



International Resources for Latter-day Saints

# Overall LDS Growth Trend Case Studies

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## Top Ten Most Encouraging and Top Ten Most Discouraging Growth and Missionary Developments for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in 2018

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### Overview

This article reviews some of the most significant growth developments for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints during 2018. Previous annual reviews of the top ten most encouraging and top ten most discouraging growth and missionary developments for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have been posted on [cumorah.com](http://cumorah.com) since 2014 and can be accessed [here](#). The Church has not released any membership figures for the year 2018. Membership data for 2017 became available to the public in April 2018. Thus, all of the most recent membership data contained in this article is current as of year-end 2017.

### Top Ten Encouraging Church Growth and Missionary Developments

#### 1. Nineteen New Temples Announced

The Church announced 19 new temples during 2018. This is the second most temples ever announced in a single year after 1998 when there were 27 new temples announced. In April, the Church announced the following seven new temples:

- Salta, Argentina (third temple in Argentina)
- Bengaluru, India (first temple in India)
- Managua, Nicaragua (first temple in Nicaragua)
- Cagayan de Oro, Philippines (fifth temple in the Philippines)
- Layton, Utah (nineteenth temple in Utah)
- Richmond, Virginia (first temple in Virginia)
- A major city yet to be determined in Russia (first temple in Russia)

In October, the Church announced the following 12 new temples:

- Mendoza, Argentina (fourth temple in Argentina)
- Salvador, Brazil (eleventh temple in Brazil)
- Yuba City, California (eighth temple in California)
- Phnom Penh, Cambodia (first temple in Cambodia)

- Praia, Cape Verde (first temple in Cape Verde)
- Yigo, Guam (first temple in Guam and Micronesia subregion of Oceania)
- Puebla, Mexico (fourteenth temple in Mexico)
- Auckland, New Zealand (second temple in New Zealand)
- Lagos, Nigeria (second temple in Nigeria)
- Davao, Philippines (sixth temple in the Philippines)
- San Juan, Puerto Rico (first temple in Puerto Rico, third temple in the Caribbean)
- Washington County, Utah (twentieth temple in Utah)

The decision to announce many new temples appears attributed to several factors. First, the Church has reached a critical mass of membership, stakes, and congregations in several nations to warrant the construction of a temple for the first time. Thus, the announcement of most new temples in 2018 did not appear attributed to sudden, rapid growth in the Church, but instead steady growth over many years and decades in these areas of the world. Second, the Church has appeared to make a greater effort for temples to be more accessible to its international membership. For example, of the 19 new temples announced in 2018, only four were located in the continental United States where 43% of worldwide temples are located. Sixty-eight percent (68%) of the world's population now resides in a sovereign country where a temple is planned or in operation. In contrast, only 48% of the world's population lived in a country with a temple planned or in operation as of the beginning of 2018. However, most of this increase was due to the announcement of the Bengaluru India Temple as 17% of the world's population resides in India.

## 2. Rapid Growth Continues in West Africa

The Church continues to sustain rapid growth in most areas of West Africa where it maintains an official presence. There were several regional growth milestones and local growth developments that were significant during 2018. These developments include: the Church reaching 100 stakes in West Africa, continued rapid stake and congregational growth in Nigeria, rapid national outreach expansion and congregational growth in Liberia, good member activity and leadership development in Sierra Leone, continued national outreach expansion in Cote d'Ivoire, the organization of the first branches outside of the capital city in Togo, and the formation of a new district in Benin.

### 100th Stake Milestone Reached

During June of 2018, the Church in West Africa reached the milestone of 100 stakes. The number of stakes in West Africa has increased from one in 1988 to five in 1995, 19 in 2000, 22 in 2005, 27 in 2010, 59 in 2015, 75 in 2016, and 104 at year-end 2018. The Church in West Africa has experienced the most rapid stake growth of any region in the world within recent memory. The 100th stake milestone in West Africa did not appear to be artificially reached by haphazardly organizing new stakes with the bare minimum number of congregations or members for the sake of reaching an arbitrary milestone. For example, in late 2018 there were dozens of new stakes that appeared ready to be organized in the immediate future due to steady, rapid growth in most nations with an official Church presence. Rapid national outreach expansion has also occurred in West Africa during the past decade. Of the approximately 670 cities, towns, and villages in Sub-Saharan Africa with an official ward or branch, the first ward or branch was organized after 2009 in approximately 275 of these populated places, and 221 of these populated places are located in West Africa.

