

Case Studies on Analyzing Growth Trends by City or Administrative Division

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The Growth of the LDS Church in Texas

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Overview

Texas is the second most populous state in the United States with 25.1 million inhabitants in 2010. English is the most commonly spoken language (68.7%) and Spanish is the second most commonly spoken language (27%). Other languages are spoken by 4.3% of the population.[1] Catholics comprise the largest Christian denomination and account for 28% of the Texan population. Provided with the percentage of the general population, other sizable religious groups include Baptists (21%), Methodists (8%), Lutherans (3%), Pentecostals (3%), Presbyterians (3%), Non-denominational Christians (2%), Latter-day Saints (2%), Episcopalians (1%), Muslims (1%), Jehovah's Witnesses (1%), Assemblies of God (1%), and Church of God (1%). Unaffiliated individuals account for 11% of the population whereas other Christian groups and other non-Christian groups account for seven and two percent of the population, respectively. The religious affiliation of five percent of the population is unknown.[2]

The LDS Church has achieved some of its most rapid and steady growth in Texas over the past several decades as indicated by virtually every measurement utilized by church growth researchers to assess growth. This case study reviews past trends in membership growth, changes in the percentage of Latter-day Saints in the population, congregational growth, stake and district growth, and mission growth. Successes, opportunities, challenges, and future prospects for LDS Church growth are analyzed. A comparative growth section compares and contrasts the growth of the LDS Church in Texas with other nontraditional Christian groups.

LDS Background

Membership Growth

In 1906, church-reported membership reached 1,000 in Texas. By 1930, there were 3,840 members. Membership increased to 50,000 in 1977, 90,217 in 1983, 139,000 in 1987, 170,000 in 1993, 210,892 in 1999, 251,564 in 2005, and 305,510 in 2011. Since 1989, annual membership growth rates have ranged from as low as 2.5% to as high as 4.4% but generally averaged around 3.3%. There were only three years during the 1990s and 2000s where the annual membership growth rate was less than 3%: 2002, 2003, and 2004.

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Changes in Percentage of Membership in Population

LDS membership constituted only 0.03% and 0.07% of the Texas population in 1906 and 1930, respectively. By 1977, 0.38% of the population was nominally LDS. The percentage of members reached 0.6% in 1983, 0.9% in 1991, 1.0% in 1997, 1.1% in 2006, and approximately 1.2% in 2012.

Congregational Growth

In 1930, there were 14 units in Texas. The number of wards and branches totaled 312 in 1987, 383 in 1993, 441 in 1999, 485

in 2005, and 590 in 2011. Since 1989, annual unit growth rates have ranged from as low as -0.9% to as high as 4.6% but generally averaged around 3%.

Stake and District Growth

The Church created its first stake in Texas in 1952 (El Paso). In the 1950s, three additional stakes were created in Houston (1953), Dallas (1953), and San Antonio (1958). In the 1960s, seven new stakes were created in Beaumont (1961), Corpus Christi (1964), Forth Worth (1967), Lubbock (1967), Houston East (1968), Odessa (1968), and Longview (1969). In the 1970s, 10 new stakes were created in Plano (1973), Austin (1973), McAllen (1975), Houston North (1975), San Antonio East (1976), Hurst (1976), Dallas East (1977), Friendswood (1977), Killeen (1978), and College Station (1979). In the 1980s, 13 new stakes were created in Houston South (1980), Harlingen (1981), Lewisville (1981), Abilene (1981), Amarillo (1981), Kingwood (1982), El Paso Mount Franklin (1982), Orange (1982), Gilmer (1983), Richardson (1983), San Antonio West (1983), Cypress (1983), and Arlington (1986). In the 1990s, eight new stakes were created in Bay City (1991), Austin Oak Hills (1991), Katy (1991), Denton (1992), McKinney (1994), Colleyville (1997), San Antonio North (1997), and Round Rock (1999). In the 2000s, 13 new stakes were created Carrollton (2001), Klein (2003), Tyler (2005), Houston West (2006), Weatherford (2006), Richmond (2006), Allen (2007), San Antonio Hill Country (2008), Frisco (2008), Kyle (2008), McAllen West (2008), League City (2009), and Spring (2009). In the 2010s, there new stakes have been created in Waco (2010), Heath (2012), and Houston Summerwood (2012). The number of stakes in Texas reached five in 1961, 10 in 1968, 15 in 1975, 20 in 1978, 25 in 1981, 30 in 1983, 35 in 1991, 40 in 1996, 45 in 2005, 50 in 2008, and 55 in 2009. In late 2012, there were 58 stakes.

