

Comparative Growth Case Studies

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Comparing the International Growth of Latter-day Saints, Seventh Day Adventists, and Jehovah's Witnesses

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Overview

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), the Seventh Day Adventist Church (SDA), and Jehovah's Witnesses share many similarities in terms of their relationship with other Christian denominations, emphasis on worldwide missionary work, initial organization in the nineteenth century in the United States, size of worldwide membership, and doctrinal focus on adhering to high standards of moral conduct and discipleship. However, the membership distribution of each of these denominations varies noticeably from one other, particularly that of Latter-day Saints to Seventh Day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses. The LDS Church reports nearly half of its membership in the United States (43%) whereas Witnesses and Adventist report 16% and 6% of their worldwide membership in the United States, respectively. In 2011, the LDS Church reported 14.4 million nominal members[1] whereas Adventists reported 17.2 million members[2] and Witnesses reported 7.66 million active members.[3] The standards for who does and does not constitute a member varies between all three denominations. Latter-day Saints uphold the most liberal definition of a member to all who have received baptism and confirmation and have not been excommunicated. Seventh Day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses place certain activity requirements for individuals to be included in membership totals.

This essay first identifies the top ten countries with the most Latter-day Saints, Seventh Day Adventists, and Jehovah's Witnesses as officially reported by each denomination. The names of countries without a presence of all three denominations but a presence of at least one or two of these denominations are provided. Reasons for a more limited worldwide LDS presence are explored. Lastly, congregational growth rates are compared between the three denominations as an indicator for member activity and growth in active membership.

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Top Ten Countries with the Most Latter-day Saints, Seventh Day Adventists, and Jehovah's Witnesses

At year-end 2011, the ten countries with the most members as reported by official LDS Church statistics included:

1. United States (6.23 million)
2. Mexico (1.27 million)
3. Brazil (1.17 million)
4. Philippines (661,598)
5. Chile (570,833)
6. Peru (508,812)
7. Argentina (399,440)
8. Guatemala (231,776)
9. Ecuador (202,935)
10. United Kingdom (188,029)

In 2011, the Seventh Day Adventist Church reported that the ten countries with the most members were:

1. India (1.56 million)
2. Brazil (1.29 million)
3. United States (1.06 million)
4. Zambia (747,539)
5. Philippines (734,929)
6. Kenya (695,153)

7. Mexico (689,816)
8. Zimbabwe (679,849)
9. Democratic Republic of the Congo (539,228)
10. Rwanda (505,235)

In 2011, Jehovah's Witnesses reported the most members in:

1. United States (1.2 million)
2. Brazil (742,425)
3. Mexico (739,954)
4. Nigeria (330,316)
5. Italy (245,657)
6. Japan (218,057)
7. Philippines (176,001)
8. Democratic Republic of the Congo (173,416)
9. Russia (165,447)
10. Germany (165,387)

All three denominations include four of the same nations among the top ten countries with the most members (the United States, Mexico, Brazil, and the Philippines). The Democratic Republic of Congo ranked within the ten countries with the most Adventists and Witnesses but ranked 37th for Latter-day Saints.

The number of Latter-day Saints, Seventh Day Adventists, and Jehovah's Witnesses varies significantly by country. One of the most stark contrasts in worldwide membership distribution of the three denominations is that at year-end 2010 there were less than 100 Latter-day Saints in Rwanda yet there were approximately 20,000 Witnesses and over half a million Adventists. In 2011, Rwanda had the tenth most Adventists of any country. Italy is another country where the number of Latter-day Saints, Adventists, and Witnesses is dramatically different. In 2011, Witnesses claimed the fifth most members in Italy - approximately a quarter of a million people - yet the LDS Church reported approximately 24,000 members and the SDA Church claimed 9,315 members. Latter-day Saints report higher percentages of members in more individual countries than either Adventists or Jehovah's Witnesses but have a reported presence in fewer countries. In 2010, official membership numbers released by the LDS Church for Tonga and Samoa constituted 45% and 36% of the national population, respectively. On the other hand, official numbers of Seventh Day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses did not appear to constitute more than 10% of the population for any country or territory at the time.