### Continued Rapid Stake and Congregational (i.e. Ward and Branch) Growth in Nigeria

The Church organized at least nine new stakes and two new districts in Nigeria during 2018. The year 2018 ties with the year 2015 in regards to the most stakes ever organized in Nigeria. There are now 54 stakes in Nigeria – the eighth most stakes of any country in the world. Convert retention and member activity rates have been good for the most part for the Church in Nigeria as evidenced by church membership in Nigeria ranking as only sixteenth in the world. Moreover, the Church in Nigeria continued to organize many new congregations in 2018. There was a net increase of approximately 50 congregations in Nigeria for the year – an 8% increase from year-end 2017. Even more impressive, the Church has continued to report rapid congregational growth in Nigeria in 2018 even though 2017 was a record-setting year for the Church in Nigeria as there was a net increase of 101 congregations. Congregational growth has occurred throughout the country. Additionally, there were congregations organized in areas where the Church has historically experienced slow growth rates such as in north-central Nigeria (e.g. Jos and Kaduna) and in areas recently reached by the Church such as Otukpo and Makurdi in Benue State. In Otukpo, the Church organized its first Idoma and Igala-speaking branches. Rapid proliferation of branches occurred in Mbaise, Nigeria where the Church's oldest branch in Nigeria is located in Umuelem. Sixteen additional cities, towns, or villages in Nigeria had the first ward or branch organized during 2018.

### Rapid Growth in Liberia – National Outreach Expansion and Congregational Growth

The Liberia Monrovia Mission has engaged in aggressive national outreach expansion within the last year primarily as a result of all four districts in Monrovia becoming stakes in 2016 and 2017.

Two previously unreached administrative counties had a branch established for the first time and one administrative county had its first member group organized. In January, the Church organized its first branch in Grand Bassa County in Buchanan. The Church organized members into a member group and assigned the first full-time missionaries to the city in November 2017. In

April, the Church organized its first branch in Bong County in Totota. There were 47 people in attendance for the creation of the new branch. In November, the Church organized its first member group in Gbarnga, Bong County. Gbarnga is the second most populous city in Liberia and is inhabited by at least 57,000 people. The mission reported 64 people in attendance for the first meeting of the Gbarnga Group. Full-time missionaries have been assigned to serve in Buchanan, Totola, and Gbarnga. There are now five cities with an official LDS ward or branch, and four cities with a member group.

The Church organized its first district outside of Monrovia in Kakata. The new district includes three branches in Kakata and had nearly 500 people attend the special conference to organize the new district in June. The first branch in Kakata was created in 2008. Local members report that there have been approximately 90 convert baptisms in the three branches during the past year. Convert retention rates in Kakata for one year after baptism are approximately 70%. Approximately half of members on church records appear to be active in Kakata.

Rapid congregational growth also occurred in Monrovia in 2018. There were seven new wards and two new branches organized in the metropolitan area – an increase in the number of congregations by 29% from the beginning of the year. The Monrovia Liberia Bushrod Island Stake has enough congregations to divide to create another stake – a significant accomplishment considering the stake was organized only two years ago. Church leaders report that congregations in Monrovia typically have 25-75 convert baptisms a year. Moderate convert retention rates occur in Monrovia.

### **Good Member Activity and Leadership Development in Sierra Leone**

Mission leaders in Sierra Leone report significant progress with leadership development and church attendance. For example, the Church held its first annual stake conference for the Kissy Sierra Leone Stake since it was organized in June of 2017. During the conference, there were more than 1,000 people in attendance and 71 men were presented to be ordained to the Melchizedek Priesthood. Given that newly organized stakes require a minimum of 100-120 Melchizedek Priesthood holders to operate, this development indicates significant growth among adult male members within the stake. Also, full-time missionaries reported in late 2018 that nearly all 90 members in the recently organized Kailahun Branch were active.

### **National Outreach Expansion in Cote d'Ivoire Continues**

The Church organized its first branches in several previously unreached cities during 2018, including Dabou, Guiberoua, and Zoukougbeu. Furthermore, member groups now operate in several additional cities including Fresco, Grand-Lahou, and Oume. Missionaries have also visited villages nearby larger cities and have taught and baptized converts in these locations for the first time such as Gagua and Zakaria. Trips by missionaries or mission leaders have occurred to locations like Dimbokro, Hire-Ouatta, and Toumodi although convert baptisms have not appeared to occur in these cities yet. There are now approximately 50 cities, towns, and villages in Cote d'Ivoire with an official ward or branch – nearly 10 times as many cities, towns, and villages as a decade earlier. Although membership growth rates significantly slowed in 2017 compared to 2016 (10.9% vs. 22.7%), the Church continues to open additional congregations in previously unreached cities and towns and reported a net increase of approximately 20 wards/branches (9.5% increase). The creation of the new Cote d'Ivoire Yamoussoukro Mission in July 2018 has appeared to help to continue outreach expansion. At most recent report, there are more than 45,500 Latter-day Saints in Cote d'Ivoire.

