



LDS Growth Case Studies

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Projecting LDS Membership Growth

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Overview

LDS membership growth rates by country generally follow a predictable pattern of growth based on the number of members, duration of an LDS presence, convert baptismal standards enforced by church leaders, and the receptivity of the population where congregations are established. Geometric growth rates (steady or increasing percentage growth) occur in countries with small church memberships, high receptivity, and a recent church establishment. As membership increases and several years or decades elapse since an initial LDS establishment, receptivity of populations in areas with congregations declines, congregational growth rates dissipate, and membership growth rates behave more arithmetically.

This essay highlights membership growth trends over the past several decades, examines LDS Church growth trends over the past decade in the ten countries with the most Latter-day Saints, and highlights specific nations that have experienced rapid or stagnant membership growth. Membership growth projections are provided and opportunities and challenges for increasing membership growth are outlined. Limitations of utilizing membership data to infer church growth trends are also discussed.

Membership Growth Background

The LDS Church reached one million members in 1947; 117 years after the initial organization of the Church. Church membership reached two million in 1963, three million in 1971, four million in 1978, five million in 1982, six million in 1986, seven million in 1989, eight million in 1991, nine million in 1994, ten million in 1997, 11 million in 2000, 12 million in 2004, 13 million in 2007, and 14 million in 2010.

In 1973, 78.5% of worldwide church membership resided in the United States whereas 4.17% resided in South America, 4.15% resided in Europe, 3.96% resided in Central America and Mexico, 3.06% resided in Oceania, and the remaining 6.16% resided in Africa, Asia, and Canada.^[1] Rapid membership growth occurred in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s outside of the United States resulting in half of church membership residing outside of the United States by early 1996.^[2] By year-end 2010, 43.5% of worldwide church membership lived in the United States.

Between 2000 and 2010, the largest numerical increases in church membership occurred in the United States (935,755), Brazil (362,918), Mexico (350,474), the Philippines (175,290), Peru (150,661), Argentina (91,417), Chile (54,097), Bolivia (53,509), Venezuela (53,307), and Nigeria (48,424) whereas decline in church membership occurred in Puerto Rico (-2,476), Macau (-255), the Northern Mariana Islands (-224), Denmark (-141), Nauru (-14), and Andorra (-4). The ten countries with the most rapid percentage growth rates between 2000 and 2010 included Laos (1100% - estimate), Togo (965%), Mozambique (921%), China (567% - estimate), Cameroon (547%), Malaysia (459%), Vietnam (400% - estimate), Cambodia (393%), Guyana (384%), and Moldova (328%).

Between 2000 and 2010, membership growth occurred in many nations which had few or no Latter-day Saints in 2000. A dozen countries appeared to have 20 or fewer Latter-day Saints in 2000 but appeared to have 30 or more members in 2010 (Iraq, Afghanistan, Benin, Saint Lucia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Dominica, South Sudan, the Turks and Caicos Islands, Rwanda, Djibouti, and Brunei).

World Membership Growth Projections

LDS Church membership has experienced arithmetic growth over the past two decades. Since 1991, annual increases in total church membership have varied between a high of 398,745 in 1999 to a low of 263,706 in 2003 and generally ranged between 275,000 and 335,000. If arithmetic membership growth trends over the past two decades continue into the 2010s, worldwide LDS membership in 2020 is projected to number no less than 16.8 million and no greater than 18.1 million and would likely number around 17.5 million.

The Ten Countries with the Most Members (ranked by 2010 membership)

1. United States - 5,208,827 (2000), 6,144,582 (2010), 7,000,000 (2020 projection)

Annual membership growth rates for the LDS Church in the United States declined in the 2000s from a high of 1.95% in 2001 to a low of 1.41% in 2010. The annual increase in numerical membership declined from nearly 102,000 in 2001 to less than 86,000 in 2010. Assuming annual membership increases continue to decline to average 80,000 over the next decade, LDS membership may reach seven million by 2020.

2. Mexico - 884,071 (2000), 1,234,545 (2010), 1,585,000 (2020 projection)

Annual membership growth rates declined in the 2000s from a high of 3.95% in 2001 to lows of 2.84% in 2003 and 3.09% in 2010. Numerical increases in membership rose slightly in the 2000s and averaged around 35,000 a year. LDS membership in Mexico will likely reach 1.585 million in 2020 assuming annual increases in membership hold steady at 35,000.

