



Overall LDS Growth Trend Case Studies

>

Top 10 Most Encouraging and Top 10 Most Discouraging LDS Growth and Missionary Developments in 2017

Author: Matthew Martinich, Psy.D.

Posted: December 30th, 2017

Overview

As the year comes to a close, I wanted to review the most significant growth developments for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church) during 2017. Previous annual reviews of the top 10 most encouraging and top 10 most discouraging LDS growth and missionary developments have been posted on cumorah.com since 2014 and can be accessed [here](#). The year 2017 appears to primarily stand out for two developments: the rapid growth and expansion of the Church in West Africa, and the continued slowdown of LDS growth in the United States.

This case study identifies 10 of the most encouraging LDS growth and missionary developments in 2017. Furthermore, the 10 most discouraging LDS growth and missionary developments during the year are also reported. Limitations to this case study are identified.

NOTE: The Church has not released any membership figures for the year 2017. Membership data for 2016 became available to the public in April 2017. Thus, all of the most recent membership data contained in this article was current as of year-end 2016.

Top 10 Encouraging LDS Growth and Missionary Developments

1. Rapid Growth Continues in West Africa

Percentage LDS growth rates in West Africa have surpassed all other world regions for several years. The number of convert baptisms has also steadily increased during the past seven years to approximately 27,000 during 2016. Recently, LDS growth rates in West Africa have begun to more closely mirror the Church's rapid growth experienced in Latin America and the Philippines during the last quarter of the twentieth century, but with higher convert retention and member activity rates, and greater regional self-sufficiency in leadership and missionary manpower. For more information about LDS growth rates in West Africa and their comparison to other world regions, click [here](#).

Also, the Church completed and dedicated its new Ghana Missionary Training Center (MTC) in Accra during October. The new MTC can accommodate 320 young full-time missionaries at a time – more than three times as many missionaries as the previous MTC located in Tema (95).^[1] The new MTC has significant potential to augment the number of full-time missionaries assigned to serve in West Africa and further accelerate growth in the region.

See below for a country-by-country breakdown of significant LDS growth developments in West Africa.

Nigeria

The Church in Nigeria reported rapid congregational growth, significant expansion of the Church into previously unreached areas, and sustained moderate-to-rapid membership growth. There was a net increase of 101 official congregations in Nigeria during 2017 – a 20% annual increase. These 101 new wards/branches were organized in the following Nigerian

states/territories: Rivers (20), Edo (14), Akwa Ibom (10), Delta (9), Abia (8), Cross River (8), Abuja [Federal Capital Territory] (5), Ebonyi (5), Ondo (5), Benue (4), Imo (3), Lagos (3), Oyo (3), Plateau (3), and Anambra (1). The creation of new congregations generally serves as a good measure for increases in the number of active members as new congregations are usually only organized when increases in active membership warrant it. However, accelerations in congregational growth during 2017 in Nigeria has appeared primarily attributed to the establishment of branches in less-reached areas of several major cities in order to spur greater growth. Moreover, 16 additional cities or towns had an official branch organized for the first time during 2017. The last time the Church reported an annual net increase of 100 or more congregations in a single country (excluding the United States) was in the Philippines in 2000 when there was a net increase of 106 official congregations. There have been few instances when the Church has reported an annual net increase of 100 or more congregations in a single year, such as in Peru during the mid-1990s, Brazil in the early and mid-1990s, and Mexico in the late 1980s. Membership growth in Nigeria has also accelerated during recent years. Church membership has increased by 10,000 or more every year since 2014. Lastly, three new stakes and two new districts were organized during 2017.

Sierra Leone

Essentially all LDS statistical measures in Sierra Leone during 2016 and 2017 indicate unprecedented growth. The number of stakes increased from one at the beginning of 2017 to five by December as new stakes were organized in Kissy (June), Bo North (November), Bo West (November), and Freetown East (December). The Church in no other country in the world has ever reported an increase from one stake to five stakes in so short a period of time. Attendance at the combined conference to create the first two stakes in Bo totaled 1,945 people. Furthermore, the creation of one of the new stakes (Bo Sierra Leone North Stake) occurred less than one year after the original Bo Sierra Leone North District was organized. Never in the history of the Church has a district so quickly been organized into a stake. Furthermore, the two new stakes in Bo are the Church's first predominantly Mende-speaking stakes in the worldwide Church. Additionally, there have been 11 new wards/branches organized in 2017 – a 20% annual increase. Church membership in Sierra Leone has steadily increased by approximately 1,500 a year since 2012. These developments are particularly impressive considering only 10% of the Sierra Leonean population is Christian, and that most the population nominally affiliates as Muslim.