Several recently returned missionaries who served in Cote d'Ivoire report that convert retention rates have recently ranged from 50-80%. This is a significant accomplishment as Ivorian missions appear to baptize more than 2,000 converts annually. Missionaries currently serving in Cote d'Ivoire report that some missionaries baptize more than 100 converts during their missions and that many, if not most, wards and branches hold convert baptismal services on a weekly basis.

### **First Branches Organized in Togo Outside of Capital City**

The Church in Togo organized its first branches outside of the capital city of Lomé. Branches opened in the cities Kpalime and Tsevie. There are now three cities in Togo with an official ward or branch.

### **New District Organized in Benin**

The Church divided the Cotonou Benin Stake (organized in 2016) to create the Cocododji Benin District. The new district includes congregations in the west portion of the city and in Hilacondji. One new branch was organized in the country during the year.

## **3. Outreach Expansion Continues into Formerly Unreached Countries in West Africa – Senegal Opens to Missionary Work for the First Time**

### **Senegal**

Church leaders reported in early April that the first young, proselytizing missionaries were assigned to Senegal from the Cote

d'Ivoire Abidjan West Mission. Furthermore, the Dakar Branch divided in early April and the mission created a second branch in Dakar called the Parcelles Branch. The Church reported 66 members and one branch in Senegal as of year-end 2017. Mission leaders indicated that there are approximately 60 active members in Senegal as of April of 2018. Full-time missionaries noted in mid-2018 that there were a sizable number of individuals who were preparing to join the Church.

## **Mali**

The Church in Mali held its first convert baptismal service in February when four adults were baptized. Twelve additional converts were baptized in one weekend in May. Seven more converts were baptized in November. Missionaries serving in the Cote d'Ivoire Abidjan Mission have taught investigators by Skype although mission leader visits have frequently occurred. The Church is currently in the process of obtaining the legal registration requirements for full-time missionaries to serve in Mali. Local members reported in late 2018 that as many as 80 people attended church services in the two congregations (Bamako Branch and the Farako [Mountougoula] Group). Bamako and areas surrounding the city pertain to the Cote d'Ivoire Abidjan Mission, whereas the rest of the country is under the direct supervision of the Africa West Area. The Church organized the branch and member group in mid-2017.

## **Guinea**

Four members from the Conakry Branch in Guinea, West Africa recently began their missions at the Ghana MTC. These members previously served as the young men president, Sunday School first counselor, branch mission leader, and branch music director in the Conakry Branch before beginning full-time missionary service.<sup>[1]</sup> The Church organized its first branch in Guinea in 2017. Local members reported approximately 30 members in late 2017. Guinea is assigned to the Sierra Leone Freetown Mission. However, no full-time missionaries have ever been assigned to Guinea

## **Burkina Faso and The Gambia**

Area leadership reported that contact has been maintained with members of the Church in Burkina Faso and The Gambia.<sup>[2]</sup> However, both countries remain under the direct supervision of the Africa West Area and are not assigned to a mission. Member groups may operate in the most populous city of each nation.

## **4. Church Growth Progresses in China, India, Myanmar (Burma), and Vietnam**

### **Mainland China**

The Church reported eight districts in mainland China for People's Republic of China (PRC) members as of July 2018.<sup>[3]</sup> At the time, the Church operated an additional four districts for foreign members for a grand total of 12 districts in mainland China. Information on the location of these PRC districts is not released to the public due to the sensitive nature of the Church in China and the Church's commitment to follow national laws governing the separation of foreigners and local members in worship and church administration (see <https://www.lds.org/mormonsandchina>). The Church has not published information regarding the number of branches and member groups for PRC members, but there appear to be as many as 60-70 branches and perhaps scores of member groups that hold worship services in most cities inhabited by one million or more people. This is a significant accomplishment given that the first PRC branches were organized only back in 2004 and the Church in China has had to operate with minimal support from members and church leaders outside of the country due to local laws. There appears to be as many as 10,000 members of the Church in China – the vast majority of whom are PRC citizens.

### **Burma (Myanmar)**

Missionaries serving in Myanmar (Burma) during early 2018 reported that church attendance in the Yangon Branch significantly increased from 90 to over 150 during a 12-month period. The Church also organized its second branch in Yangon in mid-2018. The new branch operates in the North Dagon area of the city. There may be as many as 200 members in the two branches that operate in Yangon. Ten young, full-time missionaries are assigned to serve in Yangon. The Church assigned its first young, proselytizing missionaries to Yangon, Burma in February 2014 under the direction of the Thailand Bangkok Mission. The Church continues to classify its presence in the country as sensitive, but it appears that this classification may change in the near future given the presence of proselytizing missionaries. The translation of the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, and The Pearl of Great Price into Burmese is also underway. There are 56 million people who live in Burma.