3. Brazil - 775,822 (2000), 1,138,740 (2010), 1,529,000 (2020 projection)

Membership growth rates declined in Brazil between 2000 and 2003 from 4.27% to 2.93%, increased between 2004 and 2007 from 2.93% to 4.97%, and declined from 2008 to 2010 from 4.97% to 3.27%. Annual increases in LDS membership slightly increased in the 2000s and averaged approximately 36,300 a year. Assuming membership growth rates continue to oscillate over the next decade and the average annual increase in membership slightly increases, membership may total 1.529 million in 2020.

4. The Philippines - 470,486 (2000), 645,776 (2010), 821,000 (2020 projection)

Membership growth widely fluctuated in the 2000s. In 2001, membership increased by 25,576 and grew at a rate of 5.44% whereas in 2003 membership increased by 8,804 and grew at a rate of 1.7%; less than one-third the increase in 2001. Annual membership growth rates increased between 2001 and 2007 to 3.85% and the annual increase in membership reached 22,036. Since 2007 annual membership growth rates have declined. In 2010, membership increased by 13,891 and grew at a rate of 2.2%. Assuming the Church added 17,500 members a year in the Philippines - the average increase in membership a year during the 2000s - in the 2010s, membership would total 821,000 by 2020.

5. Chile - 509,592 (2000), 561,920 (2010), 620,000 (2020 projection)

Membership growth rates rapidly declined between 2001 and 2003 as the annual membership growth rate dropped from 2.08% to 0.52% and the annual increase in church membership fell from 10,610 to 2,767. Annual increase in church membership slowly rose between 2003 and 2009 to reach 7,171 but fell dramatically in 2010. In 2010, church membership grew by 0.31% and increased by 1,719 members. Church membership in Chile may reach 620,000 by 2020 if membership increases by 5,400 members; the average yearly increase in membership during the 2000s.

6. Peru - 342,902 (2000), 493,563 (2010), 645,000 (2020 projection)

Annual increases and percentage growth rates in LDS membership in Peru oscillated between 10,500 and 18,500 during the 2000s and averaged 15,000. Assuming no major change in church membership growth patterns during the 2000s, membership may reach 645,000 by 2020.

7. Argentina - 297,976 (2000), 389,393 (2010), 480,000 (2020 projection)

Membership growth declined in Argentina during the first half of the 2000s as the annual increase in church membership dropped from 11,673 in 2002 to 7,591 in 2006. In the late 2000s, annual membership increase rose to 8,724 in 2010. Annual membership growth rates fell by one percent in the 2000s from approximately 3.5% to 2.5%. Membership is projected to reach

480,000 in 2020 if the Church continues to add 9,000 members a year in the 2010s; the average increase in membership a year during the 2000s.

8. Guatemala - 179,258 (2000), 226,027 (2010), 275,000 (2020 projection)

LDS membership growth behaved arithmetically during the 2000s as annual increases in church membership varied from 3,676 and 5,731 and averaged 4,677 for the decade. Membership growth rates experienced no major change. LDS membership is projected to reach 275,000 by 2020 if membership increases by 5,000 a year during the 2010s.

9. Ecuador - 149,938 (2000), 195,941 (2010), 245,000 (2020 projection)

Membership growth rates slightly increased in the 2000s from a low of 2.08% in 2001 to a high of 3.29% in 2006. In 2010, membership increased by 2.86%. Annual increase in membership rose from 3,118 in 2001 to 5,443 in 2010. Yearly increases in membership by 5,000 in the 2010s would result in at least 245,000 members by 2010.

10. United Kingdom - 175,572 (2000), 186,814 (2010), 198,000 (2020 projection)

Stagnant membership growth occurred in the United Kingdom for much of the 2000s as the number of church members increased by approximately 1,400 between 2000 and 2003. Membership declined in 2001 and in 2003 by 2,611 and 772, respectively. During the late 2000s, the Church posted gains in membership, the largest occurring in 2009 when church membership increased by 2,410 and grew by 1.31% for the year. The average annual increase in membership during the 2000s was 1,124. Assuming that church membership increases by at least this number in the 2010s, membership is likely to reach 198,000 by 2020.

Other Notable Countries (provided with 2010 membership ranking)

38. DR Congo - 8,827 (2000), 27,058 (2010), 50,000 (2020 projection)

Annual increases in membership declined sharply in the early 2000s from a high of 2,646 in 2002 to a low of 969 in 2004. During the late 2000s, rapid membership growth restarted resulting in church membership increasing by 3,443 in 2010. Annual membership growth rates were 24% in both 2001 and 2002, fell to between five and ten percent in the mid-2000s, and rose to 14.6% in 2010. Annual membership growth rates will likely decline in the coming decade as this pattern generally occurs in most countries as church membership grows larger. Based on past growth patterns in other African nations with larger church memberships than the DR Congo, church membership is projected to reach 50,000 by 2020.

