



LDS Growth Case Studies

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Analysis of LDS Growth in Mexico City

Author: Matt Martinich

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Overview

Tying with Delhi, India as the sixth most populous urban agglomeration in the world with 23.4 million inhabitants,^[1] the Greater Mexico City area or the Mexico City Metropolitan area covers two administrative divisions of Mexico consisting of the entire Distrito Federal and adjacent municipalities in Estado de Mexico. Mexico City has 42 municipalities that each have more than 50,000 inhabitants. No other metropolitan area in North or South America has as large of a population as Mexico City. The Church has experienced steady growth in Mexico City as indicated by the creation of new congregations, stakes, and missions over the past 50 years. In 2012, the Church reported 43 stakes in Mexico City; more than any other metropolitan area in the world outside the United States. In late 2012, the average stake serviced 544,000 people.

This case study reviews stake growth in Mexico City, analyzes congregational growth within the past decade, and examines the current geographic distribution of wards and branches. Successes, opportunities, and challenges for growth are identified and analyzed. A comparative growth section compares LDS growth in Mexico City to other cities in Mexico with over one million inhabitants and contrasts LDS growth in Mexico City to other proselytizing Christian groups. Lastly, future prospects for growth are discussed.

*NOTE: Throughout this case study, the term "Mexico City" is synonymous with the Greater Mexico City area and the Mexico City Metropolitan area.

Stake Growth

In 1961, the Church created its first stake in Mexico City - the first Spanish speaking stake in the entire Church. The Church created its second stake in Mexico City in 1967 (Mexico City North) and its third stake in 1970 (Mexico City East). The Church created its fourth stake (Mexico City Aragon) and fifth stake (Mexico City Arbolillo) in 1973 and 1974, respectively.

In 1975, the Church held a massive conference in which stake boundaries were reorganized to create new stakes. The three oldest stakes (Mexico City, Mexico City North, and Mexico City East) were discontinued and 11 new stakes were organized in Mexico City (México City Camarones, México City Churubusco, México City Ermita, México City Tacubaya, México City Zarahemla [Student Single], México City Industrial, México City Moctezuma, Chalco México, México City Netzahualcóyotl, México City Tlalnepantla, and México City Villa de las Flores) resulting in a net increase of eight stakes.

The Church has subsequently organized 30 additional stakes including the México City Lindavista (1978), México City Meyehualco (1979), México City Azteca (1981), México City Chapultepec (1982), México City Tlalpan (1982), México City Oriental (1983), México City Valle Dorado (1985), México City Anáhuac (1986), México City Ecatepec (1987), México City Cuauhtépec (1990), México City Culturas (1990), México City La Perla (1990), México City Cuautitlán (1990), México City Vergel (1994), México City Contreras (1994), México City Los Reyes (1996), México City Tecamac (1996), México City Iztapalapa (1997), México City Centenario (1997), México City Prados (1997), México City Xalostoc (1997), México City Pantitlán (1997), México City Tepalcapa (1998), México City Lomas Verdes (1999), México City Paraíso (2002), México City Tenayo (2002), Chalco México Solidaridad (2004), México City Ixtapaluca (2004), México City Culhuacan (2006), and México City Coacalco (2008) Stakes.

The number of stakes increased from one in 1965 to 13 in 1975, 20 in 1985, 28 in 1995, 41 in 2005, and 43 in 2012. The average number of wards per stake slightly declined between 2002 and 2012 from 7.97 wards per stake to 7.81 wards per stake. A map of LDS stakes and missions in Mexico City and surrounding areas can be found [here](#).