### **Vietnam**

The Church in Vietnam reported several significant developments in 2018. Member groups now operate in additional cities outside of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, such as Chau Doc and Da Nang. Convert baptisms have occurred in additional locations, such as Tra Vinh. Additional member groups may operate in other cities located in the Mekong Delta such as Can Tho. Furthermore, in mid-2018 approximately 150 members attended the Hanoi Vietnam District conference, whereas approximately 300 members attended the Ho Chi Minh City Vietnam District conference. Active membership has nearly doubled

in the past three years as there were only approximately 250 active members in 2015 nationwide per reports from returned missionaries. In late 2018, there were 184 people who attended the Hanoi Vietnam District conference – an impressive number considering there were only 212 members on district records at the time. Also, a fourth branch was organized in Hanoi which is entirely led by a native Vietnamese branch presidency. There are now four branches in Hanoi and six branches in Ho Chi Minh City. Notwithstanding these improvements, member activity rate for the Church in Vietnam as a whole appear low as there were 2,306 members at year-end 2017.

## **India**

The Church organized a new branch in Vijayawada, India during February. Vijayawada is the first city in over a decade to have a branch organized where there was no branch or ward that operated previously. Missionaries reported that 80 people attended the meeting to create the new branch, including 35 investigators. The last time the Church in India organized a branch in a city where no wards or branches previously operated was in Kolar Gold Fields in 2007. Vijayawada is inhabited by 1.91 million people. Telugu is the primarily language spoken in the city. A fifth branch in Chennai was also organized in 2018 (Tembaram). Lastly, near the end of the year a new member group opened in the Janakpuri West area of New Delhi to help spur greater growth and reduce travel times for members.

## **5. Significant Progress in Central America**

The number of young men serving full-time missions and the number of members sealed to their spouses in Central America has nearly doubled within the past 10 years.<sup>[4]</sup> Significant improvements have occurred in regards to member activity and area self-sufficiency during this period despite membership growth rates in most countries not noticeably changing during this period. A significant increase in the number of stakes in Central America from 97 at year-end 2007 to 130 at year-end 2017 indicates good improvements in the strength of the Church in the region. Moreover, hundreds of surveys completed by local members in the region during April of 2018 note that most wards have between 80-200 active members. This indicates that the size and strength of many congregations in the region has significantly improved and is comparable to most areas of North America.

## **6. Significant Developments and Growth in Angola, Mozambique, and Uganda**

### **Angola**

The Church organized its first stake in Angola in late 2018 in Luanda with six wards and six branches. This development indicates good progress with the self-sufficiency of local church leadership and with member activity rates to warrant the organization of a stake despite few members in the country. Stakes outside the United States must have at least 1,900 members, usually at least 120 active, full-tithe paying Melchizedek Priesthood holders, and often five ward-sized congregations. With 2,458 members at year-end 2017, the Church in Angola also had hundreds of members who did not live in the Luanda area. Moreover, the Church reinstated the Huambo Branch in late February. Originally organized in May 2013, the branch closed in late 2015 and reverted back to a member group due to concerns with leadership development and its isolated location. The Huambo Branch had a full branch presidency led by local leaders when it was reinstated. The Angola Luanda Mission was organized in 2013 and currently has few missionaries assigned to serve within its boundaries primarily due to high living costs. The Church organized its first branch in Angola in 1996 and assigned the first full-time missionaries to serve in the country in 2008. Rapid membership growth has occurred as annual membership growth rates have exceeded 10% since 2009.

### **Mozambique**

Five new wards and branches were organized in 2018 – a 17.2% increase from year-end 2017. This finding suggests that many new converts have likely been retained, especially considering church membership in Mozambique rose by 15.2% in 2017 – the highest annual membership growth rate for the Church in the country since 2005. Furthermore, two additional cities recently had congregations organized: Dondo (branch) and Boane (member group). Additionally, average sacrament meeting attendance in the formerly small Marromeu Branch stands at 190, with 300 who attended a recent branch conference. The Church used to operate two branches in the city, but combined the branches in 2011 due to inactivity problems.