Significant expansion of the Church in Sierra Leone into previously unreached areas has occurred since the return of young, proselytizing missionaries in February 2016. The Church has organized its first branches and assigned full-time missionaries to six additional cities and towns during this time in Lungi (2016), Koidu (2017), Moyamba (2017), Mogbwemo (2017), Moriba Town (2017), Mosenesie Junction (2017), and Kailahun (2017). Missionaries reported that there were 161 missionaries assigned to the Sierra Leone Freetown Mission as of September 2017, and that approximately 60% of missionaries in the mission were Black Africans.

The number of cities and towns with an official ward or branch increased from three in 1990 to five in 2005, seven in 2013, and 14 in 2017.

Liberia

Three new stakes were organized from districts in Monrovia in 2017 – two of which were created in a single weekend in December. As a result, Monrovia is entirely serviced by four stakes. Never has the Church in a particular country grown from zero stakes to four stakes in so short a period of time (13 months). The Church reestablished a stake in Liberia in November 2016. The mission has recently reported approximately 100 convert baptisms a month.

The Church in Liberia has also reported rapid national outreach expansion for the first time. The official operation of the Church was restricted to the greater Monrovia metropolitan area from the late 1980s until 2007 when the first branches were organized in two additional cities, Harbel and Kakata. However, with the advancement of districts into stakes in Monrovia, the mission has begun to aggressively open congregations and assign missionaries to previously unreached cities. The mission recently opened member groups (small congregations that operate under the oversight of an official ward or branch) in five previously unreached cities including Buchanan, Greenville, Harper, Totota, and Zwedru (family group). Most, if not all, of these member groups appeared to be organized in 2017. Member groups in Buchanan and Totota opened in November, and the mission has since received approval to organize these groups as official branches. Over 30 attended the first sacrament meeting in Totota and over 40 people attended the first sacrament meeting in Buchanan. The mission continues to explore opportunities to open additional cities to proselytism and establish member groups in currently unreached locations. Approximately 60% of the full-time missionaries assigned to Liberia were Black Africans as of late 2017.

Cote d'Ivoire

The Church in Cote d'Ivoire during 2016 reported its most rapid annual membership growth ever as membership increased by 22.7% to 39,589. Furthermore, the Church organized its first branches in seven previously unreached Ivorian cities including Adiake, Adiopodoume, Bayota, Logouale, Mahapleu, Saioua, and Sinfra. There are now 44 cities/towns in Cote d'Ivoire with an official ward or branch. Congregational growth rates continued at a rapid rate for 2017, but less than most recent years. The number of wards/branches increased by 15% to 210 – the lowest annual percentage growth for congregations since 2011 as annual congregational growth rates ranged between 26-40% during the five-year period between year-end 2011 and year-end 2016.

Significant growth also occurred in regards to stakes and districts. Three new stakes and two new districts were organized in

2017, including the organization of the Daloa Cote d'Ivoire Stake in October. The Church in Daloa has arguably experienced the most rapid growth of any city in the worldwide Church during the past four years. The Church organized its first six branches in Daloa in a single weekend in February 2014 – the most branches ever simultaneously organized in a city where no official wards or branches previously operated. The Church organized branches in Daloa into their own district in April 2015 when the Yamoussoukro Cote d'Ivoire District became a stake. The period between the organization of the first official branch and the creation of the first stake in Daloa appears to be the shortest ever reported by the Church with the exception of the creation of stakes during the Mormon colonial period in the Intermountain West during the mid to late 1800s. Furthermore, Abidjan is currently the metropolitan area on the Afro-Eurasian landmass with the most stakes as there are now 12 stakes.

Ghana

Four new stakes were created in Ghana during 2017, bringing the total number of stakes in the country to 22. Three of these stakes were organized from the three districts that previously operated in the interior region between Accra and Kumasi, namely districts that were based in Abomosu, Asamankese, and Koforidua. Also, the Church organized its first branch in the Upper West Region in the regional capital city of Wa. As a result, all 10 administrative regions in Ghana now have an official LDS presence. Congregational growth rates continue to hold steady (net increase of 26 congregations, 9.4% annual growth rate). Annual membership growth rates have been sustained at approximately 7-10% since the early 1990s.

