

The Law of the Harvest

Practical Principles of Effective Missionary Work

Section I. Chapter 01: Trends in LDS Church Growth

Trends in LDS Church Growth

The rapid growth of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has been a frequent and recurring theme in the secular media. The claim that the Church of Jesus Christ is the "world's fastest growing church" has been repeated in the Los Angeles Times,[4] Salt Lake Tribune,[5] Guardian,[6] and other media outlets,[7] while sources claiming that the LDS Church is the "fastest growing in the United States" are too numerous to chronicle. Sociologist Rodney Stark's 1984 projection has been widely cited: "A 50 percent per decade growth rate, which is actually lower than the rate each decade since World War II, will result in over 265 million members of the Church by 2080."[8] In Mormons in America, Claudia and Richard Bushman claimed, "Mormonism, one of the world's fastest-growing Christian religions, doubles its membership every 15 years."[9]

Latter-day Saint media have also lauded rapid church growth. The LDS Church News has described international LDS growth with a litany of superlatives, including "astronomic," "dynamic," "miraculous," and "spectacular." The claim that the LDS Church is the "fastest growing church in the United States" has been repeated in the Ensign and LDS Church News. In a recent General Conference, the Church of Jesus Christ was described not only as being prolific, but also as retaining and keeping active "a higher percentage of our members" than any other major church of which the speaker was aware.[10]

A closer examination of growth and retention data demonstrates that LDS growth trends have been widely overstated. Annual LDS growth has progressively declined from over 5 percent in the late 1980s to less than 3 percent from 2000 to 2005.[11] Since 1990, LDS missionaries have been challenged to double the number of baptisms, but instead the number of baptisms per missionary has halved. During this same period, other international missionary-oriented faiths have reported accelerating growth, including the Seventh-Day Adventists, Southern Baptists, Assemblies of God, and Evangelical (5.6 percent annual growth)[12] and Pentecostal churches (7.3 percent annual growth). For 2004, 241,239 LDS convert baptisms were reported, the lowest number of converts since 1987. The number of convert baptisms increased to 272,845 in 2006, but both missionary productivity and the total number of baptisms remained well below the levels of the early 1990s. Even more cause for concern is the fact that little of the growth that occurs is real: while nearly 80 percent of LDS convert baptisms occur outside of the United States, barely one in four international converts becomes an active or participating member of the Church. Natural LDS growth has also fallen as the LDS birth rate has progressively declined. LDS church membership has continued to increase, but the rate of growth has slowed considerably.

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A correct understanding of actual church growth, member activity, and convert retention is essential to effective missionary work. Statistics can provide benchmarks showing where we are now and where we have been. Most importantly, good data can help to identify areas where improvement is needed. While recognition alone does not guarantee progress, it is impossible to achieve meaningful improvement without awareness of present reality. Inflated claims that the LDS Church is the "fastest growing" or "highest retaining" church only stunt progress and fuel complacency. In recent years, both missionary productivity and member-missionary participation have declined even as claims of rapid LDS growth have received greater publicity. Most Latter-day Saints believe that the Church is growing very rapidly but have not initiated a gospel discussion with a single nonmember over the past year.

Declining LDS growth rates and continued low convert retention give us cause to reevaluate our programs and approaches to learn what has gone wrong with the harvest. Rationalizations for slow growth belie the fact that church growth has fallen far short of the potential in an age of unprecedented opportunities and receptivity. While there are significant external challenges, much of the key to improved church growth lies in the need for better planning, improved methodologies, wider outreach, more meaningful prebaptismal preparation, and better research and education.

Those whose faith is grounded in a true testimony of our Savior Jesus Christ and His restored Gospel will welcome data and objective analysis related to church growth. We must be able to distinguish between the perfect teachings of Christ and His prophets and the actual behaviors exhibited by members who are sometimes not so perfect. The restored gospel of Jesus Christ is true, and sociologic membership and growth data are a reflection of our faithfulness in implementing gospel principles.