### **Uganda**

After years of essentially stagnant congregational growth, the Church organized four new branches in 2018. These branches were organized in Masaka (2), Busia (1), and Kamonkali (1). Moreover, the new branch in Kamonkali is the Church's first official branch to operate in a rural community, signaling a new era for the Church's establishment in Uganda where there are 41 million people albeit only 24% of the population lives in urban areas. There has appeared to be significant improvements in church attendance and convert retention in Uganda in the past 1-2 years. Historically, the Church in Uganda appears to have had one of the lowest convert retention and member activity rates in Sub-Saharan Africa as perhaps as few as 20-25% of members appear to regularly attend church. Mission leadership has reported that Church attendance has doubled or tripled in many, if not most, outlying mission branches in the past 1-2 years. Surprisingly, the removal of full-time missionaries from cities outside of the Kampala and Jinja area 1-2 years ago has appeared to be the primary catalyst for this acceleration in growth as local leaders have had to undertake missionary responsibilities themselves. Missionaries have returned to many of these cities once a sustained need for their assistance to teach and baptize new converts was established.



## 7. Stake Growth Accelerates in the Philippines

The Church organized six new stakes organized in the Philippines during 2018 – all of which have been from districts advancing into stakes. This is the largest net increase in the number of stakes in the Philippines since the year 2000. There are now 107 stakes and 68 districts in the Philippines. There are now 28 stakes in the Greater Metro Manila area – more than any other metropolitan area in all of Africa, Asia, Europe, or Oceania.

## 8. Georgian Translation of the Book of Mormon Completed and Second Branch Reestablished in Tbilisi

The Church published its Georgian translation of the Book of Mormon on the Church's official website, [lds.org](https://www.lds.org), in late 2018. The new translation can be found at: <https://www.lds.org/study/scriptures/bofm/title-page?lang=kat>. The committee established to oversee the translation of the Book of Mormon into Georgian was formed in early 2012. Furthermore, the Church reestablished a second branch in the Georgian capital of Tbilisi, the Temka Branch, and continues to operate a member group in Rustavi. Church leadership in both branches is now predominantly native Georgian, suggesting improvements with local leadership development despite slow growth for many years and major setbacks following war with Russia in 2008. There are now 268 members and two branches in the Republic of Georgia.

## 9. Congregational Growth Rates in Peru Reverse – Largest Number of New Wards/Branches Organized in a Single Year in Peru Since 2011

The rate of new ward creations in Peru significantly increased compared to recent years. Approximately one dozen new wards and branches were organized during the year and most of these congregations were created in the Lima Metropolitan area. Local members report that most wards in Lima have between 100-200 active members – a significant increase in comparison to one or two decades ago when most wards had between 50-125 active members. Also, two new stakes were organized in Lima during 2018. There are now 44 stakes in the Lima metropolitan area – more stakes than any other metropolitan area in the world outside of the United States.

## 10. Significant Growth Developments in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Republic of the Congo

### DR Congo

At least 15 new wards and branches were organized in 2018 in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DR Congo) – one of the highest net increases in the number of congregations ever reported by the Church in the DR Congo. Furthermore, two additional cities had branches organized for the first time – Boma and Kambove. Additionally, two new stakes were organized in Kinshasa in June. There are now 10 stakes in Kinshasa - the third most of any metropolitan area on the Afro-Eurasian landmass after Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire (12 stakes) and Accra, Ghana (11 stakes). The first stake in Kinshasa was created in 1996. Given the size and growth of the Church in the city and the region, Kinshasa may be a likely candidate for the headquarters of a new church administrative area for Central Africa should the Church decide to organize such an area.

### Republic of the Congo

The Church organized three new congregations in 2018. As a result, the year 2018 ties with the year 2017 as the year with the most congregations organized in a single year since 2001 when four new branches were organized. The Church in the Republic of Congo reported rapid membership and congregational growth during the 1990s and early 2000s. However, moderate membership growth and essentially stagnant congregational growth persisted between 2004 and 2010. The Church organized a separate mission in the Republic of the Congo in 2014.

## Top Ten Discouraging Church Growth and Missionary Developments

### 1. Church Membership Growth Slows to Lowest Rate since 1937; Number of Worldwide Convert Baptisms Declines to Lowest Levels since 1987

The Church in 2017 experienced its lowest membership growth rate since 1937 according to the [2017 Statistical Report](#). This report was released during the April 2018 General Conference. The Church reported 16,118,169 members at year-end 2017 (increase of 235,752 from 2016). This accounts for a mere 1.48% increase from year-end 2016. Furthermore, the number of converts baptized during 2017 (233,729) declined to a 30-year low. The last time there were as few converts baptized in a single year was in 1987 when there were 227,000 converts baptized albeit church membership was approximately 6.5 million at the time. Increase in children of record during 2017 (106,771) was also the lowest reported since 2007 when there was an increase of 93,698.

