The Law of the Harvest

Practical Principles of Effective Missionary Work

Section I. Chapter 05: Evaluating Growth and Retention

Are Census Data Valid?

Official LDS growth reports present nominal membership figures without consideration of member activity or participation. The large disparities between official and participating membership figures have often made it difficult for members and leaders to identify, let alone correct, the root problems. The Church's use of the euphemism "less active" to describe those who do not attend church at all understandably arises from the desire to avoid further alienating often already disgruntled inactives but makes it difficult for members and even leaders to fully grasp the magnitude of activity and retention problems.

Some have attempted to discredit census data demonstrating fractional correlation to official membership figures, speculating that many active LDS members may have chosen not to identify their religious preference.[88] Census reports and other sociologic studies are subject to varying margins of error and potential methodological problems. Yet there are good reasons to believe that census data accurately reflect religious preferences. First, the number of individuals identifying themselves as Latter-day Saints on census reports is far greater than the number that attend LDS meetings. The comparison between the 57,000 members attending church in Chile each Sunday[89] and the 103,735 self-identified Latter-day Saints reported on the 2002 Chilean census suggests that far from short-changing the strength of the Church, census religious affiliation data vastly outstrip member participation. Second, consistent correlations between census data and official membership claims of high-commitment religious groups provide a control. Census data report self-identified affiliation of 175 to 206 percent of the number of official Jehovah's Witnesses in Latin American nations (reflecting both baptized adults and unbaptized affiliates), while more individuals identified themselves as Seventh-Day Adventists on the census than are officially claimed in each country. Such data contrast with LDS official membership to census correlations of 20 percent (Chile), 24 percent (Mexico), and 27 percent (Brazil). The consistently low correlation between LDS membership claims and self-identified census data across many nations, the high correlation between membership and census data for other denominations in these same countries, and the close relationship between census data and other research on member self-identification and participation all provide strong reasons to believe that census data are reliable. Third, strong official requests by LDS church leaders for local members to register the LDS Church as their faith of preference have been made from the pulpit in virtually every nation where the census has included religious affiliation data. Fourth, the LDS Church enjoys a relatively positive reputation in these nations, and so it is unlikely that Mormons would be less likely than members of marginal groups such as Seventh-Day Adventists or Jehovah's Witnesses to express their true religious preferences. Finally, only a small number of individuals in any country refused to answer questions about religious affiliation.

While imperfect, census data provide a more meaningful measure of church growth and strength than official membership numbers. Fractional rates of self-identification provide compelling evidence that most individuals on international LDS rolls do not consider themselves to be members, demonstrating that the challenge of inactivity runs far deeper than economic hardship or transportation problems.

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A Historical Perspective

Those who claim that poor retention is a natural or inevitable result of rapid growth are uninformed. Ammon and his brethren baptized thousands but achieved 100 percent convert retention: "As the Lord liveth, as many of the Lamanites as believed in their preaching, and were converted unto the Lord, never did fall away" (Alma 23:6). Of 107,827 converts baptized in the United Kingdom between 1837 and 1890, 52,688 emigrated to the American Zion (48.9%).[90] The converts who left their lands, homes, and families to undertake the perilous transatlantic journey and travel across the plains to join the Saints were dedicated and committed to the Church. Functioning congregations remained in the United Kingdom, demonstrating that many of those who stayed behind also remained active. Although this rate of convert retention is far below that achieved by Ammon and his companions, it is still well above the 20-25% rates achieved in international LDS missions the 1980s and 1990s. These nineteenth statistics reflect a time when there was no missionary training center and no specific standards for baptism, suggesting considerable room for improvement with effective training programs and the consistent application of scriptural standards.

