

The Law of the Harvest

Practical Principles of Effective Missionary Work

Section I. Chapter 02: Natural Growth

Children of Record

Bennion and Young noted, "Although Mormons reject infant baptism, they count as members any 'children of record' blessed and named soon after birth. Thus unbaptized children of members (until age eight) make up an important share of the LDS population (about 15 percent among Americans)."[27] Demographic data contradict the popular belief that the LDS Church is growing rapidly because of large families. Annual LDS statistical report data show that increase of LDS children of record was 98,870 in 2004 and 99,457 in 2003 (0.8 percent of membership).[28] This represents a modest rebound from lower increases in prior years that had bottomed out with 69,522 new members of record in 2001 (0.6 percent of membership), which was lower than any increase of children of record reported in since 1973. In 1982, the increase in LDS children of record was 124,000. Since then the increase of children of record has progressively declined in spite of increasing LDS membership in high birthrate regions of the world, particularly Latin America. Recent years demonstrate annual increases of LDS children of record between 0.6 percent and 0.8 percent of overall membership.

The increase of children of record is not the same as a birthrate but provides the only public indicator of LDS growth through births. The annual increase of LDS children of record between 0.61 and 0.82 per 100 members weigh in between 28 and 37 percent of the average world birthrate of 2.18 per 100,[29] corroborating LDS activity estimates in the low thirtieth percentiles. Per capita figures for LDS children of record relative to total membership weigh in at 40 to 52 percent of the annual per capita birthrate in communist China (1.57 births per 100), 50 to 68 percent of that in a stagnant industrial nation failing to reproduce itself (France 1.168 births per 100), one-fifth that of Pakistan (3.43 births per 100), and one-sixth to one-eighth of the birthrate in the Gaza Strip or Mali (4.5 to 5.0 births per 100).[30] These statistics demonstrate that we are facing a crisis of low natural LDS growth.

The category of "baptisms of children of record" (children on membership rolls who go on to be baptized) was dropped from LDS statistical reports after 1997. A review of statistics from years when both figures were published demonstrates that the number of children of record baptized is always significantly less than the increase of children of record. The unreported discrepancy between the increase of children of record and those that go on to baptism suggests that the crisis of low natural LDS growth is even more severe than that suggested by children of record statistics alone.

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The Church reported 11,315 U.S. units at year-end 1999. The 2000 Glenmary study reported data from 11,515 U.S. LDS congregations, so we can be confident that Glenmary investigators were given membership figures from virtually all U.S. congregations. The study's definition of "adherents" included members age fourteen and up, regardless of activity status. The Glenmary study found 4,224,026 individuals age fourteen and above on U.S. LDS congregational rolls, compared to 5,113,409 U.S. members at year-end 1999, leaving 889,383 LDS members (17.9 percent of the total) unaccounted.[31] This difference presumably represents unbaptized children of record under age eight and baptized youth between ages eight and thirteen. Bennion and Young's figure of children of record representing 15 percent of LDS members in the early 1990s would lead us to expect approximately 765,000 children of record in the United States, leaving only 124,000 membership records for the entire number of baptized youth between ages eight and thirteen -- a number which seems unrealistically low. Data harmonization suggests that the number of U.S. children of record has declined to closer to 10 percent of total membership. The lack of any additional buffer suggests that Glenmary statistics almost certainly include LDS "lost address file" members not affiliated with any congregation, although it is not clear why this is the case for a study reportedly based on congregational data alone.

The Decline of Natural Growth

At least three major factors have contributed to low rates of natural LDS growth. First, fractional annual proportional increases in LDS children of record relative to growth rates of healthy populations around the world correlate closely with low activity rates, suggesting that a large majority of inactive members rear their children outside of the Church.

Second, many active international members marry outside the Church, while many others remain unmarried. The vast majority

of children in part-member homes are brought up outside of the Church. The Encyclopedia of Mormonism documents: "The percentage of adults in a temple marriage varies from about 45 percent in Utah to less than 2 percent in Mexico and Central America ... For all of South America, with 2.25 million members, less than 1.8% of the total adult membership has been married in the temple."[32] Sociologist Tim Heaton noted that Latter-day Saints in Mexico have fewer children than the national average.[33] The construction of many small temples worldwide may positively impact temple marriage and sealing rates, yet the problems of few potential worthy marriage partners and low activity remain.