LDS Congregation Analysis

In 2002, there were approximately 325 congregations in Mexico City. In 2012, there were approximately 344 congregations in Mexico City; a 5.8% increase over the decade. At present, the average ward or branch services a geographic area populated by 55,500 people. All municipalities in the Greater Mexico City area with over 50,000 inhabitants have at least one LDS congregation with the exception of Acolman (136,558). The Church extends its most penetrating outreach in Gustavo A Madero (one LDS unit per 24,704), Cuautitlán Izcalli (one per 31,980), Coacalco de Berriozábal (one per 34,758), Chalco (one per 38,766), and Tlalnepantla de Baz (one per 39,072). The municipality with the most wards and branches is Gustavo A. Madero where 48 units operate. The least reached municipalities with at least one ward or branch include Chicoloapan (one per 175,053), Zumpango (one per 159,647), Cuautitlán (one per 140,059), Xochimilco (one per 138,336), and Milpa Alta (one per 130,582). Generally speaking, north central municipalities receive the highest degree of outreach, central municipalities receive moderate levels of outreach, and peripheral and southeastern municipalities receive the lowest levels of outreach. A map displaying the ratio of municipality population to congregations and status of LDS outreach can be found [here](#).

During the past decade, congregational growth trends have differed by stake. 16 stakes experienced congregational growth between 2002 and 2012. The most rapid congregational growth occurred in the Mexico City Ecatepec Stake where the number of wards increased from 10 to 16 within the original geographic boundaries of the stake between 2002 and 2012. All nine stakes that had two or more new units organized during this period are located in the northernmost or southeastern areas of the city. Almost two dozen stakes experienced stagnant growth as no congregations were created or closed during the past decade. These stakes were primarily located in central areas of the city. Five stakes experienced congregational decline. The number of units declined by four in the Mexico City Lindavista Stake, three in the Mexico City Cuauhtec and Mexico City Lomas Verdes Stakes, two in the Mexico City Tlalnepantla Stake, and one in the Mexico City Netzahualcóyotl Stake. Four of these stakes operate in north central municipalities located in northern Distrito Federal.

Returned missionaries report that most wards had between 75 and 170 active members in the early 2000s.

Successes

The Church in Mexico City serves as one of the largest centers for LDS missionary activity and church administration outside of the United States as no other metropolitan area outside the United States has as many stakes as Mexico City. The Church has operated a church-run school (Benemérito de las Américas) in Mexico City that numbers among the Church's largest educational facilities outside the United States. The school is scheduled to close in mid-2013. A missionary training center (MTC) has operated in Mexico City for over two decades and has solely trained missionaries from Mexico and other Latin American countries who are assigned to serve in one of the Church's 26 Mexican missions. In 2013, the Church announced that the Mexico City MTC would be relocated to the Benemérito de las Américas campus and serve upwards of 1,500 missionaries at a time called to serve in Spanish-speaking countries in Latin America. The Mexico City Mexico Temple was one of the first temples constructed outside of the United States and remains the largest temple outside of the United States. No other city in the world has as many missions headquartered in the same city. In 2012, there were six missions based in Mexico City. The Church in Mexico City has continued to hold the record for the most new stakes created in a single weekend for nearly four decades.

The Church has never discontinued a stake in Mexico City with the exception of the stake reorganization in 1975. This stands as one of the greatest successes of the Church in Mexico City considering low member activity and convert retention rates, the large number of stakes in the area increasing the probability for a stake closure, and the tendency for the Church to consolidate stakes in urban areas that have had a long-term LDS presence. Since 2000, the Church has discontinued stakes in a few other major cities in Mexico and in several major metropolitan areas in Latin America including Sao Paulo, Brazil; Santiago, Chile; Cali, Colombia; Quito, Ecuador; Guatemala City, Guatemala; Panama City, Panama; and Lima, Peru. In addition to exhibiting resilience to stake closures, the Church in Mexico City has regularly organized new stakes for half a century; longer than only a handful of cities worldwide.

Over the past decade, the Church has sustained its level of outreach in Mexico City as measured by the ratio of city population to LDS congregations. The average ward or branch serviced 1,100 fewer people in 2012 than in 2002 as congregational growth slightly surpassed population growth during this period. This finding suggests that the Church in Mexico City not only maintained the size of its presence but experienced a tiny increase in the percentage of active members in the general population.

