



# LDS Growth Case Studies

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## Government Restrictions and LDS Growth

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### Overview

The Church has a presence in many nations where government and societal restrictions prohibit open proselytism, the assignment of foreign missionaries, and public assembly. These conditions often strengthen the LDS Church in these nations as local members form communities, meet member-missionary responsibilities independent of foreign missionaries, and become self-sufficient in meeting leadership and local administrative needs. Membership and congregational growth rates in nations with limitations on religious freedom often match or surpass the growth of the Church in free nations that possess similar cultural, economic, and societal conditions. This essay identifies countries where the Church has experienced noticeable growth notwithstanding government restrictions on religious freedom, factors which have favored growth, and prospects for future growth.

### Nations With Religious Freedom Restriction and Strong LDS Growth

The Church in Pakistan and China has achieved the most impressive growth among nations with restrictions on religious freedom. Within the past 15 years, dozens of branches and multiple districts have been organized for native members and all branches and districts are lead by local leaders. In 2010, native LDS membership appeared over 5,000 in China and approximately 3,000 in Pakistan whereas native LDS membership appeared less than 200 in China and totaled 786 in Pakistan in 2000. Within the past decade, the Church has expanded outreach in Pakistan and China and today branches are established in several major population centers. No LDS missionaries are assigned to mainland China and missionary activity occurs through member referral among family members or relatives. Only Pakistani full-time missionaries are assigned to Pakistan. Missionary activity is conducted by member referral in both nations.

Expansion of national outreach has made the Church in Pakistan and China stand alone from other nations with indigenous Latter-day Saints and significant restrictions on religious freedom. In China, the conversion of Chinese nationals abroad and their return to their hometowns has been the primary force driving outreach expansion. Upon return to China, converts have shared the gospel with relatives which has built up the Church in their respective areas. Government policy mandates that foreigners and citizens meet in segregated congregations. The Church has consistently respected this policy in mainland China and the separation of foreign and native members appears one of the primary reasons that the Church has experienced impressive congregational growth among Chinese membership since the mid-2000s. Without this government policy in effect, it appears likely that foreigners would provide the bulk of leadership manpower resulting in low self-sufficiency of Chinese leadership and the assimilation of Chinese and foreign members into the same branches. In Pakistan, missionary activity in locations with sizable numbers of Pakistani Christians has driven growth. Latter-day Saint families relocating to cities without a church presence appears one of the primary means that the Church has expanded outreach in Pakistan. The strength and activity of local leadership is excellent as the Church must rely on Pakistani membership to staff leadership due to the lack of foreign Latter-day Saints in Pakistan.

The Church has experienced strong growth in several nations in the Middle East such as the United Arab Emirates and Qatar but the infrastructure of the Church in these nations is largely artificial as very few if any natives have joined the Church and church services are not held in Arabic. Growth has occurred in these nations primarily due to expatriate North American and Filipino members relocating to these nations for employment purposes. Government restrictions in the United Arab Emirates and Qatar forbid proselytizing the native Muslim population, but the nonnative population generally experiences few restrictions on worship, assembly, and member-missionary activity among non Muslims.

### Nations With Religious Freedom Restriction and Moderate LDS Growth

The Church in Vietnam, Laos, Nepal, and Belarus has experienced good sustainability of local leadership, member-missionary involvement, and willingness of local members to serve full-time missions but very little to no expansion of national outreach has occurred over the past decade. Geographic isolation from mission and area leadership, the majority of membership concentrated in a single location, and a lack of LDS translations in local languages are some factors which have limited outreach expansion but have also encouraged self-sufficiency and devotion to the Church. LDS membership appeared to increase by 100% or more in each of these nations during the 2000s but estimated church membership appears 1,000 or less in each of these nations. Government restrictions limit full-time missionary involvement in finding, teaching, mentoring, baptizing, and retaining converts. The active role of local members in the conversion process has contributed to the development of a small, tight-knit LDS community that regularly produces full-time missionaries and local leadership. Member activity and convert retention rates in nations with religious freedom restrictions surpass the rates in other nations with similar cultural, economic, and political conditions such as [\[Matt1\]](#) Cambodia, Malaysia, Ukraine, and Romania. Many teaching referrals are family and close friends of Latter-day Saints. This social support system in the Church appears to significantly improve convert retention and local mission self sufficiency and is already in place before investigators receive missionary lessons and begin attending church.

