

LDS Growth Case Studies

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Understanding YSA Activity Challenges in the United States

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Overview

The LDS Church defines young single adults (YSAs) as unmarried members between the ages of 18 and 30. Especially in the United States, the Church provides specific YSA-directed outreach and resources for YSAs but overall experiences moderately low member activity rates notwithstanding these efforts. The percentage of YSAs who attend church regularly and follow basic church teachings considerably varies by location. Many YSA congregations report that approximately half of members are active in most areas of the Intermountain West whereas only about 10-20% of members on church records are active elsewhere. There is also a wide range of variation in activity rates congregation to congregation in specific geographic regions. However, church leaders and members report that most stakes outside of high-density LDS areas have hundreds of inactive YSA members on church records.

In this case study, religiosity among young adults in the United States is explored followed by activity trends with young adult Latter-day saints. Challenges for young single adults to remain active are identified and discussed. Recommendations to improve member activity rates among this demographic are provided.

Religiosity of Young Adults in America

Low levels of interest in organized religion, consistent church attendance, and daily engagement in personal religious behaviors such as prayer and scripture reading are common frustrations found in YSAs not only in the LDS Church but in most Christian denominations. One study found that seven in 10 Protestants aged 18 to 30 stopped attending church by age 23 despite regularly attending church in high school.[1] Another Christian study reported that three-quarters of young adult participants aged 18 to 29 do not go to church, do not pray, and do not read the Bible.[2] In 2010, the Pew Forum reported that one-quarter of Americans aged 18 to 29 are not affiliated with any religious group.[3] Other studies and reports have indicated that some aspects of religiosity among young adults have steadily declined in the United States from generation to generation such as church attendance.[4]

Activity Trends with Young Adult Latter-day Saints

Most Latter-day Saint youth remain under the wing of an active parent until age 18 when college or vocational training begins. Consequently many YSAs do not make a more definitive, independent decision to be active in the Church and identify as a Latter-day Saint until separation from family. Associate director Scott McConnell of the Nashville-based, Southern Baptist-supported Lifeway Research reported in 2007 that "it seems the teen years are like a free trial on a product. By 18, when it's their choice whether to buy in to church life, many don't feel engaged and welcome."[5]

Young adults aged 18-29 nonetheless constitute a larger percentage of total adult membership for the LDS Church than most religious groups. In 2007, the Pew Research Forum reported that Latter-day Saints tied with historical black Protestant churches for highest percentage of young adults aged 18 to 29 (24%) among major Christian groups surveyed.[6] This finding appears attributed to higher birthrates than many other religious groups, sizable numbers of convert baptisms consisting of children and youth, and higher activity rates among LDS young adults compared to many other Christian denominations.

In the 2000s, the Church organized hundreds of YSA wards and branches throughout the United States in an effort to provide

sufficient administrative structure to revamp retention and reactivation efforts, spur opportunities for socialization and fellowship, and instill a sense of community and belonging. Some of these efforts appear to have yielded long lasting results through baptizing increasing numbers of YSA converts and keeping youth and young adults active. In the early 2010s, the Church had significantly slowed the rate at which YSA units were organized in the United States.

Some of the most prominent instances of low YSA member activity rates have been in the Wasatch Front where over half the population is nominally a Latter-day Saint. In 2011, church leaders held a massive conference attended by nearly 5,000 and reconfigured the boundaries of 147 student and YSA congregations into 121 YSA wards between North Salt Lake and Taylorsville. At the meeting, LDS apostle Elder M. Russell Ballard expressed concern about large numbers of YSAs falling into inactivity, indicated that the unit restructuring occurred in part due to inactivity woes, and challenged participants to bring at least one fellow YSA back into church activity. A year earlier, the Church experimented with consolidating student single and YSA congregations into the same units and creating YSA stakes to focus on improving activity rates in other cities in Utah such as Cedar City, Ephraim, Logan, Ogden, and St. George. These efforts have born at least some short-term results. Elder David Evans of the First Quorum of the Seventy noted that as part of reactivation efforts connected to the redistricting of YSA wards, members visited at least 4,600 less-active and inactive YSAs and reactivated 1,100 within the first year.[7]