Togo

Four branches advanced into wards, resulting in the original Lomé Togo Stake reaching 14 wards and three branches by late 2017. As a result, the Church organized its second stake in Togo in October 2017. Rapid growth has continued in Togo during the past decade as the first district was organized in December 2009 and the first stake was created in December 2013. Annual membership growth rates have been sustained at 15% or higher every year since 2009. Church membership increased from 1,034 in 2009 to 3,804 in 2016. Furthermore, full-time missionaries reported in 2017 that member groups were established in Tsévié and Kpalimé – the first cities outside of Lomé to have had an LDS presence established.

Benin

Three new branches were organized in 2017, including the first branch outside of a major city (Hilacondji). As a result, the number of congregations increased by 21% during the year. Rapid annual membership growth rates have been sustained at 17% or higher since the establishment of the Church in Benin in 2004 with a mere 11 members. There were 2,638 members at the end of 2016. Lastly, the Benin Cotonou Mission has investigated prospects to open additional cities to proselytism in the near future such as Allada and Bohicon. Currently there is an LDS presence in only three cities – the greater Cotonou metropolitan area, Porto Novo, and Hilacondji.

2. LDS Outreach Expands into Previously Unreached West African Nations

During 2017, the Church in West Africa commenced its most widespread efforts to expand into previously unreached nations in decades. At the beginning of the year, the Church assigned Senegal to an LDS mission, the Cote d'Ivoire Abidjan West Mission, for the first time. In late May, LDS apostle Elder David A. Bednar visited the West African nations of Guinea, Mali, and Senegal during a visit to the region. Elder Bednar visited with members of the Dakar Branch in Senegal, held a special meeting with the congregation, and later appeared to dedicate the country for missionary work. Elder Bednar also briefly met with church leaders in Conakry, Guinea before he traveled to Mali to meet with 17 members and a congregation of approximately 250 prospective members. The Church in Guinea organized its first official branch in Conakry in June and assigned the Conakry area to the Sierra Leone Freetown Mission for the first time. The Church in Mali created its first official branch in the country, the Bamako Branch, in July and also established a member group in the nearby suburb of Mountougoula (Farako). Furthermore, Bamako and surrounding areas were assigned to a mission, the Cote d'Ivoire Abidjan Mission, for the first time. As of late 2017, reports from local members indicate that church membership appears to be approximately 30-50 each in Guinea, Mali, and Senegal. The first members from Senegal began their full-time missionary service in late 2017. Lastly, senior missionaries report that there are plans to organize the Church's first official branch in at least one additional country in West Africa within the near future.

3. Stake and Congregational Growth in Certain Latin American Countries

The Church in Central America has experienced several positive developments during 2017 that indicate progress with increases in the number of active members and improvements in local leadership development.

Guatemala

The Church in Guatemala reported a net increase of 10 congregations during 2017 – a 2.3% annual increase. This is the second highest rate of congregational growth in Guatemala reported by the Church since 1998, whereas the highest rate of congregational growth occurred in 2016. Furthermore, the Church organized its first predominantly Q'eqchi'-speaking stake in June 2017 in Senahu. Lastly, data from returned missionaries and local members indicate increases in church attendance in

most congregations during the past five years.

Bolivia

After seven years of essentially stagnant or slight decline in the number of congregations, the Church in Bolivia reported a net increase of seven wards/branches during 2017 – a 2.8% annual increase the highest reported since 2003. Moreover, the Church organized four new stakes in Bolivia during the year. There are now 255 congregations (187 wards, 68 branches), 32 stakes, and eight districts in Bolivia. Despite this progress, annual membership growth rates remain low at 1.7-1.8%.

Costa Rica

There were several developments that indicate LDS growth in Costa Rica accelerated during 2017. The Church in Costa Rica reached a new all-time high for the number of wards/branches in the country of 80 (58 wards, 22 branches) by late 2017. To contrast, the Church reported a previous high of 79 congregations (39 wards, 40 branches) in 2001, but experienced a net decline to reach a low of 73 congregations (43 wards, 30 branches) in 2013. The number of wards increased by six (11.5%) during 2017 – one of the largest numerical increases in the number of wards ever reported by the Church in Costa Rica. Sacrament meeting attendance has also appeared to increase in the country during the past few years based upon reports from local members and returned missionaries. Lastly, the Church organized its tenth stake in Costa Rica in November. Annual membership growth rates have slightly slowed in recent years to 2.9% in 2016.

