



LDS Growth Case Studies

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Recent Successes Reversing Stagnant or Declining Congregational Growth in Italy, Portugal, and Spain

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Overview

The Church in Italy, Portugal, and Spain has experienced a net decrease in the number of congregations functioning during the 2000s. In the early 2010s, the Church reversed the trend of congregational decline and stagnant growth as evidenced by net increases in the number of congregations in all three countries. This case study reviews congregational and stake and district growth trends for the Church in Italy, Portugal, and Spain between 1987 and mid-2013. Successes reversing stagnant or declining congregational growth in these countries are examined and opportunities and challenges for maintaining positive congregational growth into the coming years and decades is discussed.

Italy

In Italy, there were 84 congregations (10 wards, 74 branches) in 1987. The number of congregations totaled 94 (10 wards, 84 branches) in 1991, 133 (16 wards, 117 branches) in 1999, 121 (19 wards, 102 branches) in 2002, 102 (31 wards, 71 branches) in 2007, and 98 (46 wards, 52 branches) in 2011. In 2012, positive congregational growth began as the number of congregations increased to 100 (48 wards, 52 branches) in 2012 and 102 (49 wards, 53 branches) in mid-2013. The average number of members per unit has slightly increased over the past 25 years from 155 in 1987 to 250 in 2013.

In 1987, there were two stakes and eight districts. The number of stakes reached three in 1997, four in 2005, five in 2007, six in 2008, seven in 2010, and eight in 2012 whereas the number of districts totaled 10 in 1991, 16 in 1995, 15 in 1997, 14 in 2001, 13 in 2004, 12 in 2005, 10 in 2006, nine in 2007, seven in 2008, six in 2009, and five in 2010. In mid-2013, there were eight stakes and five districts.

Portugal

In Portugal, there were 65 congregations (16 wards, 49 branches) in 1987. The number of congregations reached a high of 118 (24 wards, 94 branches) in 1991 and declined for the next two decades, totaling 105 (28 wards, 77 branches) in 1997, 82 (34 wards, 48 branches) in 2002, 75 (35 wards, 40 branches) in 2007, and 67 (32 wards, 35 branches) in 2011. In 2012, the Church reported a net increase in the number of congregations for the first time in over 20 years. The number of congregations totaled 68 (32 wards, 36 branches) in 2012 and 71 (32 wards, 39 branches) in mid-2013. The average number of members per unit has rapidly increased over the past 25 years from 185 in 1987 to 602 in 2012.

In 1987, there were three stakes and eight districts. The number of stakes reached five in 1989 and six in 2002 whereas the number of districts totaled nine in 1991, 12 in 1993, eight in 2000, six in 2001, five in 2002, and four in 2005. In mid-2013, there were six stakes and four districts.

Spain

In Spain, there were 107 congregations (11 wards, 96 branches) in 1987. The number of congregations totaled 144 (18 wards, 126 branches) in 1991, 142 (30 wards, 112 branches) in 1997, 144 (40 wards, 104 branches) in 2002, 142 (56 wards, 86

branches) in 2005, and 133 (61 wards, 72 branches) in 2007. The total number of official church units declined between 2002 and 2007 and remained unchanged from 2007 to 2010. Beginning in 2011, congregational growth has occurred every year as the number of congregations increased to 135 (67 wards, 68 branches) in 2011, 138 (69 wards, 69 branches) in 2012, and 140 (74 wards, 66 branches) in mid-2013. The average number of members per unit has rapidly increased over the past two 25 years from 160 in 1991 to 363 in 2012.

In 1987, there were three stakes and 11 districts. The number of stakes reached four in 1995, six in 1997, seven in 1999, eight in 2003, nine in 2004, 10 in 2009, and 13 in 2012 whereas the number of districts totaled 12 in 1989, 15 in 1991, 18 in 1993, 17 in 1995, 15 in 1997, 16 in 1999, 15 in 2001, 14 in 2003, 10 in 2006, nine in 2007, six in 2009, and five in 2011. In mid-2013, there were 13 stakes and five districts.