Several districts functioned throughout Texas for most of the twentieth century. The Church reported no districts between 1987 and 1993 as all districts previously became stakes or were integrated into stakes. The number of districts increased from one in 1995 (Laredo) to two in 1997 (Eagle Pass) and three in 2003 (Fort Stockton). In late 2012, there were three districts.

Missions

In 1961, the Church created its first mission in Texas called the Texas Mission (later renamed Texas Dallas). Additional missions were organized in San Antonio (1967), Houston (1976), Fort Worth (1986), Corpus Christi [later relocated to McAllen in 1994] (1989), Houston East (1990), Houston South (1997), and Lubbock (2002). The number of missions increased from 1965 to two in 1975, three in 1985, six in 1995, and eight in 2005. In 2012, there were three additional missions based outside of Texas that administered small portions of the state including the Mississippi Jackson, New Mexico Albuquerque, and Oklahoma Oklahoma City Missions.

Temples

Announced in 1981 and dedicated in 1984, the Dallas Texas Temple was the first LDS temple in Texas. Additional temples constructed have included the Houston Texas Temple (announced in 1997 and dedicated in 2000), the Lubbock Texas Temple (announced in 2000 and dedicated in 2002), and the San Antonio Texas Temple (announced in 2001 and dedicated in 2005). The Ciudad Juarez Mexico Temple services the Church's two stakes in El Paso.

Successes

The Church has experienced commensurate membership and congregational growth in Texas that has surpassed all but a handful of states over the past decade. The average number of members per congregation was virtually unchanged between 2001 and 2011 (507 members per unit versus 518 members per unit, respectively), suggesting stable convert retention and member activity rates during this period. Stable convert retention and member activity rates in Texas debunks the myth of some members that more rapid membership growth ultimately results in reduced member activity and convert retention rates.

The percentage of Latter-day Saints in the Texan population has steadily increased indicating that membership growth rates have surpassed population growth rates. This is a noteworthy achievement considering Texas has one of the most rapid population growth rates among states in the United States. A combination of new member move-ins from the Intermountain West and substantial numbers of convert baptisms have driven membership growth. Returned missionaries report that most missions baptize between 400 and 1,000 new converts a year on average whereas most missions outside the Intermountain West generally baptize fewer than 400 converts a year.

Many wards appear to have approximately 40-50% of members on church records attending church regularly according to missionary and member reports. Texas has one of the highest average number of members per congregation (518) in the United States, suggesting lower member activity rates than other states as larger numbers of members per congregation generally indicate fewer active members available to organize additional units. Member and missionary reports indicate that the average number of active members per ward appears higher in Texas than in many other states, possibly due to delays in the organization of new wards and branches until additional meetinghouses are completed. Most wards appear to have between 200 and 300 active members whereas most wards in states outside the Intermountain West generally have between 150 and 200 active members.

The Church has appeared to assign a proportionate number of mission resources to Texas in regards to receptivity and the size

of the Church statewide. Member reports indicate that many wards have a single missionary companionship assigned although some larger units may have two companionships.

Spanish-speaking proselytism efforts are well-established throughout the state as evidenced by approximately 116 wards and branches operating in Texas as of late 2012. Proselytism efforts among Spanish speakers have achieved good success, especially in the Houston area where there are 47 Spanish-speaking wards and branches. The Church has established Spanish-speaking congregations in most large and medium-sized cities. 23 of the 29 cities with over 100,000 inhabitants have at least one Spanish-speaking ward or branch. The six cities with over 100,000 inhabitants without a Spanish-speaking unit based in the city (Amarillo, Grand Prairie, Mesquite, Abilene, Frisco, and Wichita Falls) all have less than 200,000 people. Returned missionaries in some missions report that approximately one-third of the missionary force is designated Spanish-speaking and that two-thirds of convert baptisms are Spanish speakers.