These statistics indicate several concerning trends. First, the birthrate in the Church continues to decrease to the point that natural increase may not be enough to maintain current membership born within the Church into the coming decades. President Dallin H. Oaks candidly noted in his most recent General Conference talk that the number of births to Latter-day Saint families is falling.<sup>[5]</sup> Less than half of Latter-day Saints born into the Church remain active into middle adulthood. Furthermore, fewer young adults are marrying within the Church and having more than three children. Second, the Church has become less efficient in terms of the number of converts baptized per missionary. Although there have been notable improvements in convert retention in many areas of the world during the past 15 years, the number of converts baptized has significantly decreased in most world regions such as in the United States, Latin America, developed nations in East Asia, and Eastern Europe. The average missionary baptized 8.03 converts in 1989, whereas in 2017 the average missionary baptized only 3.49 converts. Factors that appear to best account for these slowing membership growth rates include the stronger influence of secularism and materialism on Latter-day Saint membership in countries where the bulk of worldwide membership resides (e.g. the United States, Latin America, Europe) and the allocation of most of the Church's missionary resources to areas of the world that have become increasingly unproductive.

## 2. Net Decrease of Fourteen Missions as Nineteen Missions Close and Five New Missions Open; Number of Full-time Missionaries Serving Essentially Stagnant in the mid-60,000s

The Church closed 19 missions in 2018. Sixteen of these 19 closed missions were located in Europe and North America and included: Australia Sydney North, Bulgaria Sofia, California Modesto, California San Fernando, England London South, Greece Athens, Illinois Chicago West, México Ciudad Obregón, México Reynosa, Mississippi Jackson, New York New York South, Ohio Cleveland, Portugal Porto, România/Moldova, Russia Samara, Spain Málaga, Ukraine L'viv, Utah Logan, and Washington Federal Way. Only five new missions were organized in 2018, including: Brazil Rio de Janeiro South, Cote d'Ivoire Yamoussoukro, Nigeria Ibadan, Philippines Cabanatuan, and Zimbabwe Bulawayo. The Church also announced the closure of three Missionary Training Centers (MTCs) effective January 2019 in Chile, the Dominican Republic, and Spain. As a result of these MTC closures, the number of MTCs decreased from 15 to 12.

These developments point to efforts to redistribute the limited number of mission resources from less productive areas to more productive ones. Also, the Church has moved towards the consolidation of smaller MTCs and the renovation and expansion of other MTCs, likely in a move to conserve operating costs and provide more training resources at retained centers. However, the number of full-time missionaries serving today appears about 10,000 less than what was originally anticipated after the double-cohort "surge" of missionaries had ended. Furthermore, there has been no noticeable change in the number of full-time missionaries serving during the past two years. As a result, the Church must find better ways to allocate its limited number of missionaries serving despite expanding opportunities for growth. The reduced age for missionary service may also play a role in lower productivity for the Church's missions due to more limited life experience and the probable perception by many that missionaries lack credibility given their younger age.

## 3. Significant Ward/Branch and Stake Consolidations in Mexico

The Church reported unprecedented numbers of wards and stakes closed in Mexico during 2018. Of the 14 stakes discontinued worldwide during 2018, 11 were in Mexico. The year 2018 had the most discontinued stakes of any year in the Church since 2003 when 20 stakes were discontinued primarily in Latin America. Furthermore, this is the largest number of stakes discontinued in a single year of any country of the world since 2003 when there were 12 stakes discontinued in Chile. The number of wards and branches in Mexico declined from 1,987 at year-end 2017 to approximately 1,847 wards and branches at year-end 2018 – a decrease of 140 congregations, or 7.0% of wards/branches in Mexico in a single year. This is the largest decrease in the number of wards/branches ever reported by the Church in Mexico, and the largest annual decrease in the number of wards/branches ever reported in a single country in the history of the Church. Approximately two-thirds of wards and branches discontinued in Mexico during 2018 were located in the Mexico City metropolitan area. Other cities where significant congregation consolidations occurred during the year include Coatzacoalcas, Minatitlán, Monterrey, and Tampico. Most cities in Mexico have undergone stake and ward/branch restructuring and consolidations – a process that began in 2012 in Guadalajara, but became widespread in 2017. The Church's all-time high for the number of wards/branches in Mexico was set in 2016 at 2,016. Thus, the number of congregations has decreased by 8.4% since this all-time high was reached.

Similar and even more drastic ward/branch consolidations have occurred in the Church in the past two decades in other countries with low member activity rates per percentage decrease in the number of congregations. For example, the Church reported a net decrease of 137 congregations (16.1% annual decrease) in Chile in the year 2002. There was a net decrease of 121 congregations (9.8% annual decrease) in the Philippines in 2003, a net decrease of 116 congregations (6.2% annual decrease) in Brazil in 2000, and a net decrease of 82 congregations (9.8% annual decrease) in Peru in 2000. Ward/branch consolidations in 2018 in Mexico mark the first widespread efforts in Mexico to establish congregations with larger numbers of active members. In contrast, nearly all other Latin American countries underwent similar congregation consolidations primarily during the early to mid-2000s. Thus, these current changes in Mexico have occurred much later than in most countries in the region.