Analysis of Congregational Growth: 1987-2011

The Church has experienced different congregational growth trends in Italy, Portugal, and Spain within the past 25 years but LDS growth trends in Italy and Spain have experienced some similarities. The Church reached its all-time high for the total number of wards and branches in 1999 for Italy (133) and in 1991 and 2002 in Spain (144). In Spain, stagnant congregational growth occurred during the 1990s as indicated by the Church tying its all-time high for total church units in 1991 and in 2002 and little fluctuation in the number of units during the 11 years between these two years. Slight congregational decline occurred until 2007 as the number of congregations decreased to 133. In Italy, steady increases in the number of congregations occurred from 1987 to 1999 and steady decreases in the number of congregations occurred from 2000 to 2011. The period of congregational decline in the 2000s for the Church in Italy and Spain corresponded with the consolidation of missions and the closure of branches to create ward-sized units to help member districts attain stake status. This is evident in the number of wards between 2002 and 2011 increasing by 68% in Spain and 142% in Italy. During this period the number of stakes increased from seven to 10 in Spain and from three to seven in Italy. The consolidation of member districts and branches to establish a sufficient number of ward-sized units in order to organize additional stakes is illustrated by the number of member districts declining from 14 in 2001 to five in 2010 in Italy and declining from 15 in 2001 to five in 2011 in Spain. In other words, the Church appeared to significantly increase the number of active members per congregation in Italy and Spain during the 2000s as demonstrated by the creation of several new stakes and dozens of branches becoming wards. When the Church reached its all-time high for the number of congregations, a mere 12% of total church units were wards in Italy and 28% of total church units were wards in Spain. By 2010, the number of wards had substantially increased in both countries resulting in wards comprising half of official church units for both Italy and Spain.

Expanding and contracting national outreach has corresponded with increases and decreases in the numbers of total church units in all three countries. Congregational growth in Portugal during the late 1980s and early 1990s and in Italy and Spain during the late 1980s and 1990s corresponded with opening new branches in previously unreached cities and towns. Moderate to low receptivity to full-time missionary efforts, few active members, and only a handful of local priesthood leaders in most locations with small branches prompted church leaders to close many branches during the 2000s in all three countries. Consequently the number of cities and towns with an LDS congregation established noticeably declined in Italy and Portugal but only slightly decreased in Spain.

The Church reduced the size of its full-time missionary force in all three countries and consolidated several missions. In Italy, the Church had four missions in 2001 that each serviced 14 million people on average but each mission administered four or fewer member districts and one or no stakes. By 2012, there were only two missions headquartered in Italy that on average serviced over 30 million people, four stakes, and two to three member districts. In Portugal, there were three missions in 2001 that each serviced on average 3.5 million people, two or fewer stakes, and two member districts. By 2012, the Church had only one mission headquartered in Portugal that serviced 10.7 million people, six stakes, and four districts. In Spain, there were five missions in 2001 that on average serviced eight million people, two or fewer stakes, and three member districts. By 2012, the Church had three missions headquartered in Spain that on average serviced 15.6 million people, four to five stakes, and one or two member districts. Mission leaders have indicated that this has been a sign of increased maturity in local church leadership as sizable numbers of past mission resources have been dedicated to leadership support rather than proselytism and reactivation efforts. Many previous missions serviced millions of people but contained only a small number of stakes and districts within their jurisdictions.

Factors Contributing to Reversal in Stagnant Growth: 2012 to Present

Greater emphasis has been placed on local leadership development and member-missionary activity than in previous years. These efforts from mission presidencies have yielded good results with several districts maturing into stakes in Italy and Spain within the past decade. Districts require close supervision from mission leadership resulting in diminished focus and attention placed on expanding outreach into lesser-reached and previously unreached cities and towns. Oftentimes one of the primary goals of mission presidencies is to help districts meet the minimum qualifications to become stakes, thereby improving the strength and stability of the local church. This process frequently results in the freeing up of mission resources for potential allocation to outreach expansion efforts. The Church has experienced noticeable progress expanding national outreach in several countries throughout the world following the maturation of districts into stakes such as in Cape Verde, Hungary, Ukraine, and Uganda. The shift from helping districts to become stakes to examining prospects for revitalizing stagnant or declining national outreach efforts has yielded good results within recent years as mission presidencies have been willing to experiment with opening member groups in lesser-reached or unreached cities. Many of these efforts have also coincided with focus from the Europe Area Presidency to revamp reactivation efforts, especially considering many cities with a recently established branch once had an LDS congregation functioning a decade earlier but was closed due to low member activity rates and leadership

development problems.

Better efficiency in utilizing full-time missionary resources has appeared to influence recent trends in reversing stagnant or negative congregational growth. Mission leaders have not overstaffed individual wards and branches with too many missionary companionships as reduced mission complements and multiple mission consolidations have limited missionary manpower in these nations within the past several years. In the late 1990s and 2000s, some missions would assign several missionary companionships to a single congregation resulting in a lack of productive activities for missionaries to spend their time.

In Portugal, senior missionaries and young single missionaries have suggested that the Church has experienced increased receptivity among the native population in recent years. This finding appears consistent in the success in the Portugal Lisbon Mission establishing multiple member groups in many additional cities and four of these member groups becoming official branches within the past couple years in the cities of Bragança, Covilha, Lagos, and Mirandela.