During the early twentieth century, most LDS members lived in Utah and the Mountain West, but participation rates were low. In 1976, President Spencer W. Kimball compared church attendance rates to lower figures at the beginning of the twentieth century: "I can remember when we were getting only about 19 percent attendance at sacrament meetings. Of course, that included all members of the Church, children and infants, but it was very low. Today many stakes and missions have reached nearly 50 and 60 percent of their total membership in attendance at sacrament meetings, and there are many units that have a much higher attendance record."[91] There were many semiactive Latter-day Saints who participated irregularly. However, most of these semiactives and even inactives had strong ties to the LDS community. Most were descendents of pioneers and other early church members and lived in communities with a strong or dominant LDS influence. Most identified themselves as Latter-day Saints. Most members lived in rural areas in the early twentieth century, and transportation to church was often time-consuming and expensive. The shift of LDS membership toward urban areas by the mid-twentieth century, as well as the convenience of modern personal transportation, resulted in a significant increase in church participation among believing but previously semiactive members in Utah and the Mountain West. Some changes in church programs led to the return of many part-active members to full activity. The first seminary buildings for youth were constructed in 1912, and the institute program was organized in the 1920s. Both programs expanded greatly during the twentieth century to involve more youth. Young single adult wards and social programs for single adults were organized only in the 1970s, and the more convenient consolidated meeting schedule was introduced in 1980. Contemporary research has shown that all of these programs play a vital role in strengthening and retaining youth.

Modern Trends in Convert Retention

While it is commonly claimed that over thirteen million members believe in the Book of Mormon and the prophetic mission of Joseph Smith, data suggest that only a fraction of those nominally on LDS membership rolls share the core beliefs, values, and practices commonly associated with Latter-day Saints. Most international LDS members are not believing semiactives who are simply undersocialized, but completely disassociated, inactive, or hostile individuals with no ongoing connection or commitment to the Church. National censuses and other studies suggest that only a small fraction of international members consider themselves to be "Mormons" in any way. Few attended church for even two months after baptism, and some attended far less.

It is a matter of grave concern that the areas with the most rapid numerical membership increase today, Latin America and the Philippines, are also areas with extremely low convert retention. Many other groups, including the Seventh-Day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses, have consistently achieved excellent convert retention rates in the same cultures and societies where LDS missions have experienced only fractional retention, and so LDS retention problems cannot be attributed to deficiencies of local cultures. Some committed believers cannot attend church regularly because of extenuating health problems or extreme hardships, although data suggest that this group represents only a small percentage of infrequent attendees.

Today's catastrophic losses of never-active and inactive converts almost immediately following baptism compare unfavorably with historical convert retention in the era before accelerated baptism programs and appear to be unprecedented in church history. Since most modern inactives lack even nominal belief or identification with the LDS Church, the Church social programs and changes that led to the dramatic increase in member participation in the early twentieth century Utah Church are having only a minor impact on international activity rates today. While over 97 percent of nineteenth century British converts mustered the commitment to cross the Atlantic and travel to Utah after joining the Church, today many of our missionaries fail to teach and prepare converts adequately to even attend church two or three times before or after baptism. The long-term dedication of the Church to its members underscores the need for full preparation of prospective converts and discerning prebaptismal interviews, since the baptism of uncommitted or insincere individuals who do not remain active presents a lifetime liability to the Church.

What Is Growth?

Study after study demonstrates a vast discrepancy between official LDS membership claims and participating or self-identified membership. I am not aware of a single large population-based, self-identified affiliation study or national census that has come anywhere close to demonstrating parity with church membership claims. Nominal membership increases that far outstrip gains in active membership beg the question: what is growth? When individuals are baptized but do not attend church, do not identify themselves as members of the Church, and do not believe or live the teachings of the Church, has the Church grown? In nations where total membership figures have increased but the number of individuals attending church is stagnant or even in decline, has the Church grown? When so few converts become participating members that durable new church units cannot be organized and some existing units are collapsed because of the loss of previously active members, has the Church grown?

Most media sources convey the impression that all of these scenarios constitute growth, since LDS growth is measured and reported almost exclusively in terms of raw membership numbers, while activity rates are never officially disclosed. The reader of LDS periodicals comes away with the impression that the Church is growing and flourishing as never before and that the missionary effort throughout the world has been a story of unmitigated success, dynamic growth, and constantly inspired programs and policies.