Government restrictions on religious freedom have ironically improved the efficiency of LDS outreach. It is unfortunate that these results have had to come at the expense of diminished religious freedom instead of church policies which reinforce efficient policies such as reliance on ordinary members in establishing and growing the Church. Most nations without legal or societal restrictions on missionary work in geographic regions with nations that impose major restrictions on religious practice often have LDS membership and the number of congregations as much as ten times the size of the Church in nations with low levels of religious freedom, yet the Church in most of these free nations has almost entirely relied on foreign full-time missionaries to achieve these numerical results at the expense of convert retention and member activity rates often between half or a quarter of the rates in nations with significant religious freedom restrictions.

Higher convert retention and member activity rates and more self-sufficient local leadership has not been entirely the product of church policy complying with governmental and societal laws and standards for religious practice. Societal restrictions often occur in tandem with those enforced by governments. Converts who join the LDS Church must therefore make a major decision to incur any persecution, disapproval, harassment, and ostracism that stems from their conversion. The often higher level of devotion of converts when they are baptized has also appeared a significant contributor toward the strength and efficiency of the Church in nations that experience restrictions on religious freedom.

Moderate levels of societal and governmental restrictions on religious expression and practice appear to generate the most favorable conditions for real LDS growth. Disapproval by family and friends but not total rejection from an individual's entire social network is a beneficial condition that requires courage and dedication from new converts. Higher levels of dedication to the Church correlate with higher levels of member activity and convert retention. A lack of opposition from society, government, and family requires greater diligence from church leaders to ensure that prospective converts meet the minimal prebaptismal requirements to ensure that they will become a productive, resourceful addition to the church in their respective congregation rather than a liability.

### **Nations With Religious Freedom Restriction and Poor LDS Growth**

Restrictions on religious freedom do not guarantee growth. Like the prerequisite conditions for a dormant seed to germinate and grow into a mature tree, certain environmental factors are necessary for healthy, sustainable church growth. The availability of church materials in native languages, periodic visits from mission and area leaders, receptivity of the general population to LDS teachings, and policies favoring or hindering the baptism of members influence outreach expansion patterns, local leadership sustainability, and efficiency in missionary work.

The LDS Church in Bangladesh demonstrates the need for all or most of these prerequisite conditions to be met for growth. Moderate governmental and societal restrictions on Christian proselytism and good receptivity as indicated by impressive growth among nontraditional Christian groups such as Seventh Day Adventists present favorable opportunities for member missionary work and local leadership development but a lack of local members, reliance on foreign members to staff leadership, and distance from mission headquarters first in Singapore and later in New Delhi, India has resulted in virtually stagnant growth since the Church's initial establishment in the early 1990s. Very few Bangladeshi Latter-day Saints have served full-time missions and the Church's sole branch in Dhaka relies on a Swedish expatriate for much of its administrative needs. Convert baptisms have occurred during visits by mission leadership in order for mission leaders to conduct baptismal interviews and provide periodic training and ecclesiastical support. The failure of the Church in Bangladesh to achieve any noticeable growth and sustainability comparable to the Church in Nepal or Laos appears rooted in appointing foreign members as local church leaders instead of their indigenous counterparts. The Church in Bangladesh has consistently relied on Westerners for leadership, which has likely limited cultural understanding, frustrated communication due to language barriers, and reduced commitment to member-missionary activity and self-sufficiency.

The greatest challenge in growing the Church in nations with prohibitions and bans on proselytism and religious practice is the initial establishment of the Church among the native population. To date, there have been very few indigenous converts in nations in the Middle East and Central Asia where nearly all nations uphold strict laws that bar the assignment of foreign proselytizing missionaries and discourage conversion from Islam and traditional Christian denominations. These legal and societal infractions on religious practice eliminate the option of assigning full-time missionaries as a means of introducing the Church. Strong ethno-religious ties to traditional faiths lower receptivity to mission-focused Christians like Latter-day Saints. These societal, legal, and political conditions reduce the priority for the Church to strategize how to initiate initial mission

outreach within the confines of society and government. Baptizing and retaining migrant workers, students studying abroad, and other individuals who relocate to nations where the Church is established is one of the most effective means of reaching nations with sizable expatriate populations. However, efforts to reach expatriates are often handled haphazardly with no clear vision or coordination between multiple mission and area presidencies and the church authority for the home nation of these converts. China remains the only nation where local, mission, area, and international church leaders have made consistent efforts to collaborate information pertaining to the activity and location status of expatriate converts baptized outside their home country. The strength and continued growth of the LDS Church in China appears to have occurred in part due to good organization and coordination between local, mission, and area leaders.