Challenges

The native population in all three countries has historically exhibited low receptivity to LDS outreach. Immigrants have comprised a large portion, if not the majority, of convert baptisms. Nonnative members from Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa constitute 50% or more of active membership in many wards and branches. Returned missionaries who have served in Spain within the past decade have reported that some missionaries never baptize a single Spaniard during their missions but instead baptize multiple Latin American and Sub-Saharan African immigrants. This has resulted in ethnic groups that are native to the country and that comprise the majority of the population constituting a small majority or even a minority within their respective wards and branches. This discrepancy between the demographic characteristics of LDS congregations and the general population poses difficulties for the Church to attract and retain converts from the primary ethnic group within a particular geographical area, thereby reducing outreach potential among the most populous ethnic group. Smaller cities, towns, and rural communities in all three countries generally have few immigrant peoples and possess homogenous populations indigenous to the area. Consequently LDS missionary efforts may experience greater difficulty in proselytism efforts due to lower interest exhibited by native groups and limited or totally absent local leadership. These areas are therefore more prone to closure if little progress occurs over an extended period of time and if the availability of mission resources is disrupted.

The Church has few local members who serve full-time missions and none of these three countries appear close to achieving self-sufficiency in staffing their own full-time missionary needs. Outsourced missionary manpower from North America has placed a crucial role in maintaining the missionary force in all three nations and conveys the image that the Church is an American institution and may not be compatible with local culture and society. The availability of full-time missionary manpower is also subsequently vulnerable to fluctuations in the number of North American members serving full-time missions and the needs and circumstances of other areas of the world that experience similar problems satisfying their own missionary needs.

Comparative Growth

The Church has experienced a net decrease or virtually no change in the number of congregations functioning in most Western European countries within the past decade. As of mid-2013, only Italy, Portugal, and Spain have experienced a net increase in the number of wards and branches of two or more within the past couple years. In the United Kingdom, the Church experienced a net increase of one congregation in 2012 but has experienced steady congregational decline within the past decade. The Church in many Western and Central European countries has experienced similar congregational growth trends as in Italy, Portugal, and Spain in that the number of wards has remained constant or increased whereas the number of branches has declined due to branches maturing into wards and the consolidation of small branches.

Other nontraditional proselytism groups report differing congregational growth trends in Italy, Portugal, and Spain. The Seventh Day Adventist Church has reported steady increases in the number of congregations functioning in all three countries. In Italy, the number of Adventist churches increased from 95 in 2003 to 109 in 2011. Approximately 200 baptisms occurred annually during this period.^[1] In Portugal, the number of Adventist churches increased from 92 in 2003 to 96 in 2011 and the number of Adventist companies increased from 15 to 26.^[2] In Spain, the number of Adventist churches increased between 2003 and 2011 from 83 to 108 and the number of Adventist companies increased from 28 to 40. Adventists generally report approximately 500 baptisms a year in Spain.^[3] Jehovah's Witnesses have reported slight net decreases in the number of congregations functioning in Italy and Portugal and sizable increases in the number of congregations operating in Spain within the past three years. In Italy, the number of Witness congregations declined from 3,101 in 2009 to 3,045 in 2012. In Portugal, the number of Witness congregations declined from 646 in 2009 to 643 in 2012. In Spain, the number of Witness congregations increased from 1,437 in 2009 to 1,521 in 2012.^[4]

Limitations

All membership, congregational, and stake and district data was obtained from official LDS sources such as the Deseret News Church Almanac. The Church does not publish the number of member groups and dependent branches for individual countries or the world as a whole. It is unclear how growth trends have behaved among these semi-official congregations within the past quarter century. The Church does not publish data on member activity indicators such as sacrament meeting attendance and the number of temple recommend holders. There are no reliable data on how member activity and convert retention rates have changed over time. No LDS congregational data is available prior to 1987 with the exception of a few isolated reports in LDS

media publications.

Future Prospects

The outlook for the Church to sustain recent advances reversing stagnant or declining congregational growth in Italy, Portugal, and Spain appears favorable for the foreseeable future as mission leaders have refocused mission resources to outreach expansion efforts and recent efforts to organize additional wards and branches have been successful. Additional branches will likely be organized in all three countries from member groups and from splitting strong wards or branches that cover large geographical areas. Several wards may divide to create additional wards in major cities. Additional member districts in all three countries will likely become stakes within the next decade. Some stakes may divide to create additional stakes in Italy and Spain within the foreseeable future. Greater progress in expanding national outreach and improving member activity rates will require the Church to increase the number of local members serving full-time missions from all three countries.

[1] "Italian Union of Churches Conference (2008-Present)," www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 24 July 2013.
http://www.adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldInstID=2177547

[2] "Portuguese Union of Churches Conference (2008-Present)," www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 24 July 2013.
http://www.adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldInstID=2176179

[3] "Spanish Union of Churches Conference (2008-Present)," www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 24 July 2013.
http://www.adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldID=U10107

[4] "2012 Service Year Report of Jehovah's Witnesses Worldwide," 2013 Yearbook of Jehovah's Witnesses,
<http://wol.jw.org/en/wol/lv/r1/lp-e/0/19400>