There is significant variability in member activity rates by region, city, congregation, and gender. In the late 2000s, one Coloradoan stake in the Denver area reported over 600 YSAs on church records but less than 100 attended the YSA congregation. Some Church Education System (CES) employees have indicated that YSA member activity rates under 20% occur in many stakes within the United States. On the other hand, some YSA units appear to have moderate to high member activity rates. Church members in some areas report that as many as 75% of members on church records attend sacrament meeting regularly. However this statistic is often misleading as large numbers of inactive or semi-active YSAs continue to have their membership records assigned to ordinary family wards and branches. Some YSA congregations potentially service as many as 1,000 members if a single YSA unit services multiple stakes. YSA women are more likely to be active than their male counterparts. Many members and church leaders report that the number of active women outnumber the number of active men in nearly all YSA congregations by as many as three to one.

Challenges

The transition of YSAs from their home ward or branch to a YSA ward in their area or to a YSA ward that meets in the city where they attend college constitutes one of the greatest sources of inactivity. Church leaders have widely observed that teenage members who remain at home after high school graduation are much more likely to stop attending church and not marry in the temple than those who go to a church university or a university with a strong LDS presence. Many young single adults who attend colleges and universities that are not church schools or have a small LDS presence also exhibit high rates of YSA attrition.

Secularism continues to erode traditional family and societal values that were often reinforced by Judeo-Christian principles. The influence of secularism is perhaps no more strong and widespread as on college and university campuses. The cultural influences of college and non-LDS peers in contemporary American society present significant challenges for Latter-day Saints YSAs to endure. Sexual immorality, pornography, alcohol, and drugs are rampant on most secular university and college campuses. Many students and faculty in higher education promote secularism and ridicule organized religion. Active participation in church and even identification with organized religion is often ridiculed and seen as old fashioned.

One of the greatest challenges to effectively meeting YSA activity needs is the dynamic nature of this young demographic. Many active YSAs attend a YSA unit often for less than a year due to changing educational or vocational pursuits, serving missions, or getting married. If there is no steady flow of new members into the unit to replace those who move, marry, or serve missions, the quality and self-sufficiency of the entire unit is diminished. Church leaders face the relentless challenge of keeping membership records current, callings staffed, and home and visiting teaching afloat. The high turnover in membership presents many positives for member-missionary work and reactivation efforts as these environments are often inviting to newcomers. However, church leaders and ordinary members must sustain diligent efforts to maintain community and continuity with the ever changing ebb and flow of membership.

The rising influence of secularism on American culture and society has appeared to lower member activity rates for YSAs. American society often conveys that religion and science are incompatible with one another and that the benefits and truths of science outweigh any positives offered by religion due to hypothesis testing, objectivity, tangible and observable evidences, and technological advances that have provided obvious and long-lasting improvements for mankind. Religion as a whole has become an increasingly taboo subject to publicly discuss and esteemed as passé, resulting in many Latter-day Saints hesitating to stand for their beliefs if they have immature testimonies and a developing understanding of self. Moral values have become increasing viewed as relative to each individual and have lost meaning and purpose for many.

Recommendations

A two-pronged approach that addresses individual testimony and religious habit development and mitigates many of the social and logistical issues of staffing YSA units and organizations will be required to achieve greater progress in ameliorating low member activity rates among YSAs. The greatest need in addressing YSA activity challenges in the United States centers on developing stronger discipleship, testimony, and real-life gospel skills.

Youth programs such as Duty to God for young men and Personal Progress for young women offer valuable structure and diversity in personal religious experiences that can help improve individual commitment and various measures of member activity that carry into young adulthood. These programs emphasize personal commitment to living the gospel, developing a testimony, and receiving exposure to a wide range of activities and learning opportunities designed to shape an adolescence life and help discover and mature talents and abilities. Consistent and widespread implementation of both programs can help prepare youth for living the gospel without the immediate in-person assistance of a parent when confronting challenges and compromising situations where personal faith and testimony are challenged.

Church leaders have instituted some programs that help address the social and logistical issues that contribute to YSAs becoming inactive. Some stakes have held special firesides and conferences where graduating high school seniors visit the local institute building with their parents and youth leaders. Some stake presidents have called couples to serve as youth transition specialists to help graduating high school seniors to adjust to their local YSA unit in the area if they do not attend college outside their hometown. For YSAs that pursue college education away from home, some church leaders have contacted the local bishop or branch president and worked with the individual to help maintain continuity in leadership accountability.

