

LDS Growth Case Studies

>

Assessing Member Activity

Author: Matt Martinich

Overview

The LDS Church does not publish statistics on member activity. Country-by-country and worldwide church data is accessible to the public but limited to nominal membership, congregation, district, stake, mission, area, and seminary and institute enrollment figures. The Church collects data on church attendance, activity status, personal worthiness, priesthood ordinations, and other demographic indicators measuring activity rates and member participation but does not release this information to the public. This essay explores the variety of approaches utilized for assessing member activity rates for individual countries and illustrates their application through ascertaining activity rates for Russia and Mexico as examples.

Approaches to Member Activity Assessment

Self Reports

Ordinary members, returned missionaries, and church leaders provide a wealth of knowledge pertaining to member activity rates and activity indicators such as sacrament meeting attendance numbers for individual congregations and the percentage of nominal members regularly attending church. Returned missionaries provide an ample supply of church attendance numbers and estimated member activity rates in areas where they served. Reports from several returned missionaries and ordinary members can be collected to create a composite picture of member activity rates for particular areas. Church leaders at times have also provided statistics on member activity rates in individual nations such as sacrament meeting attendance figures and the number of temple recommend holders.

This approach to estimating member activity rates has many strengths due to the quality of the data and high degree of accuracy compared to other methods. The primary challenge of utilizing self reports is the limited availability of these reports on the internet and through personal and professional contacts of church growth researchers. Self reports are limited or totally unavailable in many nations and locations due to few foreign missionaries assigned, geographic and political isolation from the international church, government restrictions on religious freedom, language barriers, and few members living in these locations. For example, self reports are limited or unavailable for most countries where the Church does not have an official presence such as Pakistan, China, and South Sudan.

Ratio of Membership to Congregations

Congregational and membership data is released on a yearly basis and provides information for analysis to estimate activity rates in individual countries. Dividing membership by the number of congregations to produce a ratio of the average number of members per ward or branch is an effective tool for deciphering activity rates. A smaller ratio of members to congregations suggests higher member activity rates as more active members warrant more congregations to meet their needs. A larger ratio of members to congregations suggests lower member activity rates as there are fewer active members and leaders to fill and staff congregations. In 2010, the world average for members per congregation was 493 but the average ward or branch was estimated to have 148 active members (30% of the nominal average). Fluctuations over time in the ratio of members to congregations and the ratio of wards to branches provide vital information that can indicate changes in member activity rates. Increase in the ratio of members per congregation suggests that member activity rates are declining whereas no change in the ratio of members per congregation suggests stable activity rates and a decrease in the ratio of members per congregation

suggests increasing activity rates. These inferences on membership and congregational data assume that the average number of active members per congregation remains constant and that once active membership reaches a certain threshold in a congregation the congregation is split and another new congregation is organized.

Some of the nations with the highest ratios of membership to congregations exhibit the lowest member activity rates worldwide. Provided with the average number of members per congregation, the Church in Chile (909), Hong Kong (763), Nicaragua (698), Bolivia (682), and El Salvador (678) were the five countries with the most members per congregation on average in 2010. The Church in Chile and Hong Kong exhibits some of the lowest estimated member activity rates in the world (12% and 14%, respectively) and member activity rates in Nicaragua, Bolivia, and El Salvador are all within the bottom one-fifth of countries with the worst member activity rates.

Some nations experienced a drastic increase in the average number of members per congregation in the 2000s. The average number of members per congregation increased by 100% or more in 12 countries between 2000 and 2010 including Sri Lanka (313%), the Central African Republic (239%), Malawi (238%), Malaysia (199%), Mozambique (184%), Mongolia (174%), Cyprus (160%), Uganda (132%), Cambodia (126%), Moldova (114%), Togo (113%), and Niue (103%). Of these eight nations, the average number of members per congregation in 2010 ranged from a high of 501 in Uganda to a low of 249 in Togo. Such a substantial percentage increase in the ratio of members to congregations suggests that many converts who were baptized during this period were not retained as augmentation in active membership would generally merit the organization of a commensurate number of congregations.