In East Asia, countries like Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Brunei have had only a handful of Latter-day Saint converts and any established church infrastructure is headed by foreigners. A lack of indigenous Latter-day Saints presents the primary barrier to a permanent LDS presence in nations with few or no restrictions on religious freedom, such as much of Sub-Saharan Africa.

## Comparative Growth

Other missionary-focused Christians have achieved greater membership and congregational growth than the LDS Church in nations with restrictions on religious freedom. Many of these groups do not rely on foreign missionary manpower to open nations to proselytism and instead utilize local membership to expand outreach. In 2010, Jehovah's Witnesses reported 924 members meeting in seven congregations in Azerbaijan, 136 members meeting in three congregations in Bangladesh, 3,746 members meeting in 71 congregations in Burma, 92,834 members meeting in 1,254 congregations in Cuba, 22,495 members meeting in 381 congregations in Indonesia, 4,826 members meeting in 66 congregations in Kyrgyzstan, 3,603 members meeting in 66 congregations in Lebanon, 1,413 members meeting in 17 congregations in Nepal, 967 members meeting in 18 congregations in Pakistan, and 2,074 members meeting in 27 congregations in Turkey.<sup>[1]</sup> In 2010, Seventh Day Adventists reported 32,168 members meeting in 115 congregations in Bangladesh, 5,151 members meeting in 76 congregations in Belarus, 631 members meeting in seven congregations in Bhutan, 28,527 members meeting in 210 congregations in Burma, 393,280 members meeting in 1,137 congregations in mainland China, 210,234 members meeting in 1,443 congregations in Indonesia, 33 members meeting in one congregations in Iran and Afghanistan, 587 members meeting in seven congregations in Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria, 1,005 members meeting in 17 congregations in Kyrgyzstan, 1,914 members meeting in four congregations in Laos, 8,447 members meeting in 26 congregations in Nepal, 190 members meeting in three congregations in North Africa (Algeria, Libya, Morocco, Tunisia, and Western Sahara), 13,475 members meeting in 122 congregations in Pakistan, 627 members meeting in seven congregations in Tajikistan, 82 members meeting in three congregations in Turkey, 98 members meeting in one congregation in Turkmenistan, 1,241 members meeting in 13 congregations in Uzbekistan, and 10,012 members meeting in eight congregations in Vietnam.

In contrast to Jehovah's Witnesses and the Seventh Day Adventist Church, the LDS Church generally reports few members and congregations in most of these nations if the LDS Church maintains a presence at all. In 2010, the LDS Church appeared to have less than 50 members and no organized branches in Azerbaijan, Bhutan, Iran, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan and approximately 100 members and one branch in Bangladesh, approximately 600 members and four branches in Belarus, less than 20 members in Bhutan, approximately 100 members and one branch in Burma, approximately 10,000 members and less than 100 branches in mainland China, 6,683 members and 21 branches in Indonesia, approximately 800 members and five branches in Afghanistan, approximately 200 members and four branches in Jordan, 200 members and one branch in Laos, less than 200 members and one branch in Lebanon, 130 members and one branch in Nepal, likely less than 100 members in North Africa (Algeria, Libya, Morocco, Tunisia, and Western Sahara), approximately 3,000 members and ten branches in Pakistan, 254 members and four branches in Turkey, and 1,000 members and two branches in Vietnam.

## Conclusion

The LDS Church can experience strong membership and congregational growth in nations with governmental and societal restrictions on religious freedom as these conditions require strong dedication from converts to investigate, join, and remain active in the Church and often force local members to fill leadership roles. However, limitations on religious practice do not guarantee strong, self-sufficient growth for the Church as other prerequisite conditions are needed such as native members who are active and available translations of church materials in local languages. Other missionary-focused Christians such as Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh Day Adventists have experienced stronger growth in nations with restrictions on religious freedom than the LDS Church due to these faiths implementing more aggressive proselytism strategies that utilize local members instead of foreign missionaries.

<sup>[1]</sup> "2010 Report of Jehovah's Witnesses Worldwide," [www.watchtower.org](http://www.watchtower.org/e/statistics/worldwide_report.htm), retrieved 5 January 2012.  
[http://www.watchtower.org/e/statistics/worldwide\\_report.htm](http://www.watchtower.org/e/statistics/worldwide_report.htm)