76. Denmark - 4,519 (2000), 4,378 (2010), 4,400 (2020 projection)

Stagnant or declining membership growth occurred in the 2000s in Denmark as on average membership declined annually by 14. Slight increases in membership occurred in the late 2000s whereas declining membership generally occurred in the early 2000s. LDS membership in Denmark is projected to number approximately 4,400 considering past tiny fluctuations in decline and growth.

26. Nicaragua - 34,791 (2000), 71,888 (2010), 125,000 (2020 projection)

In the 2000s, the LDS Church in Nicaragua experienced annual membership growth rates which typically ranged from six to eight percent. Considering membership growth behaved geometrically in the 2000s, projected membership for 2020 was calculated based on a best-fit line from data gathered in the 2000s. Membership is projected to total approximately 125,000 by 2020 as the average increase in membership per year is predicted to increase from 3,710 in the 2000s to 5,588 in the 2010s.

22. Nigeria - 49,935 (2000), 98,359 (2010), 146,000 (2020 projection)

With approximately 100,000 members in 2011, the LDS Church in Nigeria reports the highest number of church members of any country in Africa. During the 2000s, annual membership growth rates declined from over 10% in 2001 to 5% in 2010 whereas the annual membership increases remained stable, fluctuation from a low of 4,064 in 2003 to a high of 5,427 and averaging 4,842. Based on growth trends over the last decade of arithmetic growth, church membership is projected to total over 146,000 by 2020.

60. Uganda - 2,598 (2000), 9,024 (2010), 19,000 (2020 projection)

The LDS Church in Uganda may reach 19,000 members by 2020 based on similar growth trends in other Sub-Saharan African countries, recent and ongoing expansion of outreach into additional areas, rapid membership growth since the late 2000s, and high receptivity.

Opportunities

The most favorable conditions for rapid membership growth and moderate to high convert retention exist in Sub-Saharan Africa, Oceania, and South Asia as populations exhibit high receptivity, member-missionary efforts are well-developed, mission standards for converts to be baptized are generally sufficient and consistent to ensure good convert retention, and area policies have permitted the establishment of additional congregations in previously unreached or lesser-reached areas. Populations throughout Latin America and East Asia generally exhibit fair levels of receptivity to the LDS Church but low cultural significance of regular church attendance, quick-baptize tactics widely practiced by LDS missionaries, mission and area policies limiting outreach expansion in most nations, and inconsistent levels of understanding of church teachings by new converts frustrate retention efforts. Receptivity presents the lowest in Europe as secularism has spread and ties to traditional faiths remain strong. Mission guidelines for convert baptismal standards, baptismal goals, area policies promoting or discouraging outreach expansion, and the effectiveness of member-missionary programs are controllable factors which affect membership growth rates in countries around the world regardless of uncontrollable factors such as receptivity.

Challenges

In Latin America, membership growth rates transitioned from behaving geometrically to behaving arithmetically during the late 1990s and 2000s as a result of compounding inactivity and convert retention issues, increasing standards for covert baptism, and a decrease in outreach expansion initiatives as missionary resources focused on retention and reactivation. Consequently the anticipated rate of membership growth in Spanish-speaking nations fell far below its projection for 2012; the year which church statisticians in 1996 estimated that Spanish-speaking Latter-day Saints would outnumber their English-speaking counterparts.^[3] In late 2011, it appeared that English-speaking Latter-day Saints comprised approximately ten percent more of worldwide church membership than Spanish-speakers. Similar disappointments in anticipated membership growth have occurred in Eastern Europe, East Asia, and the Caribbean.

Limitations

Raw LDS membership totals do not take into account the activity status of each individual member resulting in many individuals on church records not attending church, following church teachings, or considering themselves as Latter-day Saints. Excessive emphasis on achieving numerical growth can lead to a decline in prebaptismal standards which in turn result in lower convert retention and member activity rates over time. Other indicators such as increases in the number of congregations, stakes, districts, missions, missionaries, and temples offer greater insight into real LDS Church growth as pertaining to activity and self-affiliation.

^[1] "Membership Distribution of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1973," Deseret News 1974 Church Almanac, p. 116-117.

^[2] "News of the Church," Ensign, March 1996.
<http://lds.org/ensign/1996/03/news-of-the-church/more-members-now-outside-us-than-in-us>

^[3] "News of the Church," Ensign, March 1996.
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