Membership totals for Latter-day Saints, Seventh Day Adventists, and Jehovah's Witnesses widely differ not only by country but also by world region. The number of Seventh Day Adventists outside North America surpassed the number of Adventists within North America in 1921[4] whereas the LDS Church did not reach this milestone until the late 1990s. The LDS Church reports four-fifths of its international membership in North and South America, but claims the highest percentage of membership in the population in Oceania. Latter-day Saints, Adventists, and Witnesses all report significant followings in Latin America. Adventists and Witnesses have comparatively large memberships in North America. Adventists have experienced especially strong growth in India, Sub-Saharan Africa, the Caribbean, and some areas of Eastern Europe whereas Jehovah's Witnesses have gained large numbers of members in Europe and Sub-Saharan Africa.

Comparative growth maps providing membership and congregational totals and status of LDS, SDA, and Witness by country and dependency are available for Africa, Asia, Europe, North America, South America, and the Caribbean, and Oceania.

Countries without an LDS, SDA, and JW Presence

At present there are no countries or territories that had an LDS presence and no Adventist or Witness presence with the exception of Afghanistan. However, the LDS Church only has a presence in Afghanistan due to United States Military personnel stationed in various areas of the country. There are a handful of countries which have recently had an LDS and Adventist presence but no reported Witness presence including China, Egypt, Iraq, Laos, and Syria. Only one country has both an LDS and Witness presence but no Adventist presence: Nauru. Adventists and Witnesses report a presence or appeared to have a presence in 26 countries and territories which had no official or known LDS presence (Anguilla, Burkina Faso, Chad, East Timor, Eritrea, Faroe Islands, the Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Kyrgyzstan, Liechtenstein, Mali, Mayotte, Montserrat, Norfolk Island, Saba, Saint Eustatius, Saint Helena, Saint Pierre and Miquelon, San Marino, Sao Tome and Principe, Seychelles, Sudan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan). Jehovah's Witnesses report a presence in Palestine and Wallis and Futuna but there does not appear to be either an Adventist or Latter-day Saint presence in either location. Adventists report a presence in Bhutan and Iran and appear to have a presence in Mauritania, Monaco, Pitcairn Island, and Somalia but there does not appear to be any organized Latter-day Saint or Jehovah's Witness presence in any of these locations.

Reasons for a More Limited LDS Presence

Seventh Day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses report a more widespread presence worldwide than the LDS Church for many reasons. A more limited LDS presence worldwide has resulted from reliance on North American missionary manpower to staff outreach efforts worldwide, centralization of LDS leadership and resources in North America, generally mediocre

member-missionary participation, the implementation of a "Centers of Strength" strategy for growth, and extremely few missionary efforts among black Africans until church leaders in 1978 announced all worthy males could receive the priesthood and temple blessings regardless of race or color.

North American missionaries constitute the bulk of international LDS missionary manpower. Consequently, the availability of missionary manpower depends on changes in the percentage of members serving missions and the total number of mission-aged young adults in the United States and Canada. In the early 1980s, declining birth rates in LDS families - among other factors - precipitated in the decline in worldwide LDS missionary manpower in the early 2000s by over 10,000. The scope and size of worldwide missionary manpower remains sensitive to even small fluctuations that influence the number of Americans serving missions such as heightened standards for missionary service, the increasing influence of secularism on American culture, counterproselytism efforts of former members and other Christians, the length and intensity of missionary preparation, and contributors to personal religious practice and faith such as family religiosity, social connections at church, daily scripture study and prayer, and weekly church attendance.

The LDS Church remains highly centralized in North America and most mission resources are dedicated to North and South America. In 2010, two-thirds of the LDS Church's 340 missions were located in the Americas yet the population of this world region constituted only 12% of the world's population. LDS Church headquarters based in the United States, comparatively few international leaders, and generally moderate to low levels of administrative self-sufficiency in many world regions have resulted in the Church's worldwide focus on missionary work sharing some overlap with the diplomacy and foreign relations of the United States government. For this reason the LDS Church appears to have less than 100 members in Cuba whereas Witnesses and Adventists report over 90,000 and 30,000 members in Cuba, respectively. Witnesses and Adventists are both based in the United States, but these denominations have developed stronger and more self-sufficient regional church leadership than the LDS Church and consequently exhibit less overlap with United States foreign relations. This permits these denominations to allocate mission resources from other nearby nations that maintain more neutral or friendly political relations with the target nation. The LDS Church has yet to achieve greater regional self-sufficiency in leadership and missionary manpower around the world to reach the outreach capabilities of Adventists and Witnesses. In 2012, the LDS Church in Oceania appeared to be the only world region where the Church exhibited complete regional self-sufficiency aside from North America as the number of members serving missions in many countries exceeded the number of missionaries assigned to the country, the young missionary force in a couple nations (Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands) entirely consisted of missionaries from Oceania, and mission resources were sufficiently large for area and mission leaders to tactfully coordinate the opening of additional areas to proselytism and plant new congregations. The LDS Church has developed self-sufficiency in local church administration and staffing a full-time missionary force in a handful of nations outside of Oceania such as in Haiti and Pakistan, but these instances are limited to a single country in the region and lack sufficiently large resources to expand outreach into previously unreached locations. Developing church planting resources outside of North America has permitted Adventists and Witnesses to extend missionary activity into nations where political hurdles prevent the LDS Church from assigning missionaries. Regional self-sufficiency in mission outreach not only facilitates the establishment of a church in nations that experience government restrictions on religious freedom or lukewarm to poor diplomatic relations with the United States, but also those nations where safety concerns make the placement of white North American missionaries unfeasible such as in many Sub-Saharan African countries that have an Adventist and Witness presence but no Latter-day Saint presence.