An understanding of what membership numbers represent is a prerequisite for drawing conclusions about growth or strength. For Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh-Day Adventists, every number represents an active, participating member. LDS membership figures are based on a one-time baptismal event and do not imply that a "member" attends or participates in church at all, considers the LDS Church one's faith of preference, believes or accepts LDS doctrines, or lives in harmony with LDS teachings. In the case of children of record, membership status does not necessarily imply that one has been baptized or has made a conscious decision to be affiliated with the Church.

Faiths with high convert retention rates are candid and realistic in their measurement of growth. Jan Paulsen, president of the rapidly growing Seventh-Day Adventist church, observed: "A growing church is not primarily identified by the increase in numbers. Growth must also be in depth of understanding ... it must also be in depth of commitment both to the Lord, to the truth, and to the church; as well as in increased capacity to unite and bond as a family of believers. Lack of attention to this will produce Adventist mutations, which would be an unacceptable development. [Evangelism] ... is effective because the new members have been taught and nurtured over many months, they know who they are and what they believe, and they have a network of friends in the church. When this does not happen, 'growth' is just a play on numbers and does not reflect the reality we want to see. The very word 'growth' means to become bigger, stronger, healthier, and more capable of functioning effectively."[92] President Paulsen criticized quick-baptize evangelists: "When I hear that 80,000 names have to be deleted from the records of our church in one country simply because they came in en masse, they cannot be traced, they do not come to church, they may not even exist, that troubles me greatly ... something is wrong. Evangelism in these circumstances becomes a carnival. This is not growth." These comments were carried widely in the Adventist press. Yet the Adventist church retains as long-term, participating members not approximately one-quarter of its new converts, like the LDS church, but 75 to 80 percent of them. The 80,000 nonparticipating or "lost members" Paulsen refers to in a country where local evangelists had been engaged in singularly questionable practices compares favorably to any of at least ten countries in Latin America alone with between 80,000 and 800,000 inactive or lost LDS members. If we examine the actual growth rates of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church (2.5 to 3 times LDS rates) and the convert retention rates (also 2.5 to 3 times LDS rates), we find that the real growth rate of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church is six to nine times that of the LDS Church. Their no-nonsense focus on "real growth," rapid intervention in problem areas, and refusal to pad their numbers with even modest numbers of inactives are key factors in maintaining a vibrant faith community where member statistics closely reflect reality.

Rodney Stark and Laurence Iannaccone noted of Jehovah's Witnesses: "Are Witness statistics reliable? There are three excellent and independent reasons to trust them. First ... they often report 'bad news' -- declines as well as increases in membership. A second reason is that even very critical ex-members ... accept and publish these statistics. Finally, these statistics stand up very solidly when compared with the Canadian Census and the American National Survey of Religious Identification"[93] and with national censuses and sociologic research from many nations. Not one of these points holds for LDS membership statistics. Because of the combination of accelerated-baptism programs that rush converts to baptism with only minimal commitment and official policies that keep inactive members on the rolls indefinitely, LDS membership figures have continued to report annual increases even in areas where attendance has actually declined.

It has often been stated euphemistically "growth is our biggest problem." Yet it is not real growth based in deep-rooted conversion to the gospel that is unhealthy and problematic, but that so little LDS "growth" is real. Many speak of great future harvests, when the all too frequent reality is that the majority of those currently being baptized are leaving out the back door of the Church almost as quickly as they are being brought in the front. Elder M. Russell Ballard noted: "We cannot establish the Church unless we have real growth -- not simply numbers on paper."[94] The Church cannot be built up by revolving-door practices that rapidly accumulate inactives but do not result in a corresponding increase in participating membership.

We must measure, report, and discuss Church growth in terms of active, faithful, and participating members and focus on building strong, vibrant units, rather than lauding paper membership increases that do not reflect true strength or commitment. There is a scriptural duty to look after those who have become part of the flock. However, it is also difficult to make real progress without objective acknowledgment of the present situation. Occasional stories of a longtime disaffected individual returning to the fold are repeatedly cited as evidence of success, yet the far greater trend is that of losing those for whom intervention could make a difference -- new converts and receptive semiactives -- because member time and resources are spread so thin trying to reactivate everyone instead of focusing on the receptive.

Do Activity Rates Inevitably Increase with Time?