The doctrines of the gospel are not on trial. We are on trial for how we respond to the gospel directives given by ancient and modern prophets. My intent is similar to that of George Barna when he wrote, "You cannot enjoy things unless you have a benchmark that shows how you've succeeded, and you cannot improve things unless you know how far and in what direction you need to go. I try to give people an accurate understanding of where things are and what the opportunities for growth are. I'm not asking people to like what the research shows, only to understand it and deal with it intelligently."[13]

U.S. Growth

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is growing faster than many large Christian faiths in the United States. The 1990-2000 Glenmary study reported that the LDS Church ranks twenty-third among the 149 participating denominations in overall U.S. growth rate, but first among denominations reporting over one million adherents.[14] This study was widely misreported in both the popular press and the LDS media as finding that the LDS church was the "fastest growing church in the United States."[15] Over the entire decade of 1990-2000, the Glenmary study reported 19 percent growth in LDS membership (1.76 percent per year, compounded): a solid figure for an increasingly secular Western nation, but hardly a dynamic one. The 2005 Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches reported that the LDS Church is now the fourth-largest denomination in the United States, up from fifth largest the year before, with a 2003 membership increase of 1.71 percent.[16] The 2007 Yearbook reported further deceleration of LDS growth to 1.63% in 2005.[17] The Glenmary study cautioned that the main findings are based solely upon the raw number of adherents "claimed by religious bodies," and no data on member activity or convert retention were examined by either the Glenmary or Yearbook authors.

The United States is home to less than 5 percent of the world's population, but nearly 50 percent of all LDS members. While the LDS Church is still one of the faster growing churches in the United States, unique contributors to North American LDS growth include family sizes slightly above the national average and the concentration of nearly one-third of all LDS missions in the United States.

International Growth

The LDS Church has fared comparatively less well outside of the United States. In 1996, Bennion and Young wrote: "Only on the Christianized or Westernized edges of the eastern hemisphere has the church established significant beachheads."[18] This is still largely true today. LDS sociologist Armand Mauss stated, "We like to think we are a worldwide church, but we're not. We are a hemisphere church ... Eighty-five percent of the LDS Church's membership lives in the western hemisphere ... We ought to be, I think, a little bit more humble about how we describe our present score geographically."[19] Another 10 percent of Latter-day Saints live in island nations such as the Philippines, the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, and Japan. Only 5 percent of all LDS members live in the contiguous continental landmass of Europe, Asia, and Africa that is home to 80 percent of the world's population.

While the LDS Church has grown internationally, it has experienced difficulty in leveraging its affluent, high-missionary sending U.S. population into committed international members on a level comparable with other outreach-oriented faiths. In 1960, there were approximately 60 million evangelicals in Western nations and 25 million in non-Western nations.[20] By 2000, there were 110 million evangelicals in Western nations and over 310 million in non-Western nations. Pentecostal Christianity, which originated in Topeka, Kansas, in 1901, now claims approximately 450 million adherents worldwide.[21] Latter-day Saints claim over 180 thousand members in Africa, while Pentecostal groups claim over 150 million adherents on the continent. The Assemblies of God Church, started with a revival movement in Topeka, Kansas, in 1914, reports over 35 million members worldwide, adding over 10,000 members each day, or approximately 3.6 million new members per year. [22] Lawrence Young noted: "The Mormon church, which was established nearly eighty-five years before the Assemblies of God, has only one-fifth as large of a presence in Latin America."[23]

The Seventh-Day Adventist Church was organized in 1849 and recently overtook the LDS Church with 13 million members, of whom virtually all are active. In 2004, the LDS Church added an average of 661 converts and 270 children of record each day. Seventh-Day Adventists were adding an average of 3,176 new members each day in 2000[24] and have experienced continued high growth since that time, adding between 900,000 and 1.2 million members each year. The Assemblies of God are growing at approximately 10 percent per year, or over three times the growth rate of the LDS Church, while the Seventh-Day Adventists report growth two to three times LDS rates at 5.6 to 8 percent per year. There are over 570,000 active Seventh-Day Adventists in Kenya alone. This is more than the official number of Latter-day Saints in all of continental Europe, Asia, and Africa combined, less than 200,000 of who are active.

