

Case Studies on Stagnant or Slow LDS Growth

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Recent Congregational Growth Trends in Argentina

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Overview

The LDS Church has maintained a presence in Argentina since the 1920s - longer than any other nation in South America. The Church experienced rapid growth in virtually all church growth indicators until the late 1990s and experienced slow growth in the early to mid 2000s. Beginning in 2008, the Church has experienced a steady decline in the number of congregations nationwide. Congregational growth numbers among the most robust indicators of church growth as wards and branches require minimum numbers of active members to operate, congregations that experience growth in active membership eventually divide to create additional congregations, and the creation of additional congregations indicates numerical growth in leadership manpower to staff new units. A decline in the number of congregations suggests that the Church is not achieving any noticeable increases in active membership or in some cases even a decline in active membership. This case study analyzes congregational growth in Argentina over the past decade and identifies factors that have contributed to its slowdown and decline within the past five years.

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Trends in LDS Congregational Growth

Beginning in 1987,panerai luminor 1950 10 days gmt replica the Church began reporting country-specific congregation totals every two years in the Deseret News Church Almanac. The number of total units in Argentina increased from 347 in 1987 to 477 in 1989, 539 in 1991, 625 in 1993, 697 in 1995, and 806 in 1997. Stagnant congregational growth occurred between 1997 and 2001 as the number of wards and branches oscillated between 792 and 806. A period of slow congregational growth occurred between 2001 and 2007 as the number of units totaled 804 in 2002, 821 in 2003, 833 in 2004, 849 in 2005, and 863 in 2007.

The Church has consolidated approximately 50 wards and branches between early 2008 and late 2012. Congregational decline began in 2008 and has occurred every year until present. The number of units decreased to 855 in 2008, 853 in 2009, 841 in 2010, 823 in 2011, and 819 in late 2012. Within the past five years, the total number of reported congregations has declined by 44.

Recent congregational decline has primarily occurred due to the consolidation and closure of branches. The number of branches decreased from 396 at year-end 2007 to 333 in late 2012. On the other hand, the number of wards has steadily increased year to year in part due to branches becoming wards. The number of wards reached 406 in 2001, 415 in 2002, 426 in 2003, 442 in 2004, 451 in 2005, 458 in 2006, 467 in 2007, 469 in 2008, 473 in 2009, 481 in 2010, and 486 by late 2012. Within the past five years, the number of branches has declined by 63 whereas the number of wards has increased by 19.

In late 2012, the breakdown of LDS congregations by province were as follows: 313 in Buenos Aires (includes both province and city), 65 in Santa Fe, 64 in Cordoba, 61 in Mendoza, 32 in Salta, 30 in Tucuman, 25 in Chubut, 25 in Neuquén, 22 in Chaco, 22 in Rio Negro, 21 in Entre Rios, 19 in Misiones, 18 in Jujuy, 17 in Corrientes, 17 in Formosa, 15 in San Juan, 11 in La Pampa, 11 in Santiago del Estero, nine in Santa Cruz, six in La Roja, six in San Luis, six in Tierra del Fuego, and four in Catamarca.

Discontinued Branches by Location

Within the past three years (late 2009 to late 2012), the Church closed three of its six branches in the Ibarreta Argentina District

(Bartolomé de las Casas, Ensanche, and Las Lomitas), two branches in the Posadas Argentina Stake (Nueva Esperanza and Santa Clara), two branches in the Cañada de Gomez Argentina District (Las Delicias and Parque), and one branch each in the Argentina Salta Mission (La Quiaca), Buenos Aires Argentina Merlo Stake (San Martin 2nd Branch), Buenos Aires Argentina Monte Grande (Colon Branch), Clorinda Argentina District (Primavera), Cordoba Argentina South Stake (El Crucero), Cordoba Argentina West Stake (Veinte de Junio Branch), Corrientes Argentina District (Centro Branch), Florencio Valera (El Parque), Godoy Cruz (Perdriel Branch), Pergamino Argentina Stake (Colon Branch), Resistencia Argentina Stake (Puerto Vilelas), Rio Gallegos Argentina District (Belgrano Branch), San Juan Argentina Nuevo Cuyo Stake (Vidart Branch), and Santa Teresita Argentina District (San Clemente). During this period additional branches were closed in Buenos Aires (2), Mendoza (2), Santa Fe (2), Catamarca (1), Formosa (1), Jujuy (1), and La Pampa (1) Provinces.

Discontinued Wards

Only a few wards have closed within the past few years such as in the Rosario Argentina North Stake (La Republica) and Bahia Blanca Argentina Stake (Vista Alegre).

Branches Maturing into Wards

Branches that have become wards within the past three years have been located in the Buenos Aires Argentina Avellaneda (Fabian Onsari), Buenos Aires Argentina Congreso (Nueva Pompeya), Buenos Aires Argentina Liniers (1), Buenos Aires Argentina Marcos Paz (Las Heras), Buenos Aires Argentina North (1), Comorodo Rivadavia Argentina (2), Godoy Cruz Argentina (Foecyt), La Plata Argentina Villa Elvida (2), Maipu de Cuyo (Argentina Rodero del Medio), Salta Argentina West (Palermo), and Tucuman Argentina (Alderetes) Stakes.

