

The Law of the Harvest

Practical Principles of Effective Missionary Work

Section I. Chapter 03: Congregational Growth

Increase in Congregations as an Indicator of Growth

Increase in congregations is one of the best indicators of church growth. Church planter James Moss wrote: "It has long been accepted that beginning new churches is a requirement for long-term numerical growth for a regional body. This is a simple truth that can be born out by study after study."[40] Protestant church planting guru C. Peter Wagner explained: "New churches are a key to outreach. I have affirmed time and again that planting new churches enhances evangelism. Much research has been done to confirm this ... Lyle Schaller, who is highly regarded as perhaps the most knowledgeable person in America about church dynamics, wrote this: 'Every denomination reporting an increase in [active] membership reports an increase in the number of congregations. Every denomination reporting an increase in the total number of congregations reports an increase in members. Every denomination reporting a decrease in membership reports a decrease in congregations. Every denomination reporting a decrease in congregations reports a decrease in members.' This is a highly significant finding.[41] Churches that are growing rapidly also report large increases in the number of congregations, and churches which are growing slowly report smaller increases in the number of congregations. Schaller is referring to denominations that count only active members. Lyle Schaller observed: 'The first step in developing a denominational strategy for church growth should be to organize new congregations.'"

Trends in LDS Congregational Growth

Congregational growth trends are particularly important in evaluating LDS growth, since LDS membership statistics have no obligatory correlation with member activity, and new congregations require active, participating members to be sustainable. From 1999 to 2004, the number of LDS wards and branches rose from 25,793 to 26,670 (+3.4 percent), and the number of LDS stakes increased from 2,542 to 2,665 (+4.8 percent). This represents an annual increase of 0.68 percent for wards and branches and 0.97 percent for stakes -- both figures well below world population growth rates. This finding of low increases in the number of church units is not an isolated anomaly, but the continuation of a pattern of declining unit growth rates over the past decade. Between 1994 and 2004, 4,838 new LDS wards and branches were organized, for an average of just 1.32 new congregations created worldwide each day. Those who insist that the low number of new LDS units being formed is a result of policy changes influencing unit size are uninformed: the average number of LDS members per unit has remained relatively stable over long periods, going from 439 per unit in 1973 to 432 in 1991 and 437 in 2001.

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Growth of LDS Stakes

The 1980 Ensign projected growth from 4,625,000 members in 1980 to 11,142,000 members in 2000 and from 1,190 stakes in 1980 to 3,600 in 2000.[42] While the number of members in 2000 came close to the projected value, there were only 2,602 LDS stakes worldwide at the end of 2002. New stakes of 2,410 were projected, but only 1,412 stakes were formed. Of all of the officially reported church growth statistics, the number of stakes is the only indicator with any obligatory relationship to actual member participation or activity, since stakes cannot be formed without a requisite number of active Melchizedek Priesthood holders.

The low number of congregations and stakes being formed reflects fractional retention of converts. President Gordon B. Hinckley noted in 1997: "Last year there were 321,385 converts comprised of men, women, and children. This is a large enough number, and then some, in one single year to constitute 100 new stakes of Zion."[43] He then cited the imperative need to help new converts "find their way." Certainly it would be a large enough number of converts, if they became or remained active members. Yet a net of just 119 new stakes were formed between year-end 2000 and 2005 (23.8/year). The fact that stakes have been formed at a rate of less than one hundred every four years rather than one hundred or more each year demonstrates that only a fraction of converts become participating members. Respected LDS sociologist Dr. Armand Mauss observed: "The key to the church's future growth will be at least as much a function of retention as conversion. While our numbers continue to grow, the rate at which we are creating new stakes has noticeably slowed down. That is a clear indication of a retention problem."[44]

Congregational Growth in Perspective

At year-end 2004, the LDS Church reported 12,256,000 nominal members in 26,670 congregations (460 members per congregation). For the same year, the Seventh-day Adventist Church had 12,894,000 baptized adult members in 117,020 Sabbath Schools (congregations) meeting in 53,502 churches (110 members per congregation),[45] while the 6.5 million Jehovah's Witnesses met in 96,894 congregations (67 members per congregation).[46]

On paper, it would appear that the LDS Church must have very large congregations compared to these other faiths. Yet the average worldwide weekly congregational attendance for all three faiths is very similar, in the range of 120 to 150 individuals. The discrepancies result from widely different membership policies. The Jehovah's Witnesses, who count as members only those who participate regularly in member-missionary work, enjoy a weekly attendance nearly double their official membership figures, while Seventh-day Adventists count as members only active, baptized adults and also experience attendance in excess of membership. Latter-day Saints membership figures convey nothing about member participation, and only a fraction of members are active.

While membership statistics imply that the LDS Church is nearly as large as the Adventist church and nearly twice as large as the Jehovah's Witness organization, congregational data convey the reality that membership figures do not. The latter two organizations are both far larger in terms of the total number of committed, active, and contributing members than the LDS Church.

Although all three denominations experience considerable variations in congregational size, very similar congregational attendance averages in spite of widely different membership reporting practices validate the concept that transdenominational sociologic and organizational principles govern the congregational dynamics of faiths that rely heavily on lay member participation.

Through the application of basic church planting principles, many Protestant and evangelical denominations have experienced exponential and sustained international growth. The Seventh-day Adventist Church experienced a 70 percent increase in the number of congregations worldwide in the course of its explosive growth during the decade of the 1990s and is on track to more than match that rate in the current decade.[47] K. P. Yohannan's Protestant Gospel For Asia group organizes over six new congregations in India and South Asia each day, over twice as many as the LDS Church organizes anywhere in the world.[48] The number of Southern Baptist congregations among some interior peoples of India, Cambodia, and many other nations has almost doubled every year since 1993.[49] Over 1,000 new churches were organized among one interior Indian people in 2000 alone. Causes of current low LDS congregational growth rates and opportunities for improving congregational growth are discussed in detail in the chapter on church planting.

[40] Moss, James W., Sr., "Contrasting Church Renewal and Church Planting," People Spots, 4/1 (January 2001): 12.
[41] Wagner, C. Peter, Church Planting for a Greater Harvest, Ventura, CA,: Regal Books, 1990.
[42] "A Statistical Profile: What Numbers Tell Us about Ourselves," Ensign, April 1980: 15.
[43] Hinckley, Gordon B., "Converts and Young Men," Ensign, May 1997.
[44] Stack, Peggy Fletcher, "Growing LDS Church Goes Global," Salt Lake Tribune, February 10, 1996.
[45] 2003 Seventh-day Adventist Statistical Report, www.adventiststatistics.org.
[46] Jehovah's Witnesses: Membership and Publishing Statistics, 2004, www.jw-media.org/people/statistics.htm.
[47] "Number of Adventist Congregations Worldwide Increases 70 Percent, Says Office of Global Mission," Adventist News Network, October 24, 2000, news.adventist.org.
[48] Yohannan, K. P., Revolution in World Missions, Carrollton, TX: GFA Books, 2000. See also www.gfa.org.
[49] Garrison, David, Church Planting Movements, Southern Baptist International Mission Board, October 1999, www.imb.org/CPM/default.htm.