The average number of members per congregation remained steady or declined in only a handful of countries during the 2000s. The average number of members per congregation increased by 10% or less in Kenya (10%), Guadeloupe (10%), Thailand (8%), American Samoa (8%), Finland (7%), Madagascar (6%), Denmark (5%), Iceland (1%), and the United States (0.3%) whereas the average number of members per congregation declined in Suriname (-53%), Mauritius (-31%), Martinique (-29%), Macau (-28%), the Northern Mariana Islands (-26%), Ethiopia (-18%), Nauru (-13%), Papua New Guinea (-11%), Lesotho (-10%), Latvia (-7%), Trinidad and Tobago (-6%), Andorra (-6%), Cote d'Ivoire (-2%), French Guiana (-2%), and Barbados (-1%). These data suggest concurrent or improving member activity rates in these nations.

The theory that increases in the ratio of members to congregations occurs due increases in active membership in each individual congregation is largely unsupported. Between 2000 and 2010, the average LDS ward or branch in the United States increased by only one member notwithstanding the Church adding nearly one million new members and over 2,000 additional congregations. Commensurate membership and congregational growth suggest stable convert retention rates whereas membership growth outpacing congregational growth suggests declining convert retention rates.

The ratio of wards to branches is an important factor to take into account when utilizing this approach. Some nations with a large number of branches but few or no wards appear to have high member activity rates as the ratio of members per congregations is relatively low (300 members or less per unit) but the average number of active members per branch is often between 25 and 50. Consequently countries with few or no wards that exhibit the highest member activity rates (45% or higher of nominal membership) generally have less than 200 members per unit whereas countries with a large number of wards that exhibit the highest member activity rates generally have less than 450 members per unit. Member-to-congregation ratios between 200 and 350 in countries with few or no wards and between 450 and 550 in countries where most congregations are wards generally exhibit moderate activity rates (30-45% of nominal membership). Member-to-congregation ratios of over 350 in countries with few or no wards and over 550 in countries where wards comprise the majority of congregations generally exhibit low activity rates (less than 30%).

Ratio of Membership to Stakes

For countries with at least 3,000 members, taking the ratio of membership per stake provides insights into member activity as stakes require a certain number of active members to operate. With the exception of countries where church membership is distributed over a large geographical area, low member activity rates are often manifest in countries with over 3,000 members and no stakes operating. At year-end 2010, the Church reported or was estimated to have more than 5,000 members in ten countries (Cambodia, mainland China, India, Sierra Leone, Cape Verde, Malaysia, Jamaica, Liberia, Mozambique, and Guyana) - enough nominal members to staff two stakes - yet in early 2012 none of these nations had stakes organized. Church membership spread over large geographical areas has contributed to delays in establishing stakes in these nations, but the Church has experienced moderate to low activity rates (20-40% of nominal membership) in all these nations with the exception of mainland China.

Seminary and Institute Enrollment

Seminary and institute enrollment numbers also provide valuable information pertaining to member activity rates. Most

members who are enrolled in seminary and institute appear to attend religion classes and Sunday church meetings regularly. Ascertaining the percentage of nominal church membership enrolled in these programs offers insight into member activity rates. Countries with moderately-high to high rates of member activity (45% or higher) generally have at least ten percent of nominal membership consistently enrolled in seminary or institute whereas countries with very low member activity rates (20% or less) generally have less than four percent of membership enrolled in seminary or institute. The Church in Portugal has one of the lowest member activity rates in the world estimated at 11-13% and reports one of the lowest percentages of membership enrolled in seminary or institute, a mere 1.3%.

Calculating the percentage of members attending seminary and institute does not provide a completely accurate assessment of activity for several reasons. First, some individuals enrolled are not baptized members and therefore are not represented in church membership totals reported. Second, enrollment in seminary or institute does not ensure other member activity indicators such as regular church attendance. Less active or inactive members may be enrolled in Church Education System programs due to pressure from members, missionaries, and teachers but fail to attend classes and Sunday worship services in their local ward or branch. Third, seminary and institute target teenage youth and young adults. The age demographics for membership vary significantly by nation and low enrollment numbers may be due to fewer youth and young adults among nominal membership. A high percentage of membership enrolled in seminary and institute in a given country may be inflated if youth and young adults represent a larger percentage of nominal membership than in other nations.