Congregation consolidations in Mexico have significantly affected congregational growth rates for the Church in the world as a whole during 2018. Based on the most recent information available, the number of wards/branches worldwide increased by only about 30 for 2018. This marks the lowest net increase in the number of wards/branches worldwide since 1953 when there was a net decrease of 35 wards/branches for the year. The Church also reported larger-than-normal net decreases in the number of congregations in several Latin American nations such as Venezuela (-15), Argentina (-12), and Chile (-11). Also, the Church

reported another lower-than-normal year for congregational growth in most nations where net increases in the number of congregations typically occur.

#### 4. Membership Growth Continues to Decelerate in the United States

The Church continues to report decelerating membership growth in the United States – the country with the most Latter-day Saints. In 2017, membership in the United States increased by only 0.75% - likely a 100-year low for membership growth in the country given historical averages with data available.<sup>[6]</sup> In contrast, the Church in the United States typically reported annual membership growth rates of 3-4% in the 1970s, 2-3% in the 1980s, 2% in the 1990s, 1.5-2.0% in the 2000s, and 1.0-1.5% in the 2010s. Congregational growth in the United States increased at a higher rate in 2018 compared to 2017 (0.35% versus 0.00%), but remains lower than typical years during the past decade (0.50-1.00%). Thus, growth trends in the United States have appeared to significantly affect worldwide growth rates given that year-end 2017 membership in the United States comprised 41.2% of membership in the worldwide Church. The Church's slowing membership growth in the United States appears attributed to a reduced birth rate among Latter-day Saint families, fewer converts joining the Church, compounding inactivity problems among youth and young adults during the past 2-3 decades, and an aging population among active members.

#### 5. Rapid Church Decline in Bulgaria during the Past Two Decades

Although not a development unique to 2018, the Church in Bulgaria has reported significant decline during the past two decades. This decline came to a greater head in 2018 when the Church discontinued the Bulgaria Sofia Mission and consolidated the mission with the Central Eurasian Mission. The Church continues to close branches in Bulgaria despite efforts over the past decade to strengthen these congregations and increase the standards for branches to operate. During 2018, branches in Sliven and Pleven closed and it is unclear whether member groups continue to operate in these locations. These branches were initially created in the late 1990s. There is no district in Bulgaria (although there used to be two districts in the country) and only seven branches currently operate nationwide (down from twenty-one in 2007). Church membership in Bulgaria has flat-lined at approximately 2,400 since 2013. Furthermore, the number of active members in Bulgaria has decreased by 80% since 2000 from 1,000 to approximately 200 today. The emigration of active members to Central and Western Europe or North America has been the primary reason why the number of active members in Bulgaria has so significantly decreased since 2000.

#### 6. Congregations, Stakes, and Districts Consolidate in Northern Germany

A major redistricting of congregations, stakes, and districts occurred in northern Germany during May of 2018. The Neumünster Germany Stake (organized in 1981) was discontinued, marking the first time that the Church has ever discontinued a German-speaking stake in Germany. Furthermore, the Church discontinued the Neubrandenburg Germany District (organized in 1994) and the Oldenburg Germany District (organized in 2007). There were a total of two wards and six branches that were also discontinued, including the only congregation in four cities: Eberswalde, Halberstadt, Prenzlau, and Wilhelmshaven. Reports from recently returned missionaries indicate that sacrament meeting attendance typically ranged from 10-30 for many years in most of the branches that were discontinued, whereas sacrament meeting attendance in wards that were closed has typically ranged from 80-90 in recent years. Thus, these changes do not appear to reflect any recent decreases in the number of active members, but instead long-term struggles with a lack of growth and concern regarding ways to better utilize limited resources and strengthen active members.

#### 7. Volunteers (Missionaries) Withdrawn From Turkey

The Church reported in April that all of its full-time volunteers were temporarily withdrawn from Turkey due to concerns with "heightened political tensions".<sup>[7]</sup> These individuals included 20 young men, 4 young women, and 5 senior couples. The official news release indicated that, with the exception of four volunteers who will return home due to nearing the end of their service, these individuals and couples will be temporarily reassigned to missions in Europe, Asia, and North America. The Church has assigned volunteers to conduct humanitarian work and proselytism efforts in Turkey since February 2012 and has experienced noticeable success particularly among non-Turks such as Iranians. Notable accomplishments for the Church in Turkey include church membership increasing from 293 at year-end 2011 to 547 at year-end 2017, and two new branches being organized in Gaziantep and Istanbul (2nd branch). As of year-end 2018, volunteers have not appeared to have returned to serve in Turkey. Turkey was previously one of the most populous predominantly Muslim nations to have official Church representatives assigned and involved in the teaching and preparation of individuals for church membership. Thus, mission outreach efforts in Turkey have appeared to cease in one of the most populous and influential nations in the region.