The Church has established and maintained a sizable presence in the municipalities with the highest living standards notwithstanding high living standards correlating with reduced receptivity to LDS outreach. Municipalities with the highest Human Development Index (HDI) levels in Mexico City are clustered in the downtown areas of Distrito Federal and receive medium levels of LDS outreach compared to other municipalities in the metropolitan area. Success in establishing a strong foothold in these municipalities stems from the early establishment of the Church in Mexico City considering all stakes that operate within the municipalities with the highest HDI levels were organized in the 1970s.

Opportunities

There are excellent opportunities for the Church to organize dependent units and branches to help spur real church growth. Mexico City has one of the world's largest populations concentrated in a relatively small geographical area where there are abundant resources for mission outreach. Many of the most favorable conditions for church planting appear in lesser-reached municipalities with lower living standards. Southeastern and extreme northern areas of Mexico City have experienced the most rapid growth in recent years yet have tens of thousands of individuals who continue to not live within close proximity of a meetinghouse. For example, the Chicoloapan Ward in the Mexico City Los Reyes Stake covers a large geographic area consisting of the entire Chicoloapan Municipality and a few bordering areas of neighboring Ixtapaluca Municipality for a total of nearly 200,000 people. Church planting strategies could help start groups and branches within the existing ward boundaries such as eastern Chicoloapan, Chimalhucan, Lomas de San Sebastian, Emiliano Zapata, Prol El Arenal 1, and Coatepec. The organization of additional congregations begins with organizing cottage meetings in members' homes followed by locating a suitable facility to hold church services within a particular neighborhood or community. The Church has not conducted church planting efforts in Mexico City within recent memory but has achieved excellent growth and rapid outreach expansion in several locations in Sub-Saharan Africa. A similar approach that begins with small gatherings of members and investigators and gradually transitions to independent branches and wards could significantly aid reactivation efforts, improve local leadership self-sustainability, and bridge the often problematic relationship between full-time missionaries and ordinary members and local church leaders. Church planting will require mission and area leaders to reconsider the implementation of church growth strategies that were contrived and have been somewhat successful in the Intermountain West of the United States and rather use a grassroots method that places the burden of responsibility for finding, teaching, and baptizing converts on local members and leaders. Continuing to wait for individual wards to gain enough active members to divide will result in lackluster church growth due to the difficulty of reaching enough active members within large geographical areas to divide wards and low convert retention rates incurred by pervasive quick-baptism techniques.

Receptivity to the LDS Church remains good in many, if not most, municipalities. Missionaries report little difficulty finding interested individuals who will commit to baptism notwithstanding struggles retaining converts and promoting member-missionary activity. Efficient missionary programs that maintain reasonably high convert baptismal standards, require converts to maintain regular church attendance for a period of months instead of weeks before baptism, and emphasize member involvement in the conversion process has a high likelihood for reaching active membership growth and leadership manpower augmentation. The ratio of municipal population to LDS congregations is highest in locations with low HDI levels, possibly indicating better opportunities for missionary activity and church growth due to less materialism and lower standards of living in these municipalities.

The Church conducts no missionary efforts that specifically target Amerindian peoples, immigrants, or temporary foreign residents. There are good opportunities for reaching these populations through the appointment of full-time missionaries that specialize in teaching in other languages such as English, Nahuatl languages, Mazatec languages, and Mazahua. Coordination between mission leaders in Mexico City would be required to achieve the greatest outreach potential by locating members who do not speak Spanish as a first language, organizing cottage meetings and dependent units that conduct church services in these languages, and translating basic proselytism materials if none are available. At present, there appears little need for the Church to open congregations that service ethnolinguistic minority groups as most, if not all, active members are proficient in Spanish to assimilate into Spanish-speaking Mestizo and European congregations. There appear good opportunities for growth among these ethnolinguistic minorities if specialized outreach is pursued by mission and area leaders.

