

The Law of the Harvest

Practical Principles of Effective Missionary Work

Section I. Chapter 04: Trends in LDS Member Activity and Convert Retention

Member Activity and Convert Retention Rates Today

The number of Latter-day Saints who attend church, or even identify themselves as Latter-day Saints, is a more meaningful indicator of church growth and strength than total membership figures. While any member who attends church at least once in a quarter is officially considered "active," no official reports of LDS activity rates are published. The Encyclopedia of Mormonism notes: "Attendance at sacrament meeting varies substantially. Canada, the South Pacific, and the United States average between 40 percent and 50 percent. Europe and Africa average about 35 percent. Asia and Latin America have weekly attendance rates of about 25 percent."[50] By multiplying the number of members in each region by the regional activity rate and summating the data, one comes up with a worldwide LDS activity rate of 35 percent, or approximately 4 million individuals. An Associated Press article observed: "While the church doesn't release statistics on church activity rates, some research suggests participation in the church is as low as 30 percent."[51]

Sociologist Armand Mauss stated that "75 percent of foreign [LDS] converts are not attending church within a year of conversion. In the United States, 50 percent of the converts fail to attend after a year."[52] This postbaptismal attrition is heavily front-loaded. Elder Dallin H. Oaks noted that "among those converts who fall away, attrition is sharpest in the two months after baptism,"[53] and missionaries report being told in the MTC that up to 80 percent of inactivity occurs within two months of baptism. In some parts of Latin America, 30 to 40 percent of new converts do not even return to church after baptism to be confirmed.[54] In contrast, Adventist News Network reported in 2001 that worldwide Seventh-day Adventist member retention rates had fallen from 81 percent in previous years to a still very impressive 78 percent at present.[55]

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United States

Studies investigating church growth through independent parameters document that real LDS growth is modest, with high attrition. Christian researcher George Barna issued the dunning declaration: "Turnover in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints appears to be the highest of any church in the U.S."[56] The CUNY American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) queried the self-identified religious affiliation of a large cohort of U.S. citizens in 1990 and 2001.[57] The study found that the LDS Church had one of the highest turnover rates of any U.S. faith. The CUNY authors observe: "Some groups such as Mormons ... appear to attract a large number of converts ('in-switchers'), but also nearly as large a number of apostates ('out-switchers')." Because of high turnover, the actual growth rate in the number of Americans identifying themselves as Latter-day Saints between 1990 and 2001 was found to be similar to the overall population growth rate, for a proportional net growth rate of close to zero. The study found that just fewer than 2.8 million Americans age eighteen and over identified themselves as Latter-day Saints. There are 5.3 million U.S. citizens officially on LDS membership rolls, although this includes a declining percentage of minors under age eighteen as well as many inactive and disengaged adults. In contrast, the ARIS survey reported that 1.33 million adults in the U.S. identify themselves as Jehovah's Witnesses, while the Jehovah's Witnesses claim only 980,000 U.S. members. An independent survey conducted by USA Today in March 2002 demonstrated similar findings, with the percentage of individuals identifying themselves as Latter-day Saints weighing in well below official membership percentages in almost every state.58 While nominally identifying oneself as a Latter-day Saint does not necessarily imply church activity, it would be difficult to claim that those on the rolls who do not identify themselves as Latter-day Saints are active or contributing members.

Canada

The 2001 Canadian census reported a 3.9 percent increase in self-identified LDS members from 100,700 in 1991 to 104,750 in 2001, compared to an official membership increase of 25 percent (125,000 to 156,575) from 1990 to 2000.[59] During this same ten-year period, the number of Seventh-Day Adventists identified on the census increased by 20.4 percent, and the Evangelical Missionary Church increased self-identified membership by 48.4 percent. The 3.9 percent LDS increase over an entire decade represents an annual increase of less than 0.4 percent. This is less than half of the annual Canadian growth rate of 0.96 percent, meaning that self-identified LDS membership is losing ground in proportion to the total Canadian population.

Only 67 percent of Canadian members identify themselves as Latter-day Saints on the census (a significant decline from 80 percent in 1991), but this rate is remarkably high compared to the international trends noted in other nations. Religious data on the Canadian census come from random proportional sampling, with only one household in five being sent the long form that included questions on religious affiliation. This sampled data is extrapolated to the entire population and is therefore not as precise as other national censuses that query every individual. In spite of the limitations, the Canadian census suggests declining rates of self-identified religious affiliation among nominal Latter-day Saints and growth rates well below that of the overall population.