Finally, birthrates have declined considerably among the core North American LDS membership. The average active U.S. LDS family has three children, just one more than the average non-LDS family. A fertility rate of 2.1 children per couple is required for population replacement. With only 22 percent of Latter-day Saints born to U.S. active families remaining active lifelong and another 44 percent returning to the Church after periods of inactivity,[34] the natural growth of Latter-day Saints in the United States appears to be below the level required to sustain a stable population.

U.S. Latter-day Saints with temple marriages have higher fertility rates than those with civil marriages, and those who attend the temple more regularly have larger families than those who attend less regularly.[35] Dr. Heaton documented that the U.S. LDS divorce rate lags only 5 to 10 percent behind the 50 percent national average.[36] Demographic data demonstrate that fewer Latter-day Saints follow the counsel of LDS prophets that mothers should remain at home with their children in most cases. Brigham Young University sociologist Marie Cornwall observed of U.S. Latter-day Saint women: "As a group, they have one more child than the national average, [and] are in the labor force at the same rate as other women but [are] more likely to be in low-paying jobs."[37]

Tim Heaton reported that rates of contraceptive use between U.S. LDS and non-LDS populations are exactly the same at 80.5 percent.[38] Dr. Robert Romney observed that at least 80 percent of young women seen at the Brigham Young University health center for premarital exams request some form of contraception.[39] Although most Mormons have traditionally believed that the purpose of the nineteenth century era of polygamy was to "raise up posterity," most LDS couples today choose to limit their families to three children or fewer under far more prosperous circumstances. While birth control was heavily discouraged by LDS Church leaders during the 1960s and 1970s, this stance has been de-emphasized in recent years.

The decrease from 60,850 full-time missionaries in 2001 to 51,067 in 2004 reflects both a decline in LDS natural growth, with proportionately fewer young men and women arriving at mission age, and higher standards under the "raising the bar" program. The decrease in children of record provides us with a glimpse into the future of the missionary force. While missionary numbers are expected to rebound in future years, the rate of increase will be much slower than in the past when Latter-day Saints had larger families. Falling LDS birthrates are therefore a primary cause not only of the decline in children of record, but also of convert-based LDS growth. Since approximately 80 percent of all LDS missionaries come from North America, current trends suggest that increased recruitment of new converts and international members will be necessary to meaningfully augment the LDS missionary force in coming years.

[27] Bennion, Lowell C. and Lawrence Young, "The Uncertain Dynamics of LDS Expansion, 1950-2020," Dialogue, Spring 1996: 8-32.
[28] Annual LDS statistical reports are published in the General Conference edition of the Ensign magazine in May of each year, library.lds.org.
[29] The State of the World's Children 2001: Early Childhood, New York: United Nations Publication, 2000, 116.
[30] U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, 2001-2006 CIA World Factbook, www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook.
[31] "Religious Congregations & Membership: 2000," Glenmary Research Center, September 20, 2002, www.glenmary.org.
[32] Ludlow, Daniel H., ed., Encyclopedia of Mormonism, New York: McMillen, 1992, vol. 4:1531-32.
[33] Heaton, Tim B., "Religious Influences on Mormon Fertility: Cross-National Comparisons," in James T. Duke, ed., Latter-day Social Life, Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, 1998, 425-440.
[34] Albrecht, Stan L., "The Consequential Dimension of Mormon Religiosity," in James T. Duke, ed., Latter-day Saint Social Life, Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, 1998, 253-292.
[35] Duke, James T., "Latter-day Saints in a Secular World: What We Have Learned about Latter-day Saints from Social Research," Martin B. Hickman 1999 Lecture, Brigham Young University College of Family, Home, and Social Sciences, March 4, 1999, fhss.byu.edu/adm/hickman_lecture.htm.
[36] Moore, Carrie A., "Statistics Offer Good and Bad News for LDS," Deseret News, August 11, 2002.
[37] Stack, Peggy Fletcher, "How Do LDS Women Live Their Lives?" Salt Lake Tribune, October 5, 2002.
[38] Heaton, Timothy, "Dealing with Demographics," 2002 FAIR Conference, www.fairlds.org/pubs/conf/2002HeaT.html.
[39] Farnsworth, Kira, "LDS Church Not Opposed to Birth Control," BYU Newsnet, January 21, 2004, newsnet.byu.edu.