Brazil

The Church in Brazil reported a net increase of 33 wards/branches during 2017. Forty-three new wards/branches were organized, whereas 10 wards/branches were discontinued. Although this increase constitutes only a 1.6% annual increase, the Church in Brazil during 2017 experienced a higher percentage increase in the number of congregations than most years in the 2010s. Congregational growth has remained steady since the early 2000s and as a result the number of wards/branches reached 1,800 in 2008, 1,900 in 2010, and 2,000 in 2015. There were 2,088 wards/branches as of late 2017. Unlike other Latin American countries, the Church in Brazil has reported net increases in the number of wards/branches every year since 2004. Many additional cities have opened to missionary work for the first time during the past decade, which has resulted in the organization of new branches. The Church in Brazil organized three new stakes in 2017. However, annual membership growth rates totaled a mere 2.1% in 2016 – the lowest reported by the Church in at least 75 years.

Honduras

Three new stakes were organized in 2017. The number of wards increased by six in 2017 although there was a net increase of only one congregation during the year. There are now 31 stakes and five districts in Honduras. However, annual membership growth rates have slowed in recent years to a mere 1.8% in 2016.

El Salvador

Three new stakes were organized in 2017. The last remaining district in El Salvador became a stake during the year (San Vicente). The number of wards increased by five although there was no net increase in the number of wards/branches during the year. There are now 22 stakes in El Salvador. Annual membership growth rates continue to be low and were measured at 1.5% in 2016.

Nicaragua

Two new stakes were organized in 2017. There was an increase of nine wards during 2017 although there was no net increase in the total number of congregations during the year. There are now 12 stakes and four districts in Nicaragua. The Church in Nicaragua continues to report the highest annual membership growth rate of any country in Central America of 3.9% in 2016.

Panama

There was a net increase of one congregation during 2017. This marks only the second time since 2002 that the Church in Panama has reported a net increase in the number of congregations as the number of wards/branches decreased from an all-time high of 112 in 2001 to a low of 71 congregations in 2014. The other year that the Church in Panama reported a net increase in congregations was in 2016. This suggests that there may be a reversal to the long-term trend of declining numbers of congregations. Church membership grew by 1.7% in 2016.

4. Second Largest Number of New Stakes Created in a Single Year since 1998.

Accelerated stake growth continued in 2017 albeit at a slightly slower pace than in 2016. The Church organized 81 new stakes and reported a net increase of 75 stakes during 2016 – a 2.30% annual increase. The number of new stakes organized, the net increase of stakes, and the annual percentage growth rate for stakes in 2017 is the second highest reported by the Church since 1998. Provided with the number of new stakes created in parentheses, locations where the Church organized the most new stakes during 2017 include Utah (9), Philippines (5), Bolivia (4), Ghana (4), Sierra Leone (4), Brazil (3), Cote d'Ivoire (3), El Salvador (3), Guatemala (3), Honduras (3), Liberia (3), Nevada (3), and Nigeria (3). The number of new stakes organized by world region for 2017 is as follows: United States/Canada (28), Africa (22), Central America (13), South America (10), Asia (6), Oceania (2), and Europe (0). Thirty-two percent of new stakes in 2017 were organized in the United States. Currently the Church reports 3,341 stakes worldwide.

The number of new stakes created in 2017 was 19 less than in 2016 when there were 100 new stakes organized. In contrast, the Church organized 67 new stakes in 2015, 64 new stakes in 2014, and 48 new stakes in 2013. The number of new stakes organized per year ranged between 32 and 67 between 2006 and 2015. The Church has historically experienced more rapid stake growth than in 2016 or 2017. For example, the Church reported a net increase of 146 stakes in 1996. Annual percentage stake growth has surpassed 10% for five years: 1978 (11.9%), 1980 (11.5%), 1977 (10.9%), 1979 (10.3%), and 1960 (10.0%). If the Church reported 10% annual growth in the number of stakes for 2017, there would have been an increase of 327 stakes.

Several other LDS statistical indicators that strongly correlate to stake growth did not accelerate in 2016. For example, the Church reported a net increase of approximately 200 official congregations (i.e. wards and branches) during 2017. As the average stake includes seven congregations, the number of stakes would have increased by only 29 if the Church organized new stakes in direct proportion to congregational growth rates for the year.