Challenges

Low member activity and convert retention rates constitute the greatest barrier to church growth in Mexico City. Returned missionaries and local members report that most wards have between 75 and 150 active members whereas the average ward or branch in Mexico has 637 members on its records. The Church in Mexico City has experienced some of the most pervasive quick-baptism tactics in Latin America within the past several decades, resulting in low convert retention rates and incommensurate membership and congregational growth. In the late 2000s, some missions reported hundreds of baptisms per month but with relatively no increase in active membership. The Church in Mexico added approximately 350,000 new members between 2001 and 2011, resulting in membership increasing by 38.5%. The Church also organized seven new missions in Mexico between 2002 and 2012, including two headquartered in the Mexico City area (Mexico Mexico City Northwest [2010] and Mexico Mexico City Southeast [2011]). Increased mission resource allocation to Mexico City and the country as a whole has not correlated with any noticeable improvement in various measurements of active membership increase such as net increases in the number of wards and branches year to year and consistent stake creations. The Church in Mexico City did not organize any new wards or branches in 2011 and 2012, indicating slow or stagnant growth in active membership. The Church experienced slower congregational growth in the Greater Mexico City area than in Mexico as a whole as congregational growth in Mexico City lagged 1.4% behind the entire country between 2002 and 2012 (5.8% versus 7.2%, respectively). Stakes in Mexico City have generally had a larger number of wards per stake than in most major cities in Latin America, likely due to inadequate numbers of priesthood holders to fill leadership positions for additional stakes. In 2012, 11 stakes had 10 or more wards; the minimum number of wards needed for a stake to split to form a new stake.

Mission and area leaders have approached the organization of new congregations in Mexico City much like in the Intermountain West of the United States by requiring congregations to grow so large in active membership that they must be divided into more manageably-sized congregations. This method has appeared largely unsuccessful in Mexico City for achieving active membership growth and congregational growth for several reasons. The logic of this approach rests on organizing new congregations when current congregations cannot adequately service large and increasing numbers of active members.

Congregational growth becomes the result of growing active membership rather than a catalyst for growing active membership. Church growth researchers have long observed that newly organized wards and branches tend to baptize more converts than older wards and branches. Waiting for older units to reach a predetermined number of active membership until splitting occurs delays or totally prohibits the establishment of additional congregations within closer proximity of populations within a given area. Starting a congregation from scratch through cottage meetings, organizing dependent units, and eventually an independent branch is often a more successful method to achieve growth in areas with small percentages of Latter-day Saints in the population.

Comparative Growth

The percentage of self-identified Latter-day Saints in the general population of Distrito Federal (0.32%) and Estado de Mexico (0.29%) is comparable to the national average (0.28%).^[2] The degree of LDS outreach in the Greater Mexico City area (one LDS unit per 55,500 people) ranks as average among the 11 metropolitan areas in Mexico with over one million inhabitants. Provided with the ratio of city population to LDS congregations, five cities (Torreon - 35,800, Puebla - 37,600, Ciudad Juarez - 41,600, Tijuana - 44,900, and Monterrey - 47,600) have a smaller ratio of city population to LDS units suggesting greater LDS outreach than Mexico City whereas five cities (San Luis Potosi - 69,400, Queretaro - 78,400, Toluca - 115,400, Guadalajara - 134,400, and Leon - 178,800) have a larger ratio of city population to LDS units suggesting less LDS outreach than Mexico City. Of the 11 metropolitan areas with over one million people, two had stakes discontinued within the past decade (Guadalajara [2] and Monterrey [1]) and six had stakes created within the past decade (Mexico City [4], Monterrey [1], Puebla [1], Queretaro [1], Tijuana [1], and Toluca [1]).