Latin America

Mexico, Brazil, and Chile, the countries with the second, third, and fourth largest LDS populations, all demonstrate trends of low member activity and poor convert retention. National censuses have provided reality checks that contrast markedly with official LDS membership figures. The Arizona Republic reported on the 2000 Mexican census: "The current Mexican Mormon Church ... claims just under 850,000 members ... However, figures from the 2000 Mexican census, based on self-reported data, place [self-identified] membership at 205,229."[60] The 24 percent LDS self-identification rate derived from a comparison of the 2000 Mexican Census to official membership data is comparable to the 25 percent activity rate for Latin America cited in the Encyclopedia of Mormonism, although religious self-identification does not necessarily imply church activity.

The 2000 Brazilian census reported that 199,645 individuals identified the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as their faith of preference, or 26.8 percent of the 743,182 claimed by the Church at year-end 1999.[61] These data harmonize with Peggy Fletcher Stack's report: "According to several Brazilian leaders, the LDS activity rate here is between 25 percent and 35 percent. That means for every three or four converts, only one stays."[62]

The 2002 Chilean census reported that 103,735 Chileans over age fifteen (0.92 percent of the population) identified themselves as Mormons or Latter-day Saints.[63] In spite of strong encouragement from the pulpit to LDS members to identify their religious affiliation on the census, just fewer than 20 percent of the 520,202 individuals claimed on official LDS membership rolls identified themselves as Latter-day Saints. Individuals under age fifteen (who were not asked for religious affiliation) represented 25.7 percent of the Chilean population. However, the Church has a solid base among young people who represent the nation's future. As for the population of youth ages fifteen to twenty-nine, 1.1 percent identify themselves as Latter-day Saints, compared to only 0.5 percent of the population over age 75. Brigham Young University professor Ted Lyon, who served as a Chilean mission president and the president of the Chilean Missionary Training Center, noted that of the nominal 535,000 Latter-day Saints in Chile, only 57,000 attend church on an average week[61]. More Latter-day Saints attend church each week in Provo, Utah, than in the entire nation of Chile.

The problem of inactivity reaches crisis levels across Latin America. Deseret News religion editor Carrie Moore wrote: "Although the church does not provide statistics on activity rates, the number of inactive members in some areas eventually outpaced those who were active by a substantial margin."[65] Brigham Young University Latin American Studies professor Mark Grover acknowledged "a wide gap between the number of people baptized and the number attending church." Former Brazilian mission president Brad Shepherd observed: "Before we arrived (in 1996) there had been a lot of youth baptized without family support. While some of them have gone on and done great things, many others had slipped away and retaining current members was a challenge. We spent a lot of time working on retention and reactivation. In fact, there was time spent every week by missionaries just devoted to that effort. The result was kind of a mixed bag with reactivation. There were some great success stories and others were very challenging."[66]

Rushed baptism of inadequately prepared investigators represents a major reason for low retention rates in Latin America. Dr. Lyon noted that low activity rates arose at least in part because "too many people were baptized before they had made the commitments to pay tithing or to attend church."[67] John Hawkins, who has studied LDS growth in Guatemala, noted: "There has, in the past, been this notion (among missionaries) that if they are not willing to commit to baptism in two weeks, you drop them and keep going ... Members found that oppressive because conversions were happening so rapidly that once the missionaries moved on to other areas, the people they baptized were left without a support system and the local members were overloaded trying to keep up with all the new converts. Many simply gave up and waited to see 'who the good ones were' that would come to church on their own and make a contribution without a lot of nurturing from the congregation."[68]

Growing awareness of low retention has led to some changes. Deseret News Reporter Tad Walch wrote: "In April 1999, President Hinckley visited Chile and delivered a strong message to missionaries on their new area of focus. 'The days are past, the days are gone, the days are no longer here when we will baptize hundreds of thousands of people in Chile and then they will drift away from the church,' President Hinckley said. 'When you begin to count those who are not active, you are almost driven to tears over the terrible losses we have suffered in this nation.'"[69] Apostle Jeffrey R. Holland confirmed that combating low activity and convert retention rates was a major goal of his assignment in Chile, stating: "Every LDS general authority is aware of the challenges that skyrocketing church growth has created in Latin America in the past 20 years. The list includes a large percentage of LDS converts who initially embraced the faith and then fell away shortly thereafter ... We know we have the baptisms. We want to make sure we have the church growing proportionately in strength right along with it."[70] While overseeing Church efforts in Chile from 2002 to 2004, Elder Holland "revised policy to insist that converts attend church three weeks in succession" and taught missionaries to focus on building the Church rather than simply adding numbers.[71] He noted that these efforts have led to substantial improvement, with more converts remaining active and greater numbers of Chileans serving missions.