5. New Branches and a New District in Vietnam

The Vietnam Hanoi Mission opened in March 2016 and paved the way for significant expansion and progress during 2017. Two new branches opened in Hanoi in January – the Ha Dong Branch and the Long Bien Branch. Both branches were organized with four members in the branch presidency, including three Vietnamese members. The Church also organized its third branch in Ho Chi Minh City in January – the Quan Sau Branch. In September, the Church organized a second district in Vietnam – the Ho Chi Minh City Vietnam District. The new district included the three original branches in Ho Chi Minh City (e.g. Quan Sau, Tan Son Nhat, and Thao Dien), as well as three newly organized branches (e.g. Binh Duong, Phu My Hung, and Thu Duc) for a total of six branches in the district. In the months preceding the organization of the new branches, senior missionaries prepared for the opening of the branches and secured new apartments and locations to hold church services. There were 25 missionaries assigned to Ho Chi Minh City by August 2017 – significantly more than the four missionaries assigned to the city just five years earlier. Moreover, the Binh Duong Branch was the first branch to be organized outside of the Ho Chi Minh City municipality albeit the new branch only had a minimally staffed branch presidency comprised of native members.

There were additional significant events that occurred in 2017. Forty-four members from Ho Chi Minh City and surrounding areas attended a temple trip to the Manila Philippines Temple in July 2017. Additionally, senior missionaries reported that over 50 young single adults attended a nationwide conference in August 2017. There were approximately half a dozen senior missionary couples assigned to the Vietnam Hanoi Mission as of September 2017.

There are now 10 branches in Vietnam, including six branches in Ho Chi Minh City, three branches in Hanoi, and one mission branch to administer members who live outside of these two cities.

6. LDS Developments in South Asia – New Stake, New Congregations, and the Translation of the Book of Mormon into Nepali

India

The first stake in the India New Delhi Mission was organized in November – the New Delhi India Stake. The New Delhi India Stake is fourth stake in India following the creation of stakes in Hyderabad (2012), Bengaluru (2015), and Rajahmundry (2016), and is the first stake organized within predominantly Hindi-speaking areas of India. Currently the India New Delhi Mission administers northern India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Bhutan for a combined population of more than one billion people but less than 10,000 Latter-day Saints. The creation of the new stake signifies significant progress in the development of local Indian leadership and increases in the active members who live within the New Delhi area.

The Church in India also reestablished a member group in Vijayawada in mid-2017. The home group had fewer than 10 people in attendance when it was first established. Most recently, the home group has had upwards of 50 people in attendance. Prospects appear favorable for the establishment of additional member groups in currently unreached cities.

Nepal

The Church published its Nepali translation of the Book of Mormon during 2017 – the 111th translation of the Book of Mormon. No previous Nepali translation of the Book of Mormon existed prior to 2017. There are currently two Nepali-speaking branches in the worldwide Church with one each in Nepal and Utah. However, there are hundreds of Nepali-speaking members who live

in other areas of the world such as northern India, Australia, Hong Kong, and other states within the United States.

Sri Lanka

The Church reported significant increases in church attendance in branches in Sri Lanka during 2017 that warranted the creation of a second branch in Colombo – the first time a new branch had been organized in Sri Lanka since 2002. These improvements in church attendance have occurred for approximately two years. For example, one branch reported in early 2016 an increase in church attendance from 15 to 115 within a matter of months. Lastly, the Church in Sri Lanka reported an annual membership growth rate of 5.0% in 2016 – the highest annual membership growth rate since 2008 when young, foreign full-time missionaries last served in the country before visa issues prompted their removal. The Church currently reports four branches in the country. There were 1,436 members by year-end 2016.

7. First Farsi-Speaking Branch Organized

The Church organized a Farsi (Persian) speaking branch in Del Mar, California in November. The branch is led by a full branch presidency comprised of native Farsi speakers. The new branch is the Church's only Farsi-speaking branch in the worldwide Church and appears to be the first branch to ever conduct meetings solely in the Farsi language. The Church established several branches in Iran during the 1970s and operated the Iran Tehran Mission to service members in Iran between 1975 and 1979. However, former branches in Iran appeared to hold church services in both English and Farsi.

Iranians have been uniquely receptive to the LDS Gospel message among peoples in the Middle East. Thousands of Iranian members have joined the Church worldwide during the past four decades and rates of convert baptisms among Iranians have appeared to increase during the past decade. Comparatively few Arabs have joined the Church. Today, Persian-speaking members have joined the Church in sizable numbers in the United States, Canada, Turkey, Sweden, Germany, and several additional European countries. The creation of a Persian-speaking branch is a significant milestone as there appears to be sufficient leadership for Persian members to maintain their own congregation. Prospects appear favorable for the organization of additional Persian-speaking branches, member groups, and Sunday School classes in several countries and locations, especially in Los Angeles, California and Toronto, Canada.