Rodney Stark and Laurence Iannaccone noted: "Except for the years immediately following the prophetic disappointment of 1975, [Jehovah's] Witness growth has consistently outpaced Mormon growth. In 1954, there were 7.7 Mormons per Witness publisher. By 1994, this had been reduced to 1.9. Given that the Mormons are generally viewed as the world's most successful new religion and had about an 80-year start on the Witnesses, this is an astonishing achievement."[25] It is even more astonishing when we consider that there are far more participating Jehovah's Witnesses than Latter-day Saints, since Jehovah's Witness statistical reports consistently cite attendance rates far above official membership, while only a fraction of nominal LDS members are active. In 1935, there were 56,000 Jehovah's Witnesses worldwide and 746,384 Latter-day Saints. Since 1935, the number of active Jehovah's Witnesses has increased more than a hundredfold, while LDS membership has increased by a factor of twenty, with only a fraction of those members remaining active. After more than fifteen years of proselyting in Russia with the largest full-time missionary force of any denomination, LDS membership has risen to only 17,000, and only a minority of those members participates. The same period has seen the number of active Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia rise to over

140,000, with some 300,000 individuals attending conferences. There are more active Jehovah's Witnesses in the countries of Georgia or Armenia than active Latter-day Saints in all of Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and Russia together. There are over 1.4 million proselytizing Jehovah's Witnesses in Europe and 2.7 million who attend Jehovah's Witness conferences, compared to fewer than 100,000 active Latter-day Saints in all of Europe, including the United Kingdom. One Austrian saint observed: "A friend of mine is a Jehovah's Witness ... When he came to Vienna with his family at age eight, there were forty Jehovah's Witnesses in Vienna. That was all for Austria. Now, twenty years later, there are 20,000 active Jehovah's Witnesses. Twenty years ago we had 400 LDS members in Vienna and some more in other cities of Austria, and now, we only have about 750 in Vienna. Whenever we talk about missionary work in Church, we always hear those saying 'it's so hard, and the Austrians are an irreligious people.' That cannot be entirely true, or else the Jehovah's Witnesses would not have had such a growth!"

While still growing faster than stagnant mainline churches, the LDS Church is one of the slowest growing outreach-oriented Christian faiths in most of Eastern Europe, the former USSR, and India and has one of the lowest rates of membership in Africa. Latter-day Saints are not competing with other denominations, yet these figures can provide a glimpse of the possibilities and a context in which to evaluate our own growth.

Increasing Opportunity, Declining Growth

The average missionary in 1989 brought 8 people into the church, while the mean number of annual baptisms per missionary averaged between 6.0 and 6.5 between 1985 and 1999. From 2000 to 2004, the average missionary experienced 4.5 convert baptisms. When one accounts for actual activity and retention rates, approximately 1.2 of the 4.5 converts baptized annually by the typical missionary will remain active. LDS annual growth has declined from 5 percent in the late 1980s to less than 3 percent from 2000 to the present, even though the absolute number of missionaries has considerably increased over this period. The sharp decline in LDS growth rates occurred even at times with record numbers of missionaries serving. This declining growth comes in spite of unprecedented increase in opportunity. From 1990 to 2000, the LDS Church opened an additional fifty-nine nations to proselyting. Opportunities for growth are time-sensitive. Brigham Young University sociologist James T. Duke conclude from extensive research: "I believe the insight to be gained is that when conditions are ripe, as they were in Mexico, the Philippines, Brazil, Chile, and all of Central America in recent years, we must strike while the iron is hot and do our best job to convert many people. We also must realize that these favorable conditions do not last forever and that the rate of conversions will decline in later years, as seems to be the case in Mexico, Japan, South Korea, and the United States. If a sizable membership can be built up during the good years, the Church will be able to maintain a strong membership when conditions are less favorable."[26]

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