LDS Growth Case Studies

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Top Ten Most Encouraging and Top Ten Most Discouraging Growth and Missionary Developments for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in 2019

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OVERVIEW

This article reviews some of the most significant growth developments for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints during 2019. Most of these developments were previously reported in monthly newsletters on www.cumorah.com. Previous annual reviews of the top ten most encouraging and top 10 most discouraging growth and missionary developments for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have been posted on www.cumorah.com since 2014 and can be accessed here. The Church has not released any membership figures for the year 2019. Membership data for 2018 became available to the public in April 2019. Thus, all of the most recent membership data contained in this article is current as of year-end 2018.

TOP TEN ENCOURAGING CHURCH GROWTH AND MISSIONARY DEVELOPMENTS

1. Sixteen New Temples Announced

The Church announced 16 new temples during 2019. This is the fourth most temples ever announced in a single year after 1998 (27 new temples announced), 2018 (19 new temples announced), and 1999 (17 new temples announced). In April, the Church announced the following eight new temples:

- Pago Pago, American Samoa (first temple in American Samoa)
- Okinawa City, Okinawa (fourth temple in Japan)
- Neiafu, Tonga (second temple in Tonga)
- Tooele Valley, Utah (twenty-first temple in Utah)
- Moses Lake, Washington (fourth temple in Washington)
- San Pedro Sula, Honduras (second temple in Honduras)
- Antofagasta, Chile (third temple in Chile)
- Budapest, Hungary (first temple in Hungary)

In October, the Church announced the following eight new temples:

- Freetown, Sierra Leone (first temple in Sierra Leone)
- Orem, Utah (twenty-second temple in Utah)
- Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea (first temple in Papua New Guinea)
- Bentonville, Arkansas (first temple in Arkansas)
- Bacolod, Philippines (seventh temple in Philippines)
- McAllen, Texas (fifth temple in Texas)
- Cobán, Guatemala (third temple in Guatemala)
- Taylorsville, Utah (twenty-third temple in Utah)

Nearly one-third of the 16 new temples announced were in countries or states within the United States where no temples operate or are in the planning states. Also, many of the new temples announced will likely be small temples given their remote location and very small Church presence. For example, the new temple in Okinawa, Japan will likely have only one stake and one district assigned to it as these are the only stakes and districts in the area. Nevertheless, some temples announced were in locations where the Church has a rapidly growing and maturing body of members (i.e. Cobán, Guatemala and Freetown, Sierra Leone) or a significant Church presence (i.e. Bacolod, Philippines; Orem, Utah; and Taylorsville, Utah). Temple announcements in 2019 also indicated an ongoing trend to build more temples outside of the United States than within the United States. Of the 16 new temples announced in 2019, only six (37.5%) were located in the continental United States where 43% of worldwide temples are located. Sixty-nine percent (69%) of the world's population now resides in a sovereign country where a temple is planned or in operation.

2. Redistribution of Mission Resources and Stabilization of the Full-time Missionary Force – Twelve Missions Close and Four New Missions Open in 2019; Eight New Missions to be Organized in 2020

The Church continues to redistribute its global missionary resources and manpower from less productive areas with more established local leadership to more productive areas that generally have less developed local leadership. The Church closed 12 missions (Argentina Posadas, California Irvine, California Long Beach, California Rancho Cucamonga, Canada Halifax, Florida Tallahassee, Georgia Macon, Idaho Nampa, Japan Sendai, Korea Daejeon, New York Utica, Virginia Chesapeake) and opened four new missions (Democratic Republic of the Congo Kinshasa East, Guatemala Antigua, Perú Limatambo, Philippines Antipolo) in July.[1] Of these 12 discontinued missions, six were organized in 2013 to accommodate the sudden increase in the number of members serving full-time missions and eight were located in the United States. All four of the newly organized missions were in nations where there has been significant increases in the number of members serving full-time missions in recent years.

