



LDS Growth Case Studies

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Estimating LDS Membership by Administrative Division through the Members-to-Units Ratio

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Posted: June 24th, 2013

Overview

The LDS Church does not publish membership data by administrative division for individual countries with the exception of the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada. Consequently it is unclear how many members the Church has on its records in various states, provinces, regions, or other types of administrative divisions in nations around the world. Although no official data is provided on an annual basis for membership figures by administrative division for individual countries, the Church has provided data on congregations by administrative region for all countries around the world through its online meetinghouse locator lds.org/maps. Calculating estimated membership through multiplying the number of congregations per administrative division by the average number of members per congregation for the respective country can generate a ballpark estimate for LDS membership by administrative division. Although not explicitly stated, other church growth researchers have utilized this method for estimating church membership by administrative division such as in the recently published atlas Mapping Mormonism.^[1]

This case study examines the accuracy of estimating membership figures by comparing actual membership figures for countries where the Church reports membership by administrative division to estimated membership figures ascertained by multiplying the average number of members per unit by the number of units in each administrative division for these same countries. Countries in which the Church publishes membership figures by administrative division, namely the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom, are included in this analysis to assess the accuracy of this method for ascertaining membership figures for countries in which the Church does not report membership figures by administrative division.

United States

When actual membership figures were compared to estimated membership figures, 21 states had a higher estimated membership than actual membership whereas 27 states and the District of Columbia had a lower estimated membership than actual membership. Only one state reported the same figure for both estimated and actual membership: West Virginia. 22 of the 50 states had an estimated membership figure within 10% of the actual membership figure whereas 45 of the 50 states had an estimated membership figure within 20% of the actual membership figure. Estimated membership was most overestimated for South Dakota (49.5% higher than actual membership) whereas estimated membership was most underestimated for the District of Columbia (43.9% lower than actual membership). With the exception of Florida, all states with 40,000 or more members on church records has estimated membership figures within 20% of actual membership totals.

Canada

When actual membership figures were compared to estimated membership figures, nine of the 12 administrative divisions in Canada with an official LDS presence had a higher estimated membership than actual membership whereas two had a lower estimated membership than actual membership. One administrative division reported the same figure for both estimated and actual membership: Manitoba. Estimated membership was more than 100% of actual membership for two administrative divisions: Northwest Territories (213% higher than actual membership) and Prince Edward Island (159% higher than actual membership). Estimated membership was the most underestimated for New Brunswick (20.5% less than actual membership). Estimated membership fell within 10% of actual membership for three of the 12 administrative divisions and within 30% of actual membership for eight of the 12 administrative divisions. Estimated membership figures fell within 20% of actual membership for provinces with 20,000 or more members.

United Kingdom

When actual membership figures were compared to estimated membership figures, two of the four constituent countries of the United Kingdom had an estimated membership higher than actual membership whereas two of the constituent countries had a lower estimated membership than actual membership. Estimated membership for England was almost exactly the same as actual membership; a mere 0.2% less than actual membership. Estimated membership for Wales was the most deviant among the four constituent countries; 44.5% more than actual church membership. All other constituent countries had estimated membership figures within 20% of actual membership totals.

Summary of Comparing Actual and Estimated Membership Figures

The most accurate membership estimates for administrative division ascertained by multiplying the average number of members per country and the number of wards and branches per administrative division occur when there are sizable numbers of wards and branches in an administrative division. Performing this calculation with data from the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom suggest that membership figures can be estimated with a fair degree of accuracy within 20% of the actual membership figure if estimated membership is at least 20,000. This finding is not surprising considering administrative divisions with larger numbers of wards and branches will exert greater influence on the average number of members per congregation for the entire country than for administrative divisions with few LDS units. Estimated membership figures are more frequently smaller than actual membership figures in administrative divisions where the Church experiences lower member activity rates than the national average.

Limitations to Analysis

Caution should be placed on estimating church membership through this method in administrative divisions where there is a recent church establishment, an extremely limited LDS presence, and major disparities in population densities among administrative divisions with sizable LDS populations. Estimated membership figures are often significantly higher than actual membership figures in these conditions.

For example, in Uganda there were 11,442 members and 25 wards and branches at year-end 2012, indicating that the average congregation had 458 members. With four branches in April 2013, Northern Region would have an estimated 1,831 members if the number of congregations in the administrative division is multiplied by the average number of members per congregation for Uganda. Senior missionaries have provided data on actual membership for one city where two of the four branches in Northern Region operate. Membership in this city stood at approximately 350 in early 2013, or nearly three times the number of members that would be estimated for the city (916) by multiplying the number of congregations by the average number of members per congregation in Uganda.

In Sierra Leone, the Church reported in late 2012 that there were approximately 2,250 members in the newly created Freetown Sierra Leone Stake and 3,000 members in the Bo Sierra Leone District.[\[2\]](#) At the time the Freetown Sierra Leone Stake had eight wards and the Bo Sierra Leone District had eight branches indicating that the average ward or branch had 281 members in the stake and 375 members in the district. On the other hand, the average ward or branch in Sierra Leone had 432 members at year-end 2012. Estimates for LDS membership would be 3,456 for both the stake and the district, or 15% higher than actual membership for the Bo Sierra Leone District and 54% higher than actual membership for the Freetown Sierra Leone Stake if the average number of members per ward or branch is multiplied by the number of units in each stake or district.

In Russia, there is wide disparity between actual church membership in administrative divisions and estimated church membership. Full-time missionaries report that some branches have over 500 members on church records yet the average ward or branch in Russia had 219 members at year-end 2012. On the other hand, some branches have 30 or few members on church records.

There are many countries where the Church has a presence in only one or two cities. Estimates for LDS membership in these administrative divisions tend to be accurate due to no LDS presence in other areas and consequently extremely few, if any, members in these locations.

Conclusion

Estimated LDS membership by administrative division ascertained by multiplying the number of LDS units in an administrative division by the average number of members per congregation in a country can be a useful tool in assessing the size of church membership in many countries around the world. This method can yield a ballpark figure that is generally within 20% of the actual membership figure based on comparing actual and estimated membership figures for the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom. However, caution should be placed for administrative divisions where there is a recent church establishment, a more limited church presence than other administrative divisions in a country, or where population densities are less than the national average as these conditions frequently yield a significant overestimation of membership. This method for estimating membership appears most useful in administrative divisions in Latin America and in urbanized administrative divisions with a long-term LDS presence in Europe, Asia, and Oceania.

[1] Plewe, Brandon S. "Middle America," Mapping Mormonism, p. 221

[2] Avant, Gerry. "Historic milestone: Sierra Leone stake marks Church's 3,000th," LDS Church News, 2 December 2012.
<http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/63030/Historic-milestone-Sierra-Leone-stake-marks-Churchs-3000th.html>