Some have claimed that the current low activity rates are an inevitable result of the process of establishing the Church and that these activity rates will rise as the Church becomes more established, citing higher activity rates in Utah and the Mountain West than in surrounding areas. This is an "apples and oranges" comparison which is not supported by data. It is true that activity rates are higher in areas where active members have many children and where there are few convert baptisms, but this observation provides no insight into the problem of catastrophic convert losses that have continued to occur in international areas. The Church entered Mexico, Chile, and Japan well over a century ago, but activity rates in all three countries hover between 20 and 25 percent, and the passing of decades has done little to rectify the crisis. In contrast, some newly opened areas, such as West Africa and Eastern Europe, have activity rates that are somewhat higher. Rampant inactivity cannot simply be waited out. Missions that have applied appropriate scriptural teaching standards have almost immediately achieved very high convert retention rates, while missions that have not have continued to lose the overwhelming majority of their converts even as unit rolls have swelled. The causes and solutions to retention problems are discussed in later chapters.

Is Slow Growth Inevitable?

Some have suggested that a slowdown in growth is inevitable as the Church faith becomes more established and claim that rapid growth is a characteristic of small but not of large organizations. This claim fails to explain why LDS growth in the fifty-nine new nations opened for missionary work in the 1990s has been slow in spite of high receptivity and exceptional opportunity and provides no explanation for the accelerating growth of larger faiths with high membership requirements like the Seventh-Day Adventist Church. Some claim that the time of great harvests is over and that now is a time of gleaning. Those who give credence to such claims are not literate in the scriptures or do not believe them. The Lord's statement that "the field is white

already to harvest" is repeated at least eight times in scripture, and the Lord promises those of great faith "it shall be given unto such to bring thousands of souls to repentance" (Alma 26:22). The Lord's assertion that the harvest field is ripe has been reiterated by modern-day prophets. Ezra Taft Benson declared: "It is a time of harvest and not a time of gleaning,"[95] and Bruce R. McConkie taught: "We live in that day, the day when the harvest is ripe. We have deluded ourselves long enough that this is a day of gleaning only. This is not a day of gleaning but of harvest."[96] President James E. Faust stated that "there are greater opportunities to build the kingdom of God than ever before."[97] The time of the "great harvests" is only just beginning for those who are willing to heed God's words.

[88] Stack, Peggy Fletcher, "Keeping Members a Challenge for LDS Church," Salt Lake Tribune, July 26, 2005.
[89] Stack, Peggy Fletcher, "Building Faith. A Special Report: The LDS Church in Chile," Salt Lake Tribune, March 31, 2006.
[90] The statement in the printed version of the book reads, "In modern times, convert retention rates approaching 100 percent were achieved in the British Isles for more than half a century. Between 1840 and 1890, 89,625 of the 92,465 converts (over 97 percent of the total) in Britain immigrated to the United States to gather to Zion, leaving only 2,770 behind." This statistic cited Rodney Stark's work (Stark, Rodney, "The Basis of Mormon Success: A Theoretical Application" in James T. Duke, ed., Latter-day Saint Social Life: Social Research on the LDS Church and Its Members, Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1998, 29-67). However, LDS historian Richard Jensen has demonstrated that the Stark's statement cites the emigration total for all countries for that of the United Kingdom alone, resulting in an overcalculation of immigration rates, and has provided the correct statistics as noted above. An annual talley of British mission converts and emigrants provided by Richard Jensen is found here.
[91] Kimball, Spencer W., "A Report and a Challenge," Ensign, November 1976.
[92] Paulsen, Jan, Opening Address, General Conference of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church, October 7, 2002.
[93] Stark, Rodney and Laurence R. Iannaccone, "Why the Jehovah's Witnesses Grow So Rapidly: A Theoretical Application," Journal of Contemporary Religion, May 1997: 140.
[94] Ballard, M. Russell, Conversion and Retention Satellite Broadcast, August 29, 1999.
[95] Benson, Ezra Taft, New Mission Presidents' Seminar, June 25, 1986.
[96] McConkie, Bruce R., Mission Presidents' Seminar, June 21, 1975.
[97] Faust, James E., CES Fireside, Marriott Center, November 1, 1998.