8. New Temples

The Church announced five new temples during the April 2017 General Conference in the following cities:

- Brasília, Brazil
- The greater Manila, Philippines, area
- Nairobi, Kenya
- Pocatello, Idaho
- Saratoga Springs, Utah

The new temple announced for Nairobi, Kenya is especially significant as it will be the first temple ever built in East Africa where there are approximately 32,000 Latter-day Saints. There are now 182 temples worldwide, including 159 operating temples, 11 temples under construction, and 12 temples in the planning and development phase.

9. Milestone of 100 Stakes Reached in the Philippines

Five new stakes were organized in the Philippines during 2017 – three of which were created from member districts. The Church held a special cultural celebration to celebrate the organization of the 100th operating stake in the country in September. The Philippines is currently one of only five countries with 100 or more operating stakes – the others being the United States (1,616 stakes), Brazil (268 stakes), Mexico (229 stakes), and Peru (101 stakes). There are currently 101 stakes and 74 districts in the Philippines.

10. First LDS Meetinghouse Established in Timor-Leste (East Timor)

The Church in Timor-Leste established its first official meetinghouse in mid-2017. Over 100 people visited an open house held at the end of July and approximately 25 students registered for free English classes. The next day, there were 17 in attendance for church services in the Dili Group. Approximately 100 students participated in English classes during the last four months of 2017, and approximately 80 attended a special fireside about the Church in late 2017. The Church's activities in Timor-Leste continue to be limited to humanitarian service and English classes. No young, proselytizing missionaries have been assigned to serve in Timor-Leste although the country was dedicated for missionary work in 2015 by Elder Jeffrey R. Holland. It is unclear whether there are any legal obstacles that prevent the assignment of full-time missionaries as religious freedom is upheld by this predominantly Christian country of 1.3 million people.

Top 10 Discouraging LDS Growth and Missionary Developments

1. LDS Growth Continues to Decelerate in the United States

LDS growth rates in the United States continued to decelerate in 2017 as part of a trend of slowing growth that began approximately 15 years ago.

As of late December, the Church in the United States reported no net change for the number of congregations for the entire year (184 new wards/branches organized, 184 wards/branches discontinued). To contrast, the Church in the United States has historically reported a net increase of 100-150 new wards/branches a year during the past decade. The approximate number of new congregations organized in the United States per year totaled 268 in 2016, 233 in 2015, 224 in 2014, and 191 in 2013, whereas the approximate number of congregations discontinued in the United States per year totaled 203 in 2016, 91 in 2015, 72 in 2014, and 67 in 2013. Thus, the number of discontinued wards/branches in 2017 numbers among the highest reported by the Church in recent memory, and the number of new wards/branches organized numbered among the lowest reported during the past five years. Declining rates in congregational growth in the United States appear primarily attributed to declining membership growth rates. However, emphasis on the organization of larger wards in some areas of the country in order to better maximize LDS meetinghouses and provide more socialization opportunities for youth has appeared partially responsible for these changes. There was a net increase of 44 wards and a net decrease of 43 branches – the lowest increase in the number of wards in the United States in several decades. States that reported the largest decreases in the number of wards/branches in 2017 included California (-41), Washington (-7), Colorado (-5), New Mexico (-5), Iowa (-4), and Alaska (-4). States that reported the largest increases in the number of wards/branches in 2017 included Utah (+41), Texas (+11), Arizona (+5), Idaho (+3), Nevada (+3), and Wyoming (+3). It is interesting to note that nearly all states with the most significant increases and decreases in the number of congregations were located in the western United States.

Membership growth rates have also continued to decelerate. Annual membership growth rates decreased to the lowest level reported by the Church since 1988 during 2016 (0.9%). To contrast, the Church generally reported annual membership growth rates of approximately 2.0% in the late 1990s and early 2000s, approximately 1.5% between the mid-2000s and early 2010s, and approximately 1.0% in the mid-2010s. Decreases in the number of convert baptisms due to the increasing influence of secularism on society, ineffective or inconsistent proselytism approaches, higher mortality rates among Latter-day Saints due to an aging LDS population, and reduced birth rates have all appeared to contribute to this noticeable decline in American membership growth during the twenty-first century.

Notwithstanding these difficulties, the creation of new stakes in the United States during 2017 occurred at a more rapid rate than most years within the past 15 years. The Church reported the organization of 25 new stakes in 2017, whereas there were 45 new stakes organized in 2016. To contrast, the Church has generally reported 15-20 new stakes for most years during the past 15 years. During 2017, the average number of wards per stake in the United States slightly declined from 7.76 to 7.67 due to stake growth rates outpacing congregational growth rates.