The Church has also conducted some limited language-specific outreach among Vietnamese and Chinese speakers in the Houston area and Tongan speakers in the Dallas area.

Opportunities

The greatest opportunities for future church growth exist in lesser-reached cities and towns within the largest metropolitan areas. Many cities and suburbs of Texas' largest cities are minimally reached by the Church or have no LDS congregations. There are 21 cities with over 15,000 inhabitants without an LDS congregation - most of which are located within or nearby the Dallas Metropolitan and Houston Metropolitan areas. A map displaying the location and population of cities with over 15,000 inhabitants without an LDS presence can be found here. Within close proximity of nearby cities with LDS meetinghouses and assigned missionaries, lesser-reached cities and communities in major metropolitan areas have large populations where mission and stake leaders can focus proselytism and church planting efforts in an effort to increase the saturation of outreach.

There are good opportunities to open groups and small branches in small cities with over 5,000 inhabitants without an LDS congregation. The populations of many smaller cities exhibit higher religiosity to dominate Christian churches in the state, resulting in potentially lower receptivity to LDS missionary efforts. Due to distance from established church centers and desire to utilize mission resources most efficiently, mission leaders may not station full-time missionaries in these locations. Conducting regular exploratory visits on a weekly or monthly basis and facilitating the operation of a group or small branch can greatly facilitate outreach expansion without depending on active members to relocate to these locations. Establishing a congregation in many unreached cities with at least 5,000 inhabitants in Texas can assist in fulfilling the divine mandate to take the gospel to the entire world in a practical manner that is not unreasonable and has good potential for spurring greater growth.

There are many immigrant groups who have recently arrived to Texas that present good opportunities for ethnic-specific proselytism efforts. The Church has only taken advantage of these opportunities among Spanish-speakers, Vietnamese, Chinese, and Tongans. Texas has numbered among the largest recipients of refugees from Burma and Bhutan in recent years but there does not appear to be any organized outreach efforts among these refugee groups and few, if any, convert baptisms. Houston is the metropolitan area in the United States with the third largest concentration of Urdu and Vietnamese speakers and Dallas in the metropolitan area with the fourth largest concentration of Vietnamese speakers.[3] Between late 2009 and late 2010, refugees resettled in Texas totaled nearly 10,000 and most commonly originated from Burma, Iraq, Bhutan, Cuba, Somalia, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.[4]

Challenges

Pervasive negative attitudes regarding the LDS Church stand as one of the greatest challenges to missionary activity. Misconceptions about Latter-day Saints and church teachings are propagated by some denominations and reinforce old stereotypes that members are reclusive, secretive, and eccentric. The Church has attempted for decades to improve its image in Texas and the South but with little improvement. Some denominations specifically target the Church in counterproselytism efforts, hold "anti-Mormon" conferences, and engage in LDS-targeted evangelism during General Conference.[5] It is up to debate whether any of these groups are successful in detracting LDS faithful but their prevalence and impact on public attitudes comprises a major barrier reducing receptivity to the Church among Texans.

Full-time missionaries appear to head nearly all missionary efforts in most congregations due to low levels of member-missionary participation. Lackluster efforts from ordinary members to talk to non-LDS acquaintances and friends about the Church appear rooted in many active members becoming socially entrenched in their congregations, restricting and limiting social interaction with those outside of the Church. This has resulted in many LDS families transplanted from the Intermountain West developing their own subculture reminiscent of Utah, California, Idaho, and Arizona. Consequently some members and missionaries report challenges for nonnative members to adequately befriend and assimilate with their Texan counterparts, especially recent converts who are not only striving to adhere to LDS teachings and keep their baptismal covenants but also to acculturate with fellow members.

Some congregations experience low member activity rates. Spanish-speaking units and English wards and branches in low income inner-city areas and small cities appear to experience the lowest member activity rates. Missionary efforts in these locations and among Spanish speakers generally outperform missionary efforts in suburban communities, small towns, rural areas, and among other ethnic groups due to higher receptivity. Quick-baptism tactics and inconsistent member-missionary

involvement has reduced convert retention rates among these groups. Cultural and societal conditions have also appeared to reduce convert retention and member activity rates in inner-city areas and among Spanish speakers due many Spanish-speakers nominally affiliating with the Catholic Church and lacking personal religious habits and practices prior to taking missionary lessons and socioeconomic conditions in inner-city areas that generally include high rates of poverty, unemployment and underemployment, and crime.

