LDS Growth Case Studies

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Comparing Congregational and Membership Growth Trends in the LDS Church: 1950-2012

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Overview

Congregational growth serves as one of the most accurate measurements for ascertaining active membership growth in the LDS Church. Certain activity requirements must be met within specific geographical areas in order for church leaders to organize additional wards and branches such as sacrament meeting attendance, the number of priesthood holders who regularly attend church and follow basic LDS teachings, and the ratio of active priesthood holders to general LDS membership. Membership growth provides insight into the total number of baptized members but does not take into consideration the activity status and self-affiliation of members.

This case study analyzes how congregational and membership growth trends have behaved over the past half century on a worldwide basis and over the past decade on a country-by-country basis.

Worldwide Trends

The number of congregations reached 5,000 in 1961, 10,000 in 1979, 15,000 in 1985, 20,000 in 1992, and 25,000 in 1998. At year-end 2011, there were 28,784 congregations. Annual congregational growth rates have widely fluctuated year to year but averaged around five percent in the 1950s, four percent in the 1960s, five percent in the 1970s, five percent in the 1980s, four percent in the 1990s, one percent in the 2000s, and 0.6% in the early 2010s.

The Church reached one million members in 1947; 117 years after the initial organization of the 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. Annual membership growth rates widely fluctuated year to year prior to World War II but were approximately four percent in the 1950s, six to seven percent in the 1960s, four to six percent in the 1970s, four to five percent in the 1980s, three percent in the 1990s, and two percent in the 2000s.

Membership growth outpaced congregational growth in 1953, 1955, 1957-1958, 1960-1963, 1965-1967, 1969-1972, 1976, 1979, 1981-1991, 1994, 1996, and 1999-2012. The number of years per decade in which membership growth surpassed congregational growth was four in the 1950s, 8 in the 1960s, 5 in the 1970s, nine in the 1980s, five in the 1990s, and 10 in the 2000s.

Calculating the average number of members per congregation is a useful statistic that sheds insight into incommensurate membership and congregational growth rates. The average number of members per unit was 368 in the 1950s, 395 in the 1960s, 435 in the 1970s, 393 in the 1980s, 416 in the 1990s, 460 in the 2000s, and 497 in the early 2010s.

In 2011, LDS membership increased by 309,879 (2.2%) whereas the number of wards and branches increased by 124 (0.4%). If the number of branches increased at the same rate as membership (2.2%), there would have been an increase of approximately 630 congregations in 2011. The Church has increased the number of congregations by 630 or more in a single year during 15 of the past 61 years (24.6%), with the number of units increasing by more than 1,000 during three years (1980 - 2,105, 1992 - 1,274, and 1997 - 1,181). On the contrary, if membership increased at the same rate as the number of

congregations (0.4%), there would have been a mere increase of 56,500 members for 2011 - the lowest annual increase in membership since 1952. Between 2001 and 2011, annual congregational growth rates have comprised between eight and 68% of membership growth rates and averaged approximately 40% of membership growth rates during this period.

Country-by-Country Trends

The discrepancy between membership and congregational growth rates is especially compelling for individual countries. Between year-end 2001 and year-end 2011, the Church experienced more rapid congregational growth than membership growth in 12 countries, including Mauritius (100% versus 26%), Suriname (500% versus 155%), the Solomon Islands (300% versus 108%), Saint Vincent and the Grenadines (100% versus 52%), Angola (150% versus 91%), Madagascar (371% versus 230%), Papua New Guinea (131% versus 90%), Reunion (25% versus 18%), Lesotho (100% versus 73%), Liberia (100% versus 73%), Latvia (133% versus 110%), Trinidad and Tobago (83% versus 72%), and Botswana (100% versus 90%). However, only four of these countries had more than 10 congregations operating at year-end 2011 (Madagascar, Papua New Guinea, Liberia, and Trinidad and Tobago). Membership growth outpaced congregational growth in all other countries in the world; a sign of decreasing member activity and convert retention rates.

In 2011, there were 10 countries that would have had the number of wards and branches increase by 10 or more for the year if congregational growth rates increased at the same rate as membership growth. The number of units would have increased by 187 in the United States (27 actual), 63 in Mexico (-9 actual), 59 in Brazil (15 actual), 27 in the Philippines (18 actual), 24 in Peru (12 actual), 22 in Argentina (-18 actual), 17 in Nigeria (9 actual), 12 in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (12 actual), 11 in Ecuador (5 actual), and 11 in Guatemala (2 actual). In actuality, only half of these countries experienced increases in the number of congregations of 10 or more (the United States, Brazil, the Philippines, Peru, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo).

If membership growth rates increased at the same rate as congregational growth rates during the year 2011, LDS membership would have increased significantly less than in actuality. Only eight countries would experience an annual increase in membership of 3,000 or more, including the United States (13,788 versus 84,651), the Philippines (10,567 versus 15,822), Brazil (8,873 versus 34,793), Peru (7,632 versus 15,249), Venezuela (4,928 versus 3,684), Honduras (3,898 versus 5,700), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (3,418 versus 3,377), and Ecuador (3,266 versus 6,994).

Of the 139 countries that experienced reportable membership growth during 2011, only 46 (33%) reported any increase in the number of congregations for the year. Of the 46 countries that experienced congregational growth in 2011, only 23 (50%) experienced more rapid congregational growth than membership growth.