2. Lack of Progress in Mexico – Congregation Consolidations in Several Major Cities

The Church in Mexico reported a net decrease of 29 congregations in 2017 – the largest decline in the number of wards/branches ever reported in the history of the Church in Mexico. The Church reported 20 new wards/branches organized during the year, and 49 wards/branches that were discontinued. Nearly all of these 49 discontinued wards/branches were located in a handful of major cities (e.g. Ciudad Obregon, Culiacan, Juchitan area, Mazatlán, Puebla) where the Church consolidated congregations and stakes in order to organize congregations that had larger numbers of active members in order to better utilize meetinghouse space. Two stakes were also discontinued in Mexico during 2017 as part of these congregation consolidations. Lastly, membership growth rates declined to 1.6% in 2016 – the lowest annual membership growth rate in Mexico in over 30 years.

As mentioned last year in regards to stagnant growth experienced by the Church in 2016, these developments in 2017 point to serious concerns regarding member activity, convert retention, missionary activity, and leadership development – especially considering that the Church in Mexico operates 34 missions and its second largest missionary training center in the world. LDS activity rates in Mexico appear less than activity rates in Brazil – the other Latin American country with more than one million members on church records.

3. Congregational Decline Continues in South Korea

The Church in South Korea continues to experience congregational decline – a trend that has persisted for the last 18 years. The number of wards/branches decreased from an all-time high of 175 in 1999 to 108 in late 2017. During 2017, the Church in South Korea discontinued 12 wards/branches, one stake (Seoul Korea Dongdaemun), and one district (Hongseong). The decision to discontinue a dozen congregations, one stake, and one district appears attributed to the ongoing exodus of active Korean Latter-day Saint families to other countries (e.g. the United States, Australia, and China), few convert baptisms, and low birth rates. The Church has also focused on the organization of wards with larger numbers of active members to better meet the Church in Korea's administrative and member socialization needs. Furthermore, high real estate prices have also appeared to affect decisions to close smaller congregations in order to conserve costs for building maintenance and construction.

Nevertheless, these changes have resulted in the closure of five stakes in South Korea within the past five years – the largest restructuring of stakes in any country of the world since widespread stake consolidations occurred in Chile during the early 2000s. There are currently 12 stakes and five districts in South Korea.

4. Unprecedented Unit Consolidations in the Netherlands and Belgium

The Church closed seven of its 33 congregations in the Netherlands and five of its 16 congregations in Belgium during 2017. Most of these closed congregations were the only LDS congregations that operated within the cities where they were located. This unprecedented closure of 31% of the wards/branches in Belgium and 21% of wards/branches in the Netherlands was primarily attributed to decades of stagnant growth in both of these countries. Information obtained from returned missionaries and local members indicates that there has been no noticeable change in the number of active members within Belgium and the Netherlands in the past couple decades despite consistent missionary efforts. As a result, many smaller congregations were consolidated in order to create larger ones to provide local members with greater socialization opportunities. Furthermore, this decision suggests that stake and mission leaders may believe that there are no good prospects for growth in many of the cities where congregations closed due to decades of low mission productivity (e.g. converts baptized and retained, reactivation of less-active/inactive members). The decision to close the sole LDS congregations in so many cities indicates a significant retraction in the Church's scope of proselytism in both of these countries albeit some cities where congregations closed continue to have missionaries assigned. However, past experience in other nations indicates that consolidation of congregations often results in a reduction in the number of active members as some members become less active or inactive due to longer travel times to attend the nearest meetinghouse and challenges to socially integrate into their new congregations. Thus, it is also common for the Church to reestablish previously closed congregations years later in order to try to revitalize missionary work and growth.

5. No Nations Had First Stake Created in 2017

The Church did not organize its first stake in any additional nations during 2017. This marks the first year that the Church has not created its first stake in a country where no stakes operated since 2008. The primary reason that no additional countries had their first stakes organized in 2017 was due to the large number of countries where the Church organized its first stakes between 2009 and 2016. More specifically, the Church organized its first stakes in 25 countries/territories during this period. Member inactivity and shortages of local leadership appear primarily responsible for why most of the countries with the most members without a stake at present did not have a stake organized in 2017, such as Malaysia, Guyana, Belize, and Armenia.

