



# LDS Growth Case Studies

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## Analysis of LDS Growth in Seoul, South Korea

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### Overview

The most populous city on the Korean Peninsula and capital of South Korea, Seoul (??) supports a population of approximately 10.5 million people within its city limits.<sup>[1]</sup> The entire Seoul agglomeration also includes neighboring satellite cities such as Bucheon (??), Goyang (??), Incheon (??), Seongnam (??), and Suwon (??) and ties with Jakarta, Indonesia as the fourth most populous agglomeration in the world with 25.4 million people.<sup>[2]</sup> Seoul proper is divided into 25 administrative city districts called gu (?). The LDS Church has maintained a presence in Seoul for half a century and reports over two dozen congregations, six stakes, and one district headquartered within the city limits. This case study reviews past LDS growth in Seoul and identifies successes, opportunities, challenges, and future prospects for growth. The growth of the LDS Church is compared to other nontraditional Christian faiths.

### LDS Background

In 1970, the Church created the Seoul Korea Military District to service American military personnel and English speakers throughout the country. In 1973, the Church created its first stake in Seoul: The Seoul Korea Stake. Additional stakes organized included the Seoul Korea South (1977), Seoul Korea East (1979), Seoul Korea North (1979), Seoul Korea Gangseo (1982), Seoul Korea Yeongdong (1982), and Seoul Korea Dongdaemun (1983). Announced in 1981, the Seoul Korea Temple was dedicated in 1985 and continues to service all of South Korea. In 1992, the Church created two new stakes in neighboring Anyang and Suwon. The Anyang Korea Stake continues to service two wards within the Seoul city limits in Geumcheon-gu. In 2001, there were 42 congregations based within the Seoul city limits (38 wards, four branches) that on average serviced a quarter of a million people each.

In 2012, the Church discontinued the Seoul Korea North Stake and assigned all remaining wards to the Seoul Korea Stake. In late 2012, there were nine wards and one branch in the Seoul Korea Stake, five wards and one branch in the Seoul Korea Dongdaemun Stake, five wards in the Seoul Korea East Stake, seven wards in the Seoul Korea Gangseo Stake, five wards in the Seoul Korea South Stake, and five wards and one branch in the Seoul Korea Yeongdong Stake. In late 2012, there were 28 congregations based within the Seoul city limits (25 wards, three branches) that on average serviced approximately 370,000 people each.

A map of Seoul city districts and status of LDS outreach as of late 2012 can be found [here](#).

### Successes

The Church has operated a congregation within 24 of Seoul's 25 city districts within the past decade, providing minimal missionary outreach for 96.5% of the city population. In the early 2000s, the Church operated at least one congregation for every city district except Gangbuk. In late 2012, only four city districts had no LDS meetinghouse or congregation based entirely within the district (Gangbuk, Mapo, Seongdong, and Yongsan) due to ward consolidations over the previous decade. Of the 21 city districts with an LDS congregation at present, 14 have one congregation and seven have two congregations.

Convert retention rates in Seoul have appeared higher than in many other areas of South Korea. Approximately half of converts

appeared to be active within a year after baptism in some Seoul stakes; significantly higher than in many other areas of Korea where hundreds of converts are baptized a year but with little or no increase in sacrament meeting attendance.

Local leadership exhibits good sustainability and adequate training resulting in no need for missionaries to undertake local ward callings or fulfill member responsibilities. The Church has closed wards before individual congregations become inclined to rely on full-time missionaries to fill empty positions.

## Opportunities

The dense concentration of millions of Koreans within a small geographic area allows for fewer mission outreach centers to adequately service the population. Small towns and rural communities pose significantly greater difficulties for the Church to proselyte due to their small populations spread over large geographical areas, thus requiring more congregations to adequately reach the population. Approximately one-fifth of the national population resides within the city limits of Seoul and can be easily administered with one or two missionary companionships assigned to each district. Planting branches within the four unreached city districts or in neighborhoods distant from current LDS meetinghouses would provide for greater saturation of missionary outreach although it is likely that the Church would experience slow growth in these areas. Due to often higher receptivity among the non-Korean population, ethnic-specific outreach among migrant workers. As of late 2012, there have been no concentrated efforts to reach this population although the Korea Seoul Mission has periodically assigned a companionship to the Seoul (English) Branch to teach foreigners.

## Challenges

The emigration of active Korean Latter-day Saint families has seriously impacted the growth of the Church in Seoul. Full member families have primarily relocated to the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and China over the past decade for employment and educational purposes and rarely return. Other factors have contributed to emigration including a dwindling population of active members, cultural pressures that oppose LDS teachings, and desire for higher living standards. No LDS colleges or universities based in Asia has also influenced emigration trends as many Koreans view the Church as Americentric. The steady exodus of active members has created a leadership vacuum and decreased the number of active members in many areas, necessitating the consolidation of more than a dozen wards and the discontinuation of a stake for the first time in the Church's history in Korea - all within the past decade. In November 2009, the Area Presidency and LDS apostle Elder Jeffrey R. Holland strongly admonished remaining members to not leave the country and promised that once members stopped emigrating elsewhere that the Church would experience greater growth in Korea. As of late 2012, there has not appeared to be any noticeable change in the ongoing trend of steady Latter-day Saint emigration from Korea as indicated by ongoing ward closures in Seoul and throughout the country.