Causes for Incommensurate Membership and Congregational Growth

Inactivity and convert attrition constitute the greatest reason for incommensurate membership and congregational growth rates. The Church has been unable to achieve commensurate membership and congregational growth rates due to slow or nonexistent active membership growth. Convert retention rates for one year after baptism are frequently less than 50% even after the introduction of Preach My Gospel and heightened baptismal standards. The continued implementation of quick-baptism tactics by full-time missionaries that are more reminiscent of business quotas rather than spiritual goals that emphasize prayerful goal setting, involve local members and church leaders, instill habitual church attendance before baptism, and create long-lasting spiritual change are the primary contributor for incommensurate international congregational and membership growth.

A decline in outreach expansion efforts has contributed to incommensurate membership and congregational growth. The Church has achieved some of its highest congregational growth rates for years when the Church made significant strides opening previously unreached areas to missionary work. The organization of branches in these locations requires comparatively few members than in more established locations, resulting in accelerated congregational growth. The three years when the Church reported an increase in the number of wards and branches of over 1,000 (1980, 1992, and 1997) were all during periods of rapid outreach expansion in various areas of the world. For example, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Church made significant progress opening new cities to proselytism in Latin America and in the early 1990s the Church opened scores of cities to missionary work across Eastern Europe and established the first branches in many Sub-Saharan African countries. The Church experienced comparatively few instances of opening additional areas to proselytism and organizing new branches in the 2000s as reflected by a significant slowdown in international congregational growth.

In recent years, higher standards for the continued operation of wards and branches and more stringent qualifications for creating new wards and branches has reduced congregational growth rates in many areas of the world. In Latin America, the Church consolidated hundreds of wards and branches in the early 2000s due to few active members and local leadership self-sustainability problems. The Church in many Latin American countries has increased the minimum standards to form new branches from two active priesthood holders to as many as eight to ten active priesthood holders before area presidents approve proposals to form additional units. The motivation for higher standards for units to operate centers on creating strong wards and branches that are more resilient to closure than in previous decades. This policy has dissuaded many stake and mission leaders from considering the organization of additional congregations within their jurisdictions due to the tedious and arduous process of meeting these high qualifications. The formation of dependent units and groups has become a more frequent alternative that permits the organization of new congregations that oftentimes do not require the approval of area or

regional church leadership. However, many of these dependent units never become independent branches or wards and are not reported on the Church's official meetinghouse locator, making their operation unknown to individuals without personal connections to the Church in the area. Many church leaders in Latin America and other areas of the world do not organize dependent units but rather focus on strengthening operating wards and branches to create centers of strength.

The maturation of branches into wards explains some of the discrepancy between membership and congregational growth rates. However, the number of members added to branches to reach ward status appears to account for only a small fraction of the disparity between membership and congregational growth as the Church has experienced incommensurate growth in membership and congregations in locations where there has been few, if any, branches mature into wards.

Limitations

The Church does not publish annual statistics on the number of dependent units worldwide or for individual countries. It is unclear how increased standards for branches and wards to operate in many countries has influenced dependent unit growth rates within the past 15 years. Membership statistics include all baptized members on church records regardless of activity status. Congregational statistics provide insight into active membership growth but are not perfectly correlated with active membership growth. For example, congregational growth may occur without active membership growth if new units are organized to reduce travel times or meet specialized language needs and not in response to increasing numbers of active members in an area.

Comparative Growth

The LDS Church reported that between 2001 and 2011, membership increased from 11.4 million to 14.4 million (27%) and the number of congregations increased from 26,084 to 28,784 (10%) whereas other denominations reported commensurate membership and congregational growth rates during this period. Between 2001 and 2011, the Seventh Day Adventist Church reported perfectly commensurate congregational and membership growth rates as the number of churches increased from 51,086 to 70,188 (37%), the number of companies increased from 56,067 to 65,157 (16%), and the number of total membership increased from 12.3 million to 16.9 million (37%). Between 2002 and 2012, Jehovah's Witnesses experienced nearly commensurate active membership and congregational growth rates as the number of congregations increased from 94,600 to 111,719 (18%) and active membership increased from 6.3 million[1] to 7.78 million (23%).[2] Adventists and Witnesses stress member-missionary activity for achieving growth, engage in zealous outreach expansion efforts, and implement higher membership standards than the LDS Church.

Future Prospects

There is no indication that the Church will reverse its 15-year trend of incommensurate congregational and membership growth rates for the foreseeable future due to the ongoing implementation of quick-baptism tactics, few outreach expansion efforts, and increased standards for organizing new units in Latin America. The expectant increase in the full-time missionary force of tens of thousands of more missionaries will likely increase membership growth rates but current convert retention and member activity rates suggest little improvement in congregational growth rates. Recent successes in church planting in Sub-Saharan Africa may prompt church leaders in other world regions to utilize similar tactics and policies for promoting growth and reverse incommensurate membership and congregational growth trends. Consistently high baptismal standards that emphasize developing habitual church attendance before baptism, increased collaboration and unity between full-time missionaries and local members, and more aggressive efforts to open additional locations to missionary work with surplus missionary manpower will be essential steps for achieving commensurate membership and congregational growth in the years to come.

[1] "Worldwide Report 2002 Grand Totals," http://wol.jw.org/en/wol/d/r1/lp-e/302003003?q=Jehovah&p=par

[2] "2013 Yearbook of Jehovah's Witnesses," http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&ved=0CDIQFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.jw.org%2Fapp