6. Stagnant Growth in Europe

Overall, no measurable LDS growth appeared to occur in Europe during 2017. Only the Church in Albania has appeared to achieve significant progress within the past couple years. This lack of progress for the Church in Europe as a whole constitutes a serious concern for LDS growth trends, productivity, and the effectiveness of missionary activity in the region as the Church operates 45 missions within the Europe and Europe East Areas. Low member-missionary participation, secularism, nominal religious ties to traditional Christian denominations, challenges assimilating immigrant and refugee converts into congregations, and low self-sufficiency in European nations staffing their full-time missionary needs constitute significant barriers towards real growth. Nevertheless, reports from local members and recently returned missionaries indicate improvements in sacrament meeting attendance during the past several years for many congregations in some European countries such as in Germany.

7. LDS Growth in the Philippines Decelerates

After several consecutive years of improvements in member activity and real growth, the Church in the Philippines continued to experience a slowdown in this progress. The Church reported a net increase of only seven wards/branches during 2017, whereas there was a net increase of 10 wards/branches in 2016, and 20 wards/branches in 2015. Only a couple cities and towns have had an LDS presence established in 2017 compared to previous years. Emphasis from the Philippines Area Presidency regarding better utilization of meetinghouses and the organization of new congregations with larger numbers of active members appear primarily responsible in the slowdown in national outreach expansion and congregational growth.

8. Russia Vladivostok Mission Closes

The Church discontinued the Russia Vladivostok Mission in June and reassigned branches and volunteers (missionaries) to the Russia Novosibirsk Mission. The mission was among the more productive missions in Russia based upon recent reports by full-time missionaries although most branches in the mission strongly depended on foreign missionaries to properly operate. Additionally, two branches in the former area administered by the Russia Vladivostok Mission closed in Artyom and Nakhodka. The decision to close the mission appeared primarily influenced by fewer volunteers called to serve in Russia due to visa problems, increasing government restrictions on religious freedom, and low receptivity to LDS proselytism. However, it remains unclear why the Church decided to close the Russia Vladivostok Mission instead of other mission in Russia that are less productive.

9. LDS Growth in Australia and New Zealand Slows

After several consecutive years of increases in the number of congregations, the Church in Australia and New Zealand reported a net decline in the number of wards/branches during 2017. The Church reported a net decrease of one congregation in New Zealand and three congregations in Australia. This is the first time the Church has reported a decrease in the number of congregations in New Zealand since 2012 and Australia since 2008. Annual membership growth rates in New Zealand have remained steady during the past five years at approximately one percent, whereas annual membership growth rates in Australia have declined during this period from approximately three percent to approximately two percent.

10. Lack of Progress in Central Asia and Most Areas of Southeast Asia

The Church reported no significant LDS growth developments in most areas of the continental Eurasian landmass and in the archipelago nations of Southeast Asia. Provided in order from most populous to least populous, some noteworthy nations where very slow or stagnant growth occurred included Indonesia (no change in the number of congregations in 2017, most recent annual membership growth rate = 1.5%), Thailand (increase of one congregation in 2017, most recent annual membership growth rate = 2.6%), Malaysia (decrease of one congregation in 2017, most recent annual membership growth rate = 2.9%), Kazakhstan (no change in the number of congregations in 2017, most recent annual membership growth rate = -22.9%),^[2] Cambodia (decrease of one congregation in 2017, most recent annual membership growth rate = 2.7%), and Mongolia (no change in the number of congregations in 2017, most recent annual membership growth rate = 1.7%). With hundreds of millions of people in these regions of Asia, the lack of progress with the growth of the Church during 2017 is a discouraging development, especially considering that there have been previous periods of rapid growth in most of these nations.

Limitations

The subjective nature of determining which LDS missionary and church growth developments numbered among the most significant for 2017 constitutes the greatest limitation to this case study. Some developments have likely been unknown to missiology researchers due to limited access to LDS statistical data and a lack of reports from members, missionaries, and church leaders from particular areas of the world. Data obtained regarding the organization of new congregations/stakes and the expansion of national outreach was retrieved from official LDS sources such as [lds.org/maps](https://www.lds.org/maps). Local member, full-time missionary, and church leader reports also contributed to the findings in this case study. Official country-by-country membership data for year-end 2017 will not become available until April 2018. Some 2017 data regarding congregational growth and stake and district growth in this case study may be inaccurate due to lags in the Church updating congregational and organizational totals for the year 2017.

^[1] "Elder Bednar Dedicates New Missionary Training Center in Ghana," Mormon Newsroom – Ghana, 24 October 2017. <http://www.mormonnewsroom.com.gh/elder-bednar-dedicates-new-missionary-training-center-in-ghana>

^[2] This significant decline in membership appears attributed to the creation of a mission branch to service members who live outside of Astana and Almaty, and membership reported for this branch classified under the country of Turkey where the Central Eurasian Mission headquarters are located.