New Wards and Branches

Within the past three years, only five new congregations appear to have been created including two wards and a branch in Buenos Aires, one ward in Santa Fe, and two mission branches (Argentina Neuquén Mission and Argentina Salta Mission).

Reasons for Congregational Decline (2007-Present)

Chronically low member activity rates, poor convert retention rates, and small numbers of active Melchizedek Priesthood holders in most areas are primarily responsible for the decrease in the number congregations in Argentina over the past five years. The Church created many of its new wards and branches in the 1990s and 2000s with an expectation that these new units would spur greater growth and ultimately become self-sufficient. This expectation was disappointed for scores of units due to quick-baptism tactics and reliance on full-time missionaries to find, teach, and retain new investigators and converts. Consequently, the Church has chosen to close many small units that have had fewer than 40 active members due to the high administrative burden on the small nucleus of active, participating church members, reliance on full-time missionaries to properly run some branches, and little, if any, growth in active membership.

In the 2000s, some missions reported convert retention rates as low as 10-20% for converts one year after baptism. Consequently the vast majority of converts baptized during this period were not retained and have created a burden on active membership to visit and reactivate lost members. In the early 2010s, returned missionaries reported that convert retention rates one year after baptism were as high as 60% in some missions, suggesting that some mission leaders have rectified troublesome mission policies that exacerbated inactivity problems. However, some area leaders continue to pressure missionaries to implement quick-baptism tactics as indicated by baptizing most converts within only a couple weeks upon first meeting missionaries and little accountability demonstrated by missionaries for convert retention responsibilities. Reduced emphasis on prebaptismal preparation necessitates greater local member involvement in fellowshipping and ensuring that new converts properly understand church doctrine, develop a personal testimony, and prepare to hold a calling to reduce the administrative burden on the small numbers of active members in most branches.

Congregational growth in the LDS Church in Argentina has significantly varied city to city and province to province due to differences in receptivity and allocation of mission resources. The Church has experienced a mixture of new units creations and branch consolidations in the Buenos Aires metropolitan area resulting in virtually no change in the total number of units within the past five years. The large number of congregations in Buenos Aires (38% of all wards and branches nationwide) is one reason for why the Church has experienced a combination of congregational growth and decline due to shifting LDS populations and the large number of active and nominal members in comparison to other provinces. Areas with the lowest member activity rates and poorest convert retention (provinces between Santa Fe to the Paraguayan border) have experienced congregational decline over the past five years with only a few exceptions.

Recent congregational decline has had a minimal impact on the extend of national outreach. Nearly all discontinued wards and branches operated in cities where there were multiple congregations. The Church has closed its sole branch in only a handful cities and towns primarily in northeastern Argentina between Buenos Aires and the Paraguayan border. Congregation consolidations within cities that already have multiple congregations reduces the saturation of LDS outreach in urban areas and siphons mission resources from expanding outreach into lesser-reached and unreached cities and towns.

Within the past three years 10 of the 23 Argentine provinces have not had a single ward or branch closed including Chubut, Entre Ríos, La Rioja, Neuquén, Rio Negro, Salta, San Luis, Santiago del Estero, Tierra del Fuego, and Tucumán. Many of these provinces number among the provinces with the fewest LDS congregations in Argentina and only two have 30 or more congregations at present. The Church may consolidate congregations in some of these provinces in the coming years as there has not appeared to be noticeably different member activity and convert retention rates between these provinces and other provinces in Argentina that have experienced congregational decline.

Comparative Growth

The Church in Argentina has not experienced as dramatic congregational decline as in other South American countries with large LDS memberships. The Church reported a decline of over 200 congregations between 1999 and 2003 in Brazil, a decline of over 300 congregations between 1999 and 2005 in Chile, and over 250 congregations between 1997 and 2003 in Peru. To contrast, the Church in Argentina only experienced a mere decline of 14 units between the late 1990s and early 2000s. The Church in Argentina is the only country in South America that has experienced a noticeable decline in the number of units since 2008 whereas virtually all South American countries have reported stagnant congregational growth or slight increases in the number of wards and branches during this period.

Future Prospects

With the number of units consolidated outnumbering the number of units created year to year since 2007, the Church will likely continue to experience slight congregational decline in Argentina for several more years due to low member activity rates nationwide, renewed efforts to follow a centers-of-strength paradigm of church growth, and little long-term growth occurring in many smaller branches over the past decade. Recent trends suggest that the number of wards will continue to increase due to few ward consolidations nationwide and the Church creating a handful of new wards or reorganizing large branches into wards every year. It is possible that the Church may create a few additional stakes within the near future due to steady increases in the number of wards but the Church will have to reverse the trend of congregation consolidations in order to report greater growth in all growth indicators such as consistent increases in the number of stakes, the opening of new branches in unreached cities, and the organization of additional districts in areas where the Church has established multiple branches. The likelihood of the Church announcing additional temples in Argentina will improve once the Church experiences steady congregational growth year to year.
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