangelical Covenant Church (ECC), and the Christian and Missionary Alliance (C&MA). The EFCA was formed in 1950 from the merger of the Swedish Evangelical Free Church and the Norwegian-Danish Evangelical Free Church Association—note the strong ethnic identity of its roots. The ECC has 800 congregations in the United States and Canada. It was founded in 1885 by Swedish immigrants. Historically Lutheran in theology and background, it is now a broadly evangelical movement—again note the ethnic identity. The C&MA was founded by Rev. Albert Benjamin Simpson in 1887. It did not start off as a denomination, but rather began as two distinct parachurch organizations: The Christian Alliance, which focused on the pursuit and promotion of the higher Christian life, and The Evangelical Missionary Alliance, which focused on mobilizing "consecrated" Christians in the work of foreign missionary efforts. These two groups amalgamated in 1897 to form The Christian and Missionary Alliance.*

*But in the Upper Midwest, the membership of **ALL** evangelical churches combined will usually number less than 10% of the population in any given county. And Southern Baptists will generally be well under 1%. We are new and we are few, but with effective strategies, we can make a significant impact. The use of effective missiological strategies brings us to our third point.*

### We Have Experienced Mission Strategy Challenges

Added to the aforementioned challenges (strong national ethnic identities and the late arrival of Southern Baptists) is the reality that most of the early Southern Baptist Churches were, in essence, ethnic churches. They were formed to meet the needs of former southerners who had moved to the area and were unable to find a church like the one they had back home. Thus, the early churches were the product of migration and not the result of a specific mission strategy. Members of those churches often heard, "You're not from around here, are you." Or they were asked, "Where are you from?" Their potlucks featured foods "new to the region."

*The early churches were viewed as cults and lumped in with the Mormons and Jehovah Witnesses because they were the only groups who went door-to-door. Their worship services were different—even different from other evangelical churches in the area: public invitations at the end of each service, an informal and highly relational worship style (a lot of hugging and chatting before services began), and language (ministers were called*

“Brother” and not “Pastor,” and services were held on Sunday morning, Sunday night, AND Wednesday night. The churches strong emphasis on congregational polity, individual church autonomy, and lay pastors surfaced ecclesiological issues unfamiliar to most area residents. Many pastors were not comfortable connecting with other pastors in the community because of their theology and/or education and ended up isolating themselves. In an area where ecumenism is highly valued, the perception that Southern Baptists were sectarian and were proselytizing drove a wedge of separation and created barriers to evangelism.

*Like many ethnic churches in America today, pastors and lay leaders unintentionally expended significant energy maintaining their cultural identity and staying connected “back home.” To be Southern Baptist meant you already were or you were willing to become southern to some degree. Just like becoming Lutheran meant, to some extent, becoming German. Too often, if a pastor or a church suggested an activity or strategy or name outside the traditional SBC experience, it was viewed with skepticism and might even be called unbiblical.*

In 1961 with the formation of a mission congregation in Vermont Southern Baptists could claim a presence in all fifty states. After the initial excitement died down, the hard work began of strengthening and expanding those churches. By 1980 some new work areas saw the number of Southern Baptist churches plateau or, in a few cases, even decline. The strategy of congregationalizing former southerners had run its course. And some conventions struggled to find an effective way to reach the predominantly Catholic and Lutheran population. However, the good news is that there are pockets where SBC pastors and lay leaders learned effective ways to lean into our historic passions and strengths: we are Biblically based, we desire to cooperate with one another to accomplish more together than we can individually, we are unapologetically evangelistic, and we have a heart for global missions. In some areas of the Upper Midwest, Southern Baptists have found effective apologetic ways to unite our passion for solid biblical theology and our desire to connect relationally with people who have a very different cultural background. They have redefined being Southern Baptist from being southern and being passionate about the Word of God to simply making disciples who are passionate about the Word of God.