


# Case Studies on Stagnant or Slow LDS Growth

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**Methods for Reversing Stagnant LDS Growth in Japan**

Author: Matt Martinich

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**Overview**

In the 1970s and 1980s, the LDS Church in Japan experienced rapid membership and stake growth as official membership totals increased from 12,000 in 1968 to 91,000 in 1989 and the number of stakes rose from zero to 23. The Church has experienced stagnant membership growth and a slight decline in the number of stakes over the past couple decades as membership increased from 99,000 in 1991 to 125,744 in 2011 and the number of stakes reached a high of 31 in 2000 but decreased to 29 in 2012. Congregational growth trends also signal a major change in church growth in Japan. The number of wards and branches reached a high of 317 in 1999 and 2000 but declined to 280 in 2012; a decrease of 37, or 11.7%.

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This case study reviews recent LDS growth trends in Japan and recommends methods for reversing stagnant growth. Recent successes and challenges for accelerating growth are identified. A comparative growth section contrasts growth trends for the LDS Church in Japan with other nontraditional Christian groups. Limitations to this case study are provided followed by future prospects for LDS growth in Japan.

**Trends in Membership Growth**

Membership reached 600 in 1951. The average number of converts annually baptized per missionary increased from 0.7 in 1955 to 5.8 in 1957. There were 6,600 Latter-day Saints by 1962 and 12,000 members in mid-1968. Membership reached 70,998 in 1983, 85,000 in 1987, 103,000 in 1993, 108,000 in 1997, and 112,203 in 2000.

Membership growth slowed in the 2000s as membership totaled 118,508 in 2002, 120,197 in 2004, 121,744 in 2006, and 123,245 in 2008. Annual membership growth rates have ranged from 0.6% to 1% since 2002. Membership generally increases by between 700 and 1,000 a year.

**Trends in Congregational Growth**

In 1951, there were 25 branches in Japan. The number of congregations reached 258 in 1987, 264 in 1989, 274 in 1991, 289 in 1993, 293 in 1995, 295 in 1997, and 317 in 1999. The number of wards and branches declined to 314 in 2001, 309 in 2003, 308 in 2004, 298 in 2006, 294 in 2007, 288 in 2008, 286 in 2010, 283 in 2011, and 280 in 2012. The number of wards increased from 114 in 1987 to 1975 in 2000 and declined to 165 in 2012 whereas the number of branches increased from 144 in 1987 to 196 in 1995 and declined to 116 by 2012.

**Trends in Stake and District Growth**

In 1987, there were 23 stakes and 15 districts. The number of stakes totaled 22 in 1991, 25 in 1993, 26 in 1997, 30 in 1999, 31 in 2000, 30 in 2001, 29 in 2006, 28 in 2010, and 29 in 2012. The number of districts totaled 18 in 1991, 21 in 1993, 22 in 1997, 20 in 1999, 19 in 2000, 18 in 2004, 16 in 2005, 14 in 2006, 15 in 2010, and 13 in 2012.

**Trends in National Outreach**

Between 2002 and 2012, there was a net decrease in the number of cities with an LDS presence as there were four cities where the Church organized its first unit whereas there were at least 10 cities where the Church's sole LDS unit was closed. The Church organized its first units in Beppu, Ina, Odawara, and Sado; all of which had independent branches organized except Beppu which was a group under the jurisdiction of the Oita Ward. In early 2013, a Japanese member served as branch president in all three locations where an independent branch was established.

The Church discontinued its only ward or branch in ten cities including Aioi, Asuka, Hitachi, Kamisu, Matsukara, Nankoku, Noda, Sakata, Sasayama, Shimizu, and Takefu (Echizen). It is unclear whether dependent units continue to function in any of these locations.

Two cities had the sole LDS ward or branch relocated to a neighboring city that previously had no ward or branch. The Ageo Ward was relocated to Okegawa and renamed the Okegawa Ward and the Hikone Ward was relocated to Omihachiman and renamed the Omihachiman Ward.

The number of non-Japanese speaking units slightly declined within the past decade as no new non-Japanese units were organized and a couple non-Japanese units were discontinued. The Church closed at least one English-designated branch in Sendai and one Portuguese-designated branch in the Osaka area.