Census Data

Census data on religious self affiliation provide insights into member activity rates as many inactive members no longer identify as Latter-day Saints. These data are valuable as they are among the few which originate from outside the Church that describe the self affiliation of many Latter-day Saints. In Chile, self-identified Latter-day Saints on the 2002 census accounted for 20% of the Church membership reported for 2002, although the census did not query the religious affiliation of individuals under the age of 15. This number is reasonably close to the estimated member activity rate of the Church in Chile at 12%. In Brazil, 199,645 persons identified themselves as Latter-day Saints on the 2000 census,[1] just 26% of the number of members reported by the LDS Church at year-end 2000 and only a percent higher than the estimated member activity rate of Brazil (25%). In Mexico, the 2000 census counted 205,229 persons identifying as Latter-day Saints,[2] just 23% of the number of members reported by the LDS Church at year-end 2000. The estimated activity rate for the Church in Mexico is 20-25%; identical to the percentage of self-affiliated members on the 2000 census. In Ireland, the 2006 census counted 1,237 self-identifying Latter-day Saints; 46% of membership reported by the Church at the time whereas the estimated member activity rate for Ireland is 35%.[3] In Australia, the 2006 census reported 53,100 Latter-day Saints; 45% of nominal church membership notwithstanding member activity rates ranging from 25-30%. In New Zealand, the 2006 census tallied 43,539 Latter-day Saints; 45% of nominal membership on church records. LDS activity rates appear to range between 40-45% in New Zealand. In Samoa, the government reported that self-reported Latter-day Saints comprised 13.2% of the population whereas nominal membership constituted 36% of the national population.[4] Member activity rates in Samoa are estimated at between 35% and 40%; nearly the same percentage as the percentage of membership who self reported on the census. In Tonga, the 2006 census found that 16.8% of national population identified as Latter-day Saint although membership comprised 45% of the national population. Between 30% and 35% of church membership appears active, slightly lower than the 38% of church membership that self reported as LDS on the census. In Fiji, 32% of nominal church membership self-reported as LDS on the 1996 census. The current estimated activity rate for the Church in Fiji is between 20% and 25%.[5] In Iceland, government sources indicate that up to 75% of nominal LDS membership self-affiliates as Latter-day Saint[6] notwithstanding an estimated member activity rate of 40%. These findings indicate that the percentage of nominal church membership which self affiliate on censuses as Latter-day Saint generally ranges within ten percentage points of estimated member activity rates.

Although census data appears as one of the most reliable and accurate methods for ascertaining member activity rates there are several limitations to these data. First, individual countries vary in who they count as religious affiliates depending on age and family status. Religious status is identified by the head of the household for the entire family in some censuses. Children under a certain age are also not reported as religious adherents in some nations, such as children under five in the 2000 Mexican census, whereas children of member families are included in nominal and active membership statistics. Consequently many active youth may not be counted as Latter-day Saints on the census. Second, self-affiliation does not ensure active participation in church. Some inactive or less-active members continue to identify as Latter-day Saints but do not live church teachings and participate in services. Furthermore, not all active members are self affiliated on the census as is the case with many youth from part-member families.

Temples

The number of temples in a country provides additional insight into activity rates, particularly among nations with 150,000 or more members as the size of church membership generally mandates the construction of multiple temples. In 2010, there were slightly over 180,000 members in Canada and nine temples announced, under construction, or in operation whereas in Brazil there were 1.14 million members - nearly a million more members than in Canada - and just seven temples announced, under construction, or in operation. A temple is located in Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Switzerland - all nations with fewer than 10,000 Latter-day Saints on the books that exhibit moderate activity rates - yet there remains only one temple in Bolivia, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Honduras, New Zealand, and Venezuela - all of which have over 100,000 Latter-day Saints on church records and, with the exception of New Zealand, exhibit low member activity rates.