Europe

European LDS activity rates appear to have fallen well below the older 35 percent figure cited in the Encyclopedia of Mormonism. In "Issues in Writing European History and in Building the Church in Europe," Wilfried Decoo reported: "1996 estimated Church membership in Western Europe [is] ... 347,000 members represent[ing] 0.09 percent of the total population ... about one out of four members is active. Our effective membership in Europe [including the UK is] ... about 87,000 or 0.02 percent."[72] The 2001 Austrian census reported 2,236 citizens who identify the LDS Church as their faith of preference,73 compared to 3,917 members listed in the 2003 LDS Church Almanac at year-end 2000 (57 percent). Local members report that actual LDS activity in Austria runs at about 43 percent, one of the highest rates in Europe. Gary Lobb wrote that activity rates of members in large cities of Western Europe vary from 20 to 30 percent.[74] These data correlate closely with my research gathered from traveling to twenty nations. In 1999, LDS activity rates were reported by mission offices, local members, and full-time missionaries as 25 percent in the Czech Republic, 28 percent in Hungary, 20 percent in Estonia, and 20 percent in Poland.

Africa

Former African mission president Dale LeBaron noted "during the year 2000 sacrament meeting attendance in the West Africa Area was 54 percent, second only to the Utah South Area."[75] The fact that an activity rate just above 50 percent ranks as the second highest among the Church's twenty-nine areas underscores how low activity rates are in many other areas. How much of this high activity rate in West Africa can be attributed to affinity for LDS teachings and how much is due to cultural factors remains to be elucidated. The 1997 University of Michigan study on rates of weekly church attendance worldwide found that 89 percent of Nigerians surveyed reported attending organized religious meetings of some kind at least weekly -- the highest rate of reported church attendance in the world.[76] The West Africa area represents the only convert-based area in the Church reporting over 50 percent member activity today, yet this feat has been achieved not by North American MTC-trained missionaries, but by native African missionaries who had little or no formal missionary training until the construction of the Ghana MTC in 2002.

LDS member retention has presented major challenges in other regions of Africa. Reporting on a black branch in South Africa, Peggy Fletcher Stack wrote: "Of 23 people baptized into Guguletu Branch of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints during 1997, only three were men age 18 or older. Of these three, only one remains active in the church. The branch has 253 members on the rolls, but an average weekly attendance of about 65. Seldom are there more than two married couples. Five married men attend regularly, four have jobs."[77] She quoted Guguletu Branch President Nigel Giddey: "I do not think that the missionaries read much beyond a few key scriptures to the potential converts or possibly a few pages of the Book of Mormon."

The Philippines

Brigham Young University Newsnet quoted senior missionary Dave Brinsfield: "Out of the 49,000 converts who joined the church in 2001 and 2002 [in the Philippines], only 1,000 remain active."[78] He continued: "The mission was averaging 120-170 baptisms a month two years ago, but only do around 80 now. Even if the numbers are lower, the church members are stronger." The retention statistic is likely misprinted, since 10 to 20 percent retention rates in the Philippines have been reported with a few missions dipping below 10 percent, but never to 2 percent. In any case, the article is a remarkable admission of the magnitude of the retention problem and the inadequacy of conventional quick-baptize methods. With a focus on ensuring that prospective converts are regularly attending church and have established other gospel habits prior to baptism, a few missions in the Philippines have greatly improved their convert retention rates. Many other missions have continued accelerated baptism practices, perpetuating catastrophic rates of convert loss.

Japan

Jiro Numano, an experienced LDS leader in Japan and editor of a pro-LDS Japanese-language publication, analyzed the seemingly impressive Japanese LDS membership figures published in official sources: "Several problems are not apparent from these favorable numbers. First, the active membership of the church is only a fraction of the official membership. As recently as 1992, after forty-five years of post-war missionary effort, only 20,000 members could be counted as active out of a total membership of more than 87,000, or about 23 percent. Depending on how strict a definition one uses of 'active member,' the figure could range from 15 percent active, with a strict definition, to as much as 30 percent ... I estimate 25 percent active as a realistic figure for the country in general. This means that three-fourths of church members in Japan are inactive, having nothing to do with the church. A second problem is the decreasing rates in recent years both of baptisms themselves and of activity on the parts of new converts. As an illustration, although 50,000 people were baptized from 1978 through 1990 (including some children of members), the increase in active membership was only 10,000, with virtually no growth in Melchizedek priesthood holders. Since 1981, furthermore, attendance at sacrament meetings, priesthood meetings, and Relief Society meetings have all remained fairly level, despite thousands of new convert baptisms. In general, the growth in nominal membership has outstripped the growth in activity by either men or women."[79]

Thailand

In 2003, there were over 13,000 LDS members in Thailand, of whom approximately 2,100 (16 percent) were active according to estimates from returned missionaries.