**Methods for Reversing Stagnant Church Growth**

Opening additional cities to missionary activity and establishing groups or branches will be the primary method for the Church to reverse stagnant growth in Japan. Church growth researchers have long observed that more recently opened locations to missionary activity and more recently organized units are more successful in baptizing new converts than locations with a long-term church presence and units in operation for more than a decade. A lack of social entrenchment of local LDS populations in newly opened locations appears to improve proselytism efforts. The most populous unreached cities present some of the greatest opportunities for holding cottage meetings and organizing dependent units or small branches if a sufficient number of active members is present. There are approximately 100 cities with over 100,000 inhabitants without an LDS presence. Mission and local church leaders visiting these and other cities to assess conditions for extending outreach can help identify the most suitable locations to maximize the efficiency and productivity of limited mission resources delegated to Japan. A map displaying the location of cities where the first LDS unit was organized between 2002 and 2012, the cities where the sole LDS unit was closed between 2002 and 2012, and cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants without an LDS unit can be found here.

In recent years, the non-Japanese population has demonstrated higher receptivity to missionary efforts than the native Japanese population. The initiation of ethnic-specific proselytism efforts among major minority groups such as Chinese, English-speaking Westerners, Spanish and Portugese-speaking Latin Americans, Southeast Asians, and Koreans may accelerate church growth. Witnesses have successfully established congregations and groups that provide services in 10 minority languages including Mandarin Chinese (40 congregations and groups), Japanese Sign Language (35 congregations and groups), Spanish (31 congregations and groups), Tagalog (31 congregations and groups), Portuguese (30 congregations and groups), English (22 congregations and groups), Korean (five congregations and four groups), Vietnamese (three groups), Cambodian (one group), and Thai (one group).[1] To date the LDS Church has only appeared to extend outreach to Portuguese and English speakers although sizable numbers of Chinese and other ethnic minorities have joined the Church. Organizing purposeful and concentrated outreach programs that target specific minority groups present good opportunities for establishing the Church in these communities and reversing stagnant growth trends.

Emphasis on seminary and institute programs can improve member activity and convert retention rates, especially if Latter-day Saint youth complete all four years of the seminary program. A requirement for youth investigators to attend seminary and young adult investigators to attend institute can provide greater socialization opportunities with members within the same age group and maintain greater consistency in learning the gospel, applying LDS teachings into their daily lives, and developing a strong testimony that can help inoculate against inactivity problems. Attracting members and nonmembers to seminary and institute through opportunities for socialization and gospel learning will require diligence and cooperation between local members and full-time missionaries for optimum success. Pressuring individuals to attend these programs to simply fulfill a baptismal requirement may result in diminished effectiveness in utilizing seminary and institute as a missionary, convert retention, and reactivation tool.

Discouragement by mission leaders for missionaries to engage in street contacting and door-to-door proselytism and emphasis on reactivating less-active members and obtaining teaching referrals from less-active members has good potential to reignite growth. In 2012, area presidencies in the Philippines and Mexico dissuaded mission presidents from having their missionaries street contact and go home-to-home in search of investigators largely due to the often poor activity outcome of members baptized through these activities. In the Philippines, there was an increase in congregational growth and significant augmentation of sacrament meeting attendance in many locations as a result of missionaries concentrating on reactivation work and finding investigators through member referral. Similar results may occur in Japan if there is more member involvement in missionary activity - whether this focuses on reactivation or on teaching and baptizing new members.

A greater emphasis is needed on learning and living the principles of the gospel rather than finding, teaching, baptizing, and

reactivating individuals for reaching arbitrary numbers. The Church in Japan has historically suffered from an overemphasis on pressuring oftentimes poorly prepared investigators for baptism to reach yearly baptismal goals and qualify for a church-built meetinghouse in branches that meet in rented facilities. The Church has experienced declined receptivity in some countries where this perspective toward missionary work abounds as many view the Church as more concerned about converting individuals solely for numerical goals rather than making a long-term difference and achieving personal conversion. As Elder Boyd K. Packer noted in a mission president training seminar in 2009, it seems as if the gospel is struggling for life in a church full of less-important agendas pertaining to administration.[2]

Continued development of culturally-tailored teaching and gospel resources may be beneficial to reversing stagnant growth in Japan. In the mid-2000s, the Church produced a DVD which provided a culturally-tailored introduction to LDS beliefs that identified similarities in Japanese culture with LDS teachings and taught basic church doctrine with a family-focused approach. Similar adaptations of teaching the missionary lessons to the religious and cultural background of most Japanese can improve success.