Although the number of temples in a country with over 100,000 members provides insights into member activity rates, this

statistic has little utility by itself as a predictor for member activity rates. Other factors strongly influence the decision for the Church to build additional temples in a country such as distance from operating temples, the geographic distribution of membership, tithe-paying faithfulness, and the maturity of membership.

Leadership

Another indicator of member activity is the number and frequency of members serving in international leadership positions such as mission presidents, temple presidents, area authorities, and general authorities. Countries with a higher percentage of local members serving in these positions at a given time generally demonstrate higher activity rates than other countries that have a smaller percentage of local members serving in these positions. Although no precise statistics are available on this indicator of member activity, countries with few or no members serving in international leadership positions suggest that there may be activity issues at hand.

This approach is most effectively applied in countries with at least 5,000 members as the Church in countries with few members generally does not call members to become international church leaders. The strength and activity of local priesthood leadership in countries with comparatively few members provides insights into member activity issues. Full-time missionaries serving as branch presidents and other local church leaders also suggests challenges with member activity and local leadership development.

Estimating Member Activity Rates Utilizing Multiple Assessments

Russia

Self reports provide abundant data on member activity rates in the LDS Church in Russia. Missionaries serving in some cities report member activity rates as low as 10%, such as in Perm where there fewer than 20 active members in 2010. 20 of the 200 members of the Novokuybishevsk Branch attended church meetings in early 2011. 20 members attended a member meeting in Petrozavodsk with the mission president in 2001.[7] The Pervouralsky Branch had seven active members in late 2010. Many branches in the Russia Moscow West Mission had 15 to 20 active members in early 2011. There were 20-25 active members in the Petergof Branch in late 2010. The Kurgan Branch had approximately 20 active members and four active priesthood holders in mid-2010. The Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk Branch had approximately 55 active members in late 2010. In mid-2010, 50 of the more than 350 members in the Vladivostok Branch were active. The Ussuriysk Branch had 40-50 active members in early 2011. 25-30 attended church meetings in the Tula Branch in mid-2010. The Balakovo Branch had 20 active members in 2010. Some branches in the larger cities such as Moscow, St. Petersburg, and Saratov have between 50 and 75 active members.

In general, active church membership in the largest Russian cities has experienced little increase since the late 1990s, and in some cases has actually declined notwithstanding continued increase in nominal membership. Many of Russia's most populous cities have experienced a decline in the number of LDS congregations operating. In 2001, there were eight branches in Yekaterinburg whereas in 2010 there were three. During this same time period, the number of branches in St. Petersburg declined from thirteen to nine, in Ufa from four to one, in Novosibirsk from five to three, and in Samara from four to two. Rostov has experienced no change in the number of LDS congregations over the past decade whereas Saratov has been the only city with over one million inhabitants to have an increase in the number of LDS branches during this period from four to six. There were 500 LDS members in St. Petersburg in 1992 and 1500 by mid-1994, with subsequent growth to over 2,000 members in the 2000s. However, only an estimated 250 members were attending church regularly in St. Petersburg in late 2010, approximately half of the number that attended fifteen years earlier.

The ratio of members to congregations generates a misleading picture of member activity rates. The average number of members per congregation increased from 121 in 2000 to 181 in 2010; a 50% increase within a decade. With fewer than 200 members per unit on average, member activity rates would appear higher than in most countries. However, when taking self reports from members and full-time missionaries into account it is apparent that nearly all congregations have fewer than 50 active members.

Delays in organizing the first stake in Russia indicated chronic member activity challenges. By the time the first stake was organized in Moscow in 2011, Russia had over 21,000 members on church records; more than twice as many Latter-day Saints as the country with the second most members without a stake at the time (Cambodia). Russia numbers among the countries which had the largest church memberships when their first stake was organized; all other countries which had their first stake organized and a similarly-sized number of church members are in Latin America. The spread of church membership across the world's geographically largest country also contributed to delays in creating the first stake but several of the largest cities appear to have had the minimal number of nominal members to organize a stake for many years but have lacked the needed number of active members to gain approval for a stake to be organized. At present, Russia has the highest number of members per stake on average in the world - one stake per over 21,000 members - due to most church members residing within the ten member districts.