Seventh Day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses heavily rely on member-missionary work and church planting to expand outreach and increase membership whereas Latter-day Saints strongly rely on foreign full-time missionaries to open new areas to proselytism. The expenses and logistical issues for coordinating a professional, full-time missionary force are exacting on church administration and reduce the ease and speed that mission resources can be assigned to open new areas in a timely manner. Adventists and Witnesses benefit from a member-missionary approach to outreach expansion that utilizes a part-time missionary force. With no professional missionary force like the LDS Church, these denominations often experience greater success entering previously unreached areas for proselytism as there is an increased responsibility for members to undertake this role. In addition to higher member-missionary participation, Adventists and Witnesses also implement stricter standards prior to converts joining their churches than the LDS Church. Adventists require the congregation to approve whether a baptismal candidate has reached a sufficient degree of knowledge and commitment in order to be approved for baptism.[5] These standards often include regular church attendance lasting for several months before consideration for baptism. Proselytism constitutes one of the prebaptismal steps for prospective Jehovah's Witnesses.[6]

Many of the Church's approximately two dozen administrative areas heavily rely on the "Centers of Strength" paradigm to guide mission resource allocation. Many area and mission leaders implement a centers of strength approach to reduce logistical challenges, try to jumpstart local self-sufficiency in leadership, and take advantage of proselytism opportunities in densely populated urban areas. However, church leaders often struggle to open additional areas to missionary activity in a timely fashion when utilizing this approach, resulting in years or decades transpiring with no noticeable expansion of an LDS presence into previously unreached areas. Generally receptivity declines as opportunities to start missionary activity in new areas are delayed resulting in an under-realization of growth potential. Meanwhile, other proselytizing faiths shepherd many receptive individuals into their congregations and deplete growth potential for the LDS Church when outreach is eventually extended if at all.

The LDS Church's ban on African-descent males from holding the priesthood until 1978 delayed the establishment of the Church in Sub-Saharan Africa and the Caribbean. Adventists and Witnesses did not hold such bans and entered these regions of the world decades or even a century before the LDS Church. Latter-day Saints have since struggled to catch up opening these countries to missionary activity over the past three decades and consequently many remain unreached to the Church. The major slowdown expanding outreach in the LDS Church during the 2000s resulted in the Church permanently assigning missionaries for the first time to only a few countries such as Saint Lucia, Kazakhstan, Vietnam, Dominica, Georgia, Angola, and the Turks and Caicos Islands yet Adventists first established a presence in Saint Lucia in the early twentieth century,[7] in

Kazakhstan since the late 1970s,[8] in Vietnam since as early as the mid-1950s and continuously until present day,[9] Dominica in the 1900s, Georgia as early as the 1900s, in Angola since the 1920s, and the Turks and Caicos Islands since as early as the 1960s.[10] Furthermore, Seventh Day Adventists established a presence in Equatorial Guinea in 1960 yet in mid-2012 there remained no LDS presence.[11]

Congregational Growth, Convert Retention, and Member Activity

The percentage increase in the number of Adventist and Witness congregations has dramatically outpaced growth rates for the LDS Church in nearly every nation where all three denominations operate. In 2011, the LDS Church reported 14.44 million members meeting in 28,784 congregations worldwide.[12] Between 2001 and 2011, the number of LDS congregations increased by an average of 270 per year and LDS membership increased by an average of 304,683 members per year. Membership increased by 26.7% whereas the number of congregations increased by 10.4% during this period. Due to noncommensurate rates of growth, the average number of members per congregation increased from 437 to 502.