**Challenges**

Cultural and societal conditions continue to create challenges for missionary activity and church growth. Only a tiny minority of Japanese are Christian. Traditional LDS missionary teaching tactics and the presentation of missionary lessons must be properly adapted to the religious background of the Shinto and Buddhist majority. Quick-baptismal tactics incurred due to aggressive quota-driven approaches with minimal post-baptismal member support have created disastrous results in Japan as an estimated 15-20% of total membership on church records regularly attend church. The busy work and school schedules of many Japanese adults and youth pose major challenges for finding and teaching investigators. Cigarette consumption rates number among the highest in the world. Totally abstaining from tobacco and other substances prohibited by LDS teachings are major challenges for investigators and new converts with past smoking habits. Japan has one of the lowest birth rates in the world and an aging population that presents difficulties for the Church to achieve stable, long-term growth from natural growth and a shrinking demographic of youth and adults to target in proselytism efforts.

Low member activity rates and local leadership development problems have instigated ward and branch consolidations in many cities that currently have multiple units or that once had multiple units. Consequently the extend of outreach has declined in many major cities within the past decade as the number of wards and branches decreased from a high of 317 in 2000 to 280 in 2012. During this 12-year period, the average number of members per ward or branch increased from 354 to approximately 450 due to positive membership growth and negative congregational growth. Expanding missionary activity into lesser-reached and unreached areas and organizing new units in additional cities has been challenging within the past decade due to difficulties keeping currently operating wards and branches functioning and the declining size of the full-time missionary force in Japan. Between 2000 and 2012, the number of missions declined from nine to six. Reliance on full-time missionaries to initiate and execute outreach expansion efforts reduces the self-reliance of the Church in Japan and delays the introduction of an LDS gospel witness to previously unreached locations. Limited mission resources, a lack of strategic vision, and difficulties establishing a permanent church presence among temporary foreign residents has reduced outreach efforts among the non-Japanese population over the past decade.

**Comparative Growth**

Other proselytizing Christian faiths report a comparably small presence in Japan. Some denominations report a more widespread presence than the LDS Church whereas others report a more limited presence than the LDS Church. Virtually all denominations report stagnant or declining congregational growth. Evangelicals estimate that 0.5% of the Japanese population is evangelical and that most evangelical churches have 30 or fewer attending worship services.[3] Jehovah's Witnesses have experienced slight declines in the number of congregations in Japan. In 2012, the number of Witness congregations declined from 3,078 to 3,055. In recent years, the number of Witness congregations has generally declined by about 20-30 a year. Seventh Day Adventists have experienced stagnant growth over the past decade as the number of churches has been unchanged and membership has increased by approximately 1,000. Adventists report approximately 15,000 members and 150 churches and companies in Japan.[4] The Church of the Nazarene reports 72 congregations in Japan.[5]

**Limitations**

No detailed data on the location of LDS units prior to the early 2000s is available. Data regarding the location of LDS units in the early 2000s was retrieved from Marc Schindler's online International Atlas[6] and is not an official LDS source. Some locations in Japan do not have data on the location of LDS units in Schindler's online international atlas such as Gunma Prefecture. The Church does not publish information on the location of dependent units. It is unclear whether many cities have groups or dependent branches organized that are unreported in official LDS sources. No official statistics on nationwide sacrament meeting attendance or member activity are available. Returned missionaries and members have provided data on member activity rates for many locations but these reports are relatively few and are not official statistics.

**Future Prospects**

The outlook for reversing stagnant LDS growth trends in Japan appears unfavorable for the foreseeable future due to ongoing congregation consolidations, low receptivity, other proselytizing Christian faiths reporting stagnant growth, a lack of outreach

expansion vision among the nonnative population, and reliance on full-time missionaries to open new locations to proselytism and facilitate the establishment of additional church units. The surge in the worldwide full-time missionary force may help refocus mission and area leaders to expand national outreach but low member activity rates and leadership sustainability problems will likely continue to siphon surplus mission resources to stabilize wards and branches susceptible to closure. Creating additional teaching and proselytism materials tailored to Japanese culture may improve receptivity and convert retention rates.


[1] "Congregation Meeting Search," retrieved 22 March 2013. http://www.jw.org/apps/index.html?option=FRNsPnPBrTZGT&txtCMSLang=E

[2] Swensen, Jason. "Church advances as missionaries perform labor," LDS Church News, 4 July 2009. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/57557/Church-advances-as-missionaries-perform-labor.html

[3] "Japan," Operation World, retrieved 8 February 2013. http://www.operationworld.org/japa

[4] "Japan Union Conference (1997-Present)," www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 5 February 2013. http://www.adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldInstID=2052495

[5] "Nazarene Church Data Search," retrieved 6 February 2013. http://app.nazarene.org/FindAChurch/results.jsp?n=&c=&y=JA&s=&z=&l=&SearchChoice=

[6] https://cumorah.com/atlas/