#### 8. Member Inactivity Problems in the Adriatic North Mission

Missionaries serving in the Adriatic North Mission reported in May of 2018 that only 200 people attend sacrament meetings held within the five countries that comprise the mission even though there are approximately 1,700 members who live within the mission boundaries. This indicates that the Adriatic North Mission experiences one of the lowest member activity rates in the world at approximately 10-15%. Stagnant or extremely slow membership growth and congregational growth rates have persisted for many years due to low receptivity and local leadership development challenges. The Church has yet to achieve any noticeable breakthroughs with reaching populations in the former Yugoslavia despite persistent proselytism efforts in several nations since the early 1990s.



## 9. Church Growth Slows in Australia

Membership growth in Australia slowed to 1.4% in 2017 – the lowest annual membership growth rate for the country since 2001 when membership decreased by 0.6%. The number of congregations decreased by six during the year – the largest decrease in the number of congregations since 2004. The Church had reported a period of accelerated growth between 2005 and 2015 as church membership increased from 111,098 to 146,443, the number of congregations increased from 285 to 309, and the number of stakes increased from 32 to 38. There were some years during this period when membership growth rates ranged from 3-5% - some of the most rapid membership growth reported by the Church in a developed country within recent memory.

## 10. Congregation Consolidations Continue in Venezuela

The Church in Venezuela continues to report steady decreases in the number of congregations and slowing membership growth rates. During 2018, the number of congregations decreased by approximately 15 and the annual membership growth rate for 2017 was 0.5% - the lowest ever reported by the Church in Venezuela since its initial establishment in the country in 1966. The Church also discontinued a stake in Venezuela for the first time in its history during 2018 – the San Cristóbal Venezuela Stake. The number of wards/branches has decreased from its all-time high of 283 in 2011 to 231 at present – an 18% decrease. Political and economic crisis appear primarily to blame for the Church's struggles with growth during the 2010s. Furthermore, many active members have fled the country to pursue better living conditions in neighboring nations. Notwithstanding these difficulties, the Church continues to operate its four Venezuelan missions and even organized one new stake in 2018 (Coro Venezuela Stake) albeit this new stake appeared to be organized primarily to reduce travel times for members rather than because of church growth in the area.

## Limitations

The subjective nature of determining which missionary and church growth developments numbered among the most significant for 2018 constitutes the greatest limitation to this article. Some developments have likely been unknown to the author due to limited access to statistical data and a lack of reports from members, missionaries, and church leaders from some areas of the world. Data obtained regarding the organization of new congregations/stakes and the expansion of national outreach was retrieved from official Church 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 2018 will likely not become available until April 2019 shortly after General Conference. Some 2018 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 2018.

[1] Amankwah, Samuel Agyei. "First Four Missionaries from Guinea Ready to Serve," [africawest.lds.org](https://africawest.lds.org/first-four-missionaries-from-guinea-ready-to-serve?lang=eng-afw). Accessed May 2018.

[2] Vinson, Terence M. "Area Presidency August Message." [Africawest.lds.org](https://africawest.lds.org/august-area-presidency-message). Accessed 31 December 2018.

[3] <http://ldschurchgrowth.blogspot.com/2018/07/eight-districts-in-mainland-china-for.html>

[4] Weaver, Sarah Jane. "'Central America Has a Bright Future,' Says Elder Quentin L. Cook." *Church News*. 4 April 2018. <https://www.lds.org/church/news/central-america-has-a-bright-future-says-elder-quentin-l-cook?lang=eng>

[5] Oaks, Dallin H. "Parents and Children." *Lds.org*, accessed 3 January 2019. <https://www.lds.org/general-conference/2018/10/parents-and-children?lang=eng>

[6] [https://cumorah.com/index.php?target=countries&cnt\\_res=2&wid=231&wid\\_state=&cmdfind=Search](https://cumorah.com/index.php?target=countries&cnt_res=2&wid=231&wid_state=&cmdfind=Search)

[7] "Volunteers in Turkey Temporarily Reassigned," *Mormon Newsroom*. 29 April 2018. <https://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/volunteers-in-turkey-temporarily-reassigned>