1,289 were enrolled in seminary and institute during the 2008-2009 school year, increasing to 1,444 during the 2009-2010

school year. As many as seven percent of nominal church membership is enrolled in seminary or institute. No census data on self-identified Latter-day Saints is available. There is no temple in Russia. Russia is the country with the second most members without a temple. The Church has called approximately six Russian members to international leadership positions as mission presidents or area authorities.

The estimated member activity rate for the LDS Church in Russia is between 17% and 23% as indicated by combined data from self reports, ratio of members to congregations, ratio of members to stakes, delays in organizing stakes, seminary and institute enrollment, the lack of a temple in Russia, and few members who have served in international leadership positions.

Mexico

Self reports from missionaries indicate that many wards have over 150 active members and others have fewer than 80 active members. Most wards appear to have over 125 active members. Some branches have well over 100 active members or fewer than 20 active members but most appear to have 60 to 80 active members. The ratio of members to congregations increased from 499 in 2000 to 615 in 2010. With over 600 nominal members and between 100 and 200 active members per congregation on average, each ward or branch appears to have hundreds of inactive members. In 2010, the ratio of members to stakes was 5,586 to one. Notwithstanding the noticeable increase in the ratio of members to congregations during the 2000s the number of self-identified Latter-day Saints on the Mexican census increased at a more rapid rate than nominal church membership reported by the Church. The census counted 314,932 self-identified Latter-day Saints in Mexico[8] (25.5% of nominal membership) compared to 205,229 Latter-day Saints in 2000.[9] The inclusion of children under age five in the 2010 census is partially responsible for the increase in the number of members reported on the two censuses, but the majority of this increase appears attributed to larger numbers of nominal Latter-day Saints self-identifying on the census. There are 13 temples in Mexico operating or announced. Scores of Mexican members have been called to serve as international church leaders. When taken all of these activity measures into account, estimated member activity rate for the LDS Church in Mexico is 20-25% of nominal membership.

Conclusion

The most accurate estimates of member activity rates include all of these indicators to produce a comprehensive, multi-faceted approach for calculating member activity rates. Nominal membership, the number of congregations, the average number of members per congregation, the percentage of members enrolled in seminary and institute, the number of temples for countries with sizable membership, the ratio of members to stakes, and the degree of representation of international leadership for a given country are statistics for which the Church releases data that provide insight into activity rates. Self reports, the average number of members per congregation, and census data are often the most reliable measures of activity whereas other measures are often less accurate. No other more reliable measures are available as the Church does not directly publish statistics on membership activity for public consumption.

[1] "Brazil," International Religious Freedom Report 2010, 17 November 2010. http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2010/148738.htm

[2] "Mexico," International Religious Freedom Report 2009, 26 October 2009. http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2009/127397.htm

[3] "Census 2006 Principle Demographic Results," Central Statistics Office Ireland, March 2007. http://www.cso.ie/census/documents/Final%20Principal%20Demographic%20Results%202006.pdf

[4] "Samoa," International Religious Freedom Report 2010, 17 November 2010. http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2010/148892.htm

[5] "Religion," Fiji Islands Bureau of Statistics, retrieved 15 June 2010. http://www.statsfiji.gov.fj/Social/religion_stats.htm

[6] "Religious organisations," Statistics Iceland, retrieved 13 January 2012. http://www.statice.is/Statistics/Population/Religious-organizations

[7] "20 attend fireside in Russia," LDS Church News, 20 January 2001. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/39216/20-attend-fireside-in-Russia.html

[8] "Instituto Nacional de Estadistica y Geografia," www.inegi.org.mx, retrieved 28 January 2012. http://www.inegi.org.mx/

[9] "Mexico," International Religious Freedom Report 2009, 26 October 2009. http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2009/127397.htm