The declining number of active members in Seoul is further evidenced by other negative church growth developments within the past decade, namely decreasing numbers of congregations and full-time missionaries serving from South Korea. One-third of the Church's wards and branches headquartered within the Seoul city limits closed between 2001 and late 2012. The massive consolidation of units has reduced the Church's outreach throughout the city. Between 2001 and 2012, the number of congregations within the Seoul city limits declined by four in the Seoul South Stake (Sadang, Seo Dae, Sillim, and Sangdo Wards), two in the Seoul Gangseo Stake (Banghwa and Sinwol Wards), two in the former Seoul North Stake (Mapo and Sinchon Wards), two in the Seoul Stake (Chung Woon and Seongdong Wards), two in the Seoul East Stake (Jangan and Taeneung Wards), and two in the Seoul Yeong Dong Stake (Jamsil and Yeongdong Wards). The Seoul North Stake was the only stake in Seoul that did not have a ward or branch discontinued within the Seoul city limits since 2001. The number of Korean Latter-day Saints serving missions from Korea has continued to fall from possibly as many as 300 in the late 1980s and early 1990s to approximately 100 in 2010. Fewer youth converts joining the Church within the past two decades and the departure of LDS families with children appear primarily responsible for this decline. This decline has occurred not just within Seoul but throughout the entire country and contributed to the closure of the Korea Missionary Training Center (MTC) that was previously based next to the Seoul Korea Temple.

The recent trend in congregation decline over the past decade is especially concerning in light of the increasing population of Seoul. Between 2002 and 2009, the city population increased by 183,500. The three city districts that experienced the greatest population increases were Gangseo (49,027), Songpa (39,408), and Seocho (37,548) whereas the three city districts that experienced the largest population decreases were Seodaemun (-31,352), Nowon (-28,424), and Seongdong (-26,954). Within the past decade, two of the three city districts that reported the largest population gains had at least one ward discontinued (Gangseo and Songpa) whereas two of the three city districts that reported the largest population losses had at least one ward discontinued (Seodaemun and Seongdong). In other words, these findings indicate a shrinking LDS population in Seoul as evidenced by the total city population continuing to increase but the number of active members continuing to decrease.

Receptivity to the Church has also declined within Seoul over the past two decades due to the saturation of proselytizing Christian faiths and increasing secularism. These conditions have resulted in fewer convert baptisms and the Church assigning smaller numbers of full-time missionaries. The 2010 decision to merge the Korea Seoul and Korea Seoul West Missions into a single mission stands as a further testament to declining church growth conditions due a decline in member-missionary manpower, expanding opportunities in countries with more receptive populations, and the decline in the number of Korean

members serving full-time missions.

The Church in South Korea experiences one of the lowest member activity rates in the world as only 10-15% of nominal members on church records are active. The whereabouts of most inactive members are unknown and Korean laws prevent the Church from finding lost members using their national identification numbers. Quick-baptism tactics employed for several decades particularly among youth, socialization problems with new move-ins, increased travel times for members that live in an area where a ward closed, and declining church attendance rates in the general population have all contributed to low member activity rates.

## **Comparative Growth**

The decline in the number of congregations in Seoul has been greater than any other major city in South Korea. One-third of the wards and branches have closed within the past decade in Seoul compared to only one-fifth of the number of wards and branches nationwide. Some industrialized East Asian nations report similar declines in the numbers of wards and branches in major cities such as in Japan and Hong Kong. The extend of LDS outreach in Seoul remains average for major cities in East Asia. In Japan, the Church operates six Japanese-speaking wards and two English-speaking wards headquartered in six of the 23 ku or administrative wards within the city limits of Tokyo. In Taiwan, the Church has a congregation functioning in nine of the 12 city districts of Taipei. In Hong Kong, the Church has a congregation functioning in 17 of the 18 city districts.

Jehovah's Witnesses operate over 100 congregations within the Seoul city limits. There are several non-Korean congregations including six Korean sign language, four Chinese-speaking, and two English-speaking congregations and one congregation each for Hindi, Japanese, Russian, and Vietnamese speakers. Four languages have a group that meets under another congregation including Mongolian, Nepali, Spanish, and Tagalog. The LDS Church operates only one massive English-speaking branch that had almost 300 active members in 2010. The Seoul (English) Branch also services a handful of Tagalog, Chinese, and French speakers and operates a Tagalog-speaking Sunday School but no other non-English language services. The LDS Church once operated a Mongolian-speaking group in the mid-2000s but it was unclear whether this congregation continued to operate in the early 2010s.

## **Future Prospects**

The outlook for future LDS Church growth in Seoul appears bleak due the steady emigration of active members to other countries, no indication that the ongoing trend of congregation consolidations is close to reversing, the recent closure of the Korea MTC and the Korea Seoul West Mission, declining numbers of members serving missions, few convert baptisms, and the Church not creating any new wards or branches within Seoul in over a decade. Half of the Church's remaining stakes in Seoul operate with the minimum number of wards needed for a stake to function, signaling that additional stakes will be discontinued if any more wards are closed. The opening of a small church university in Seoul may help reverse the trend of member emigration and jumpstart missionary activity among youth and young adults although prospects appear slim that the Church will pursue opening any additional universities in the coming years worldwide - let alone in South Korea where there are only approximately 10,000 active members and well-established universities that are highly esteemed by the general public. A more realistic outlook for addressing activity and emigration woes may focus on creating young single adult (YSA) outreach centers similar to the Church's efforts in Europe to encourage members to marry within the Church and foster a sense of LDS community.

[1] "South Korea - Seoul," [www.citypopulation.de](http://www.citypopulation.de), retrieved 1 October 2012.  
<http://www.citypopulation.de/KoreaSouth-Seoul.html>

[2] "The Principal Agglomerations of the World," [www.citypopulation.de](http://www.citypopulation.de), retrieved 1 October 2012.  
<http://www.citypopulation.de/world/Agglomerations.html>