Comparative Growth

The LDS Church in Texas has the largest number of districts, ties with Utah with the second most missions, and has the fifth largest number members, stakes, and temples among states in the United States. Between 2001 and 2011, the Church in Texas experienced the fourth highest membership growth rate (36%), the third highest congregational growth rate (33%), the fourth highest stake growth rate (30%), and the sixth highest growth rate in the number of missions (14%). Missions in Texas number among the highest baptizing in the United States outside of the Intermountain West. Statewide member activity rates appear representative of the United States as a whole at approximately 40%. Outreach among ethnic minority groups in Texas appears comparable to other states with large LDS populations. For example, Texas and California are the only states that have Spanish-speaking stakes.

The size of the LDS Church in Texas is similar to most nontraditional Christian groups. The size of Jehovah's Witnesses and the LDS Church is similar in terms of active membership and total congregations but Witnesses report significantly more specialized language units. Witnesses maintain hundreds of Spanish-speaking congregations, 15 American Sign Language congregations, five French-speaking congregations, five Korean-speaking congregations, three Portuguese-speaking congregations, two Arabic-speaking congregations, two Chinese-speaking congregations, two Tagalog-speaking congregations, one Russian-speaking congregation, one Swahili-speaking congregation, one Vietnamese-speaking congregation, five American Sign Language groups, three Hindi-speaking groups, two Chinese-speaking groups, two Farsi-speaking groups, two Russian-speaking groups, two Tagalog-speaking groups, two Vietnamese-speaking groups, one Albanian-speaking group, one Amharic-speaking group, one Cambodian-speaking group, one French-speaking group, one Laotian-speaking group, one Low German-speaking group, one Marshallese-speaking group, one Romanian-speaking group, and one Serbian-speaking group.[6] The Seventh Day Adventist Church reports over 48,000 members[7] and 378 congregations in Texas. Adventists generally baptize 1,000 to 3,000 new converts a year.[8] The Church of the Nazarene reports 306 churches in Texas.[9]

Future Prospects

The outlook for future church growth in Texas appears favorable as there has been virtually no variation in the strength and consistency of membership and congregational growth over the past decade and member activity and convert retention rates have appeared to hold steady as indicated by commensurate membership and congregational growth. Cities that appear likely to have additional stakes organized in the near future include Austin, Dallas, Houston, and San Antonio. The Church may organize additional missions in Texas due to the state's large population and good opportunities for growth. Cities that appear most likely to headquarter new missions include Austin, Dallas, El Paso, and Houston. The Church may construct small temples in El Paso and McAllen due to difficulties for members crossing the Mexican border to attend the Ciudad Juarez Mexico Temple and distance from the San Antonio Texas Temple.

[1] "Texas," en.wikipedia.org, retrieved 20 November 2012. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Texas

[2] "Texas," en.wikipedia.org, retrieved 20 November 2012. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Texas

[3] "New Census Bureau Report Analyzes Nation's Linguistic Diversity," U.S. Census Bureau, 27 April 2010. http://www.census.gov/newsroom/releases/archives/american_community_survey_acs/cb10-cn58.html

[4] "Monthly arrivals report by country of origin and selected counties," http://www.dshs.state.tx.us/idcu/health/refugee_health/statistics/

[5] "Texas ministry hid messages in tissues at LDS Conference Center," universe.byu.edu, 4 October 2012. http://universe.byu.edu/beta/2012/10/04/texas-ministry-hid-messages-in-tissues-at-lds-conference-center/

[6] http://www.jw.org/apps/index.html?option=FRNsPnPBrTZGT

[7] "Texas Conference," www.adventistyearbook.org, retrieved 20 November 2012. http://www.adventistyearbook.org/default.aspx?page=ViewAdmField&Year=9999&AdmFieldID=TXSC

[8] "Texas Conference (1907-Present)," www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 20 November 2012. http://www.adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldID=C10483

[9] http://app.nazarene.org/FindAChurch