Australia

Of the 1991 Australian census, Marjorie Newton observed: "While the official membership figure was 78,000 in 1991, the Australian census that year showed only 38,372 Latter-day Saints. A letter from the area presidency urging members to respond to the voluntary census question on religious affiliation was read in every ward sacrament meeting before the census, making it unlikely that many active Latter-day Saints would have refused to answer. When we consider that the census figure also includes those of the 4,000 RLDS members who responded (the Australian Bureau of Statistics does not distinguish between the two churches), the conclusion seems inescapable that well over half the nominal Mormons in Australia no longer regard themselves as Latter-day Saints."[80] The 1996 Australian census (which did distinguish between the LDS and RLDS churches) showed that 42,158 individuals identified themselves as members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,[81]81 compared to 87,000 official members at year-end 1995. The LDS Church statistics show 102,773 Australian members at year-end 2001, while 48,775 individuals reported LDS affiliation in the 2001 Australian census (47 percent of official membership).

New Zealand

From 1991 to 2001, New Zealand LDS membership statistics demonstrated an 18.6 percent increase from 77,000 (year-end 1991) to 91,373 (year-end 2001). Over this same period, the number of individuals identifying themselves as Latter-day Saints or Mormons on the official New Zealand Census fell from 48,009 in 1991 to 41,166 in 1996 and 39,915 in 2001.[82] Almost all regions of the country showed this decline. Religious groups such as Pentecostals show census increases during this same period. As the 2001 survey allowed individuals to specify up to four religious affiliations and those reporting multiple affiliations were counted in each group, it is unlikely that any significant number of individuals identifying themselves as Latter-day Saints were not counted. The significant decline in the percentage of individuals on LDS membership rolls reporting religious affiliation with the LDS Church from 62 percent in 1991 to 43.7 percent in 2001 suggests that the Church accumulated many nominal members, but retained very few, and may even have experienced a net loss of previously active members to other faith communities.

Address Unknown File

The LDS address unknown file or "lost address file" consists of church members who cannot be located. In Utah, the "address unknown file" consists of 180,000 names, or 10 percent of LDS membership in the state.[83] Approximately 50,000 individuals in Utah are added to the lost address file each year. Ninety percent of those are found within the next year, while those on the list longer than one year (and located less frequently) constitute over 70 percent of lost address file members. Ted Lyon reported that 200,000 of the 535,000 nominal members in Chile -- over 37 percent -- are in the "lost address" file.[84] With over 380,000 lost address file members between Utah and Chile alone, the total number of LDS lost address file members is unlikely to be much less than 2 million.

Elder Merrill Bateman agreed that many of the members on the "lost address file" list are less-active, especially those on the list for more than twelve months.[85] Individuals in the address unknown file are counted as full members and included on statistical reports until the age of 110 or until proof of death can be located. With an average life expectancy of 77.5 years in the United States and significantly less in many developing nations, the address unknown file may result in an overcount of LDS membership. Since lost address file members are not included on unit rolls, activity calculations based on congregational attendance rates may significantly overestimate LDS activity.

Double Affiliation

The phenomenon of double affiliation presents researchers with a major difficulty in determining the true religious makeup of each nation.[86] Double affiliation is when the same individual is claimed as an adherent by more than one religious group. This implies that some faiths claim as members many individuals who express preferences for other denominations. If the raw membership statistics reported by each faith were taken at face value, the summed value in many cases would be greater than the nation's population.

The international LDS population has an especially high rate of "double affiliation," because the majority of members claimed by the Church express other religious preferences, as census data demonstrate. Nations like Tonga and Western Samoa with the world's highest rates of LDS membership (42 percent and 28 percent of population, respectively) have some of the world's highest rates of double religious affiliation (21 percent and 24 percent of the population, respectively), due mainly to the large number of LDS converts who return to their former denominations and beliefs without ever having experienced meaningful LDS activity.[87] In the United States, where Latter-day Saints constitute approximately 2 percent of the population, the double affiliation rate is 7 percent, and most European nations, with LDS populations below 0.1 percent, have double affiliation rates of 0 to 3 percent.

The problem of double affiliation further demonstrates the need to focus on participating or self-identified church membership rather than relying exclusively on denominational membership claims. For denominations for which membership reports do not reflect actual participation, data from other sources such as national censuses, sociologic studies, or attendance reports are necessary to determine the true number of religious adherents.

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