In contrast, the Seventh Day Adventist Church in 2011 reported 17.21 million members meeting in 71,048 congregations worldwide.[13] Between 2001 and 2011, the number of Adventist congregations increased by an average of 1,996 a year and Adventist membership increased by an average of 489,384 members per year.[14] Membership increased by 40% whereas the number of congregations increased by 39.1% during this period. Commensurate rates of growth for membership and the number of congregations resulted in no significant change in the average number of members per congregation between 2001 and 2011 as the average congregation increased from 241 members to 242 members.

In 2011, Jehovah's Witnesses reported 7.66 million active members and 19.37 million people attending memorial attendance. At the time there were 109,403 Witness congregations worldwide.[15] Between 2001 and 2011, active membership increased by 27.7%. No congregational totals were accessible for 2001 at the time this case study was written. In 2011, the average Witness congregation had 70 active members and an average memorial attendance of 177.

Future Prospects

The international growth of Latter-day Saints, Seventh Day Adventists, and Jehovah's Witnesses has slowed within the past decade and this trend appears likely to continue for the foreseeable future. Seventh Day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses have exhibited consistently commensurate membership and congregational growth rates for many years, suggesting that convert retention rates may remain constant in the coming decade. Both of these denominations will likely establish an official presence in few additional countries in the medium term as Adventists and Witnesses have already established a presence in nearly all countries that do not experience significant restrictions on religious freedom that prohibit any missionary activity of religious worship. The LDS Church appears unlikely to enter many nations that already have an Adventist and Witness presence due to limited mission resources, reliance on full-time missionaries to expand outreach, and renewed interest in expanding missionary work in many nations that are minimally reached by the LDS Church at present. There does not appear to be any indication that commensurate membership and congregational growth rates experienced by Adventists and Witnesses will become unequal in the near term. However, Latter-day Saints have experienced congregational growth rates ranging from 68% of the membership growth rate to as little as 8% of the growth rate over the past 11 years. This noncommensurate growth illustrates convert retention difficulties resulting in fewer active members to necessitate the organization of additional wards and branches. There does not appear to be any change in LDS congregational growth trends due to ongoing convert retention challenges, few church planting initiatives worldwide, and a widely followed centers-of-strength church growth policy enacted in many regions around the world.

[1] "Statistical Report, 2011," General Conference, April 2012. http://www.lds.org/general-conference/2012/04/statistical-report-2011

[2] "General Conference," www.adventistyearbook.org, retrieved 19 May 2012. http://www.adventistyearbook.org/default.aspx?page=ViewAdmField&Year=9999&AdmFieldID=GC

[3] "Statistics: 2011 Report of Jehovah's Witnesses Worldwide," www.watchtower.org, retrieved 19 May 2012. http://www.watchtower.org/e/statistics/worldwide_report.htm

[4] Land, Gary. Historical Dictionary of the Seventh-Day Adventists, Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press Inc., 2005, p. 8

[5] "Guidelines for Engaging in Global Mission," www.adventist.org, retrieved 27 March 2012. http://www.adventist.org/beliefs/guidelines/main-guide7.html

[6] http://www.wikihow.com/Become-one-of-Jehovah%27s-Witnesses

[7] "Saint Lucia Mission," stluciaadventist.org, retrieved 28 May 2012. http://stluciaadventist.org/

[8] "Northern Kazakhstan Mission," www.adventistyearbook.org, retrieved 28 May 2012. http://www.adventistyearbook.org/default.aspx?page=ViewAdmField&AdmFieldID=NKZC

[9] "Vietnam Mission (1957-Present)," www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 28 May 2012. http://www.adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldInstID=1881512

[10] "Turks and Caicos Islands Mission (1965-2010)," www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 28 May 2012. http://www.adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldInstID=1881220

[11] Land, Gary. Historical Dictionary of the Seventh-Day Adventists, Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press Inc., 2005, p. 92

[12] "Statistical Report, 2011," General Conference - April 2012, retrieved 5 April 2012. http://www.lds.org/general-conference/2012/04/statistical-report-2011

[13] "General Conference," www.adventistyearbook.org, retrieved 5 April 2012. http://www.adventistyearbook.org/default.aspx?page=ViewAdmField&AdmFieldID=GC

[14] "General Conference (1901-Present)," www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 5 April 2012. http://www.adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldID=G10001

[15] "Statistics: 2011 Report of Jehovah's Witnesses Worldwide," www.watchtower.org, retrieved 5 April 2012. http://www.watchtower.org/e/statistics/worldwide_report.htm