Jehovah's Witnesses report a significantly larger presence in Mexico City than the LDS Church. Witnesses operate over 1,000 congregations in Mexico City. There are more than twice as many Witness congregations within the nine municipalities with the most Witness congregation than there are total LDS congregations in the entire Greater Mexico City area. Three municipalities have over 100 Witness congregations each (Ecatepec de Morelos, Iztapalapa, and Nezahualcóyotl) and six municipalities have over 50 Witnesses congregations each (Álvaro Obregón, Gustavo A. Madero, Chimalhuacán, Naucalpan de Juárez, Tlalnepanitla de Baz, and Tltiltlan). Witnesses operate 18 congregations within the municipality of Acolman whereas no LDS units are based within this municipality. Witnesses also operate non-Spanish speaking congregations in Mexico City that service speakers of 27 other languages including Mexican Sign Language (52 congregations), Huastla Mazatec (22 congregations, 1 group), Huasteca Nahuatl (20 congregations), Central Nahuatl (19 congregations), English (17 congregations), Mazahua (13 congregations), Mixe (10 congregations), Tlaxiaco Mixtec (5 congregations, 2 groups), Nochistlan Mixtec (5 congregation), Otomo (3 congregations), Totonac (3 congregations), French (2 congregations), Huajuapán Mixtec (2 congregations), Guerrero Nahuatl (2 congregations), Chinantec (1 congregation), Italian (1 congregation), Korean (1 congregation), Mandarin Chinese (1 congregation), Northern Puebla Nahuatl (1 congregation), Portuguese (1 congregation), Isthmus Zapotec (1 congregation), Ixtlan Zapotec (1 congregation), Villa Alta (1 congregation), Japanese (1 group), Russian (1 group), and Tzeltal (1 group).^[3] In early 2013, the LDS Church operated only one non-Spanish speaking unit for English speakers in Mexico City. Seventh Day Adventists reported 109 churches in 2011^[4] and 89 companies in 2010 operating in the Greater Mexico City area. Adventists have experienced slow congregational growth in recent years as the number of churches has increased by less than 10 per year for the Greater Mexico City area and several surrounding states since 2008.^[5]

Limitations

The Church does not publish statistics on convert retention rates or sacrament meeting attendance. There are no official figures for active membership in Mexico City or anywhere else in the world. Ward and branch boundaries frequently cross municipal or administrative boundaries in Mexico City, creating inaccuracies in the ratio of the population to LDS congregations. There were no missionary or member reports regarding outreach among Amerindian, immigrant, or temporary residents in Mexico City but it is possible that the Church has gained converts among these populations and perhaps has operated or continues to operate dependent units to serve these populations. There are no official figures or information on the number and location of dependent units in Mexico City or anywhere else in the world.

Future Prospects

Low member activity and convert retention rates, disconnect between full-time missionaries and local members, no clear vision for church planting, and stagnant congregational growth in recent years predict little LDS Church growth in Mexico City for the foreseeable future. The organization of two new missions in Mexico City since 2010 suggests that the Church has revamped its reactivation efforts considering the number of convert baptisms appears unchanged and no congregational growth has occurred in Mexico City since 2010. The Church will likely create additional stakes in the coming years once there is a sufficient number of priesthood leadership to staff more stakes and congregational growth requires large stakes to divide.

^[1] "THE PRINCIPAL AGGLOMERATIONS OF THE WORLD," www.citypopulation.de, retrieved 8 January 2013. <http://www.citypopulation.de/world/Agglomerations.html>

^[2] <http://www.inegi.org.mx/>

^[3] "Congregation Meeting Search," accessed 5 January 2013. <http://www.jw.org/apps/index.html?option=FRNsPnPBrtZGT>

[4] "Central Mexican Union Mission," www.adventistyearbook.org, retrieved 5 January 2013.
<http://www.adventistyearbook.org/default.aspx?page=ViewAdmField&Year=9999&AdmFieldID=CMUM>

[5] "Central Mexican Union Mission (2008-Present)," www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 5 January 2013.
http://www.adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldID=U_CMUM