In late 2019, the Church announced plans to organize the following eight new missions in July 2020: Brazil Recife South, Cameroon Yaoundé, Ecuador Guayaquil East, Ethiopia Addis Ababa, Mozambique Beira, Tanzania Dar es Salaam, Texas Austin, and Texas Dallas East.[2] No plans for mission closures/consolidations were reported. The new missions announced will permit greater mission resources to be allocated in many minimally reached areas by the Church, particularly in Africa. For example, Cameroon (25.6 million people), Ethiopia (108.4 million people), and Tanzania (55.5 million people) currently do not have their own missions and instead are administered by a mission in a neighboring country despite their large populations. New missions in the Americas are located in locations where the Church has either steadily grown or where current missions have a large number of stakes and a significant population to proselyte.

These changes with mission creations and discontinuations in 2019 and 2020 will result in no net change in the number of missions (407). However, the Church reported more than 68,000 missionaries serving full-time, proselytizing missions in late 2019 – an increase of more than 4% from year-end 2018 when there were 65,137 full-time, proselytizing missionaries. As a result, 2019 is the first year with a significant increase in the number of full-time missionaries serving since the "surge" in the full-time missionary force ended in the mid-2010s.

3. Significant Year for Congregational Growth in the United States

There has been a net increase approximately 400 number of wards and branches in the worldwide Church during 2019, with

approximately half of this increase occurring in the United States. There were approximately 14,455 congregations as of year-end 2019 – 181 more than at year-end 2018. This increase in congregations constitutes a 1.27% annual increase – a small percentage increase but the highest reported by the Church in the United States since 2007 when there was a 1.47% annual increase in the number of congregations for the country. See below for the annual net change in the number of congregations for the United States within the past decade:

- 2019 +181
- 2018 +49
- 2017 +0
- 2016 +65
- 2015 +142
- 2014 +152
- 2013 +124
- 2012 +114
- 2011 +27
- 2010 +126
- 2009 +112

Most of the new congregations organized in the United States during 2019 have been English-speaking wards without any special designation (i.e. young single adult, single adult, care center). Increases in the number of congregations is one of the best statistical indicators published by the Church that correlates with increases in the number of active members. Thus, this development suggests perhaps accelerated growth in the number of active members in the United States. Reports from hundreds of members throughout the United States indicate that the average number of active members per ward or branch appears to remain constant, and this increase in the number of congregations do not appear related to a Church-led initiative to organize congregations with fewer active members. Furthermore, many wards and branches, particularly outside of the Intermountain West, have reported significant increases in the number of convert baptisms within the past year.

Accelerated congregational growth in the United States during 2019 was also influenced by the creation of many new Spanish-speaking congregations. The Church in many, if not all, of its administrative areas in North America organized Spanish-speaking congregations in many lesser-reached areas in an effort to better reach Latinos who are more receptive to the Latter-day Saint gospel message than most of their English-speaking counterparts. This effort, called the Hispanic Outreach Initiative, has resulted in the organization of dozens of new Spanish-speaking congregations, especially within the western and central United States. It appears that may Spanish-speaking member groups have also been organized that are not reported on official Church websites.

Time will tell whether this unexpected increase in the number of congregations within the United States will continue into 2020 and beyond, especially given precipitously slowing membership growth rates for the United States. The trend during the past three decades has been one of decelerating membership growth from 2.1-2.3% annual growth in the 1990s to 1.4-1.9% annual growth in the 2000s, 1.0-1.4% annual growth during the first half of the 2010s, and 0.6-0.9% annual growth from 2016-2018. Although the number of convert baptisms in the United States has appeared to have slightly decreased during the past decade compared to previous decades, the decline in the average number of children born per Latter-day Saint woman appears the primary cause for rapidly decelerating membership growth within the United States. Increase in Church membership through births has appeared the primary mechanism for growth for the Church in the United States for many decades. Moreover, difficulties with effective member-missionary programs, and adequate prebaptismal preparation and post-baptismal mentoring for new converts have posed challenges to augment the number of converts who join the Church. Lastly, increasing secularism in the United States has also reduced the receptivity of many Americans to the Latter-day Saint Gospel message.

4. Creation of Africa Central Area Announced – Several Significant Growth Developments in Central, Eastern, and Southeastern Africa

Africa