The October 2012 announcement lowering the mission age to 18 for men and 19 for women has excellent potential to improve member activity rates for young single adults. Church leaders and members have widely observed that there are sizable numbers of young men who commit to serving a mission upon graduation from high school but lose the desire or become engaged in prohibitive behaviors that temporary disqualify them from missionary service by the time they reach age 19. Instances of attrition for prospective missionaries appears most prominent in secular universities and colleges, particularly where there is a small LDS presence. It is possible that the Church will increase the percentage of young adult men and women who serve missions which may improve member activity rates upon returning home from missions. Missionary service does not inoculate returned missionaries from falling away from the Church and becoming inactive as church leaders express inactive returned missionaries within their stewardship constitutes one of their greatest frustrations and disappointments. Activity rates have been historically high with returned missionaries. In 1979, the Church conducted a study of over a thousand returned missionaries and reported that 97% attended sacrament meeting at least once a month, 91% attended at least three sacrament meetings a month, 95% of married returned missionaries were married in the temple, and 89% of returned missionaries held a calling.[8] However it is unclear where this sample of returned missionaries originated (possibly just in Utah or the Intermountain West) and may not be representative for the Church for the United States or the Church as a whole. More recent official figures for church attendance, temple marriage, and other measures of member activity for returned missionaries are not available but have appeared to decline since their levels in the late 1970s.

The organization of additional YSA stakes in locations with a sufficient number of YSA wards may help improve member activity rates by providing more socialization opportunities among fellow Latter-day Saints and offering consistent administrative and leadership support totally dedicated and adapted to common issues faced by this demographic. Time will tell how successful the newly organized YSA stakes in Utah, Idaho, Arizona, Hawaii, and Virginia will be in addressing these issues and whether this approach would be useful in other states. States without YSA stakes that may benefit from the organization of one or more YSA stakes include California, Colorado, Nevada, Oregon, Texas, and Washington.

Conclusion

The increasing influence of secularism on American society will remain one of the greatest challenges for the LDS Church to retain its members from adolescence into early adulthood. There remains a significant need for church leaders to tailor gospel teaching, testimony development, and the practical application of living church teachings to a secular environment. Recent revisions of teaching manuals for youth classes at church, increased emphasis on programs like Duty to God and Personal Progress, and reduced minimum age for full-time missionary service have potential to stabilize and possibly increase the overall activity rates for YSAs in the United States. Due to unavoidable logistical challenges that come with the transition from adolescence into adulthood, the Church will continue to experience difficulties losing active or semi-active YSAs to inactivity as a result of societal pressures, testimony development challenges, and maladjustment to YSA congregations from their home wards and branches.

[1] Grossman, Cathy Lynn. "Young adults aren't sticking with church," USA Today, 6 August 2007. http://www.usatoday.com/news/religion/2007-08-06-church-dropouts_N.htm

[2] Volentine, Jason. "Young Adults Are Saying "No Thanks" to Religion," www.39online.com, retrieved 3 September 2012. http://www.39online.com/news/local/kiah-church-young-story,0,7055139.story

[3] Pond, Allison; Smith, Gregory; Clement, Scott. "Religion Among the Millennials," The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 17 February 2010. http://www.pewforum.org/Age/Religion-Among-the-Millennials.aspx

[4] Grossman, Cathy Lynn. "Young adults 'less religious,' not necessarily 'more secular'," USA Today, 17 February 2010. http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/religion/2010-02-17-pewyouth17_ST_N.htm?csp=usat.me

[5] Grossman, Cathy Lynn. "Young adults aren't sticking with church," USA Today, 6 August 2007.

http://www.usatoday.com/news/religion/2007-08-06-church-dropouts_N.htm

[6] Pond, Allison; Smith, Gregory; Clement, Scott. "Religion Among the Millennials," The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 17 February 2010. http://www.pewforum.org/Age/Religion-Among-the-Millennials.aspx

[7] Stack, Peggy Fletcher. "Loss of members spurred LDS singles ward changes," The Salt Lake Tribute, 29 April 2011. http://www.sltrib.com/sltrib/news/51700209-78/lds-single-lake-salt.html.csp

[8] Card, Orson Scott. "Survey Results Show That a Mission Makes a Big Difference," Liahona, February 1979. https://www.lds.org/liahona/1979/02/survey-results-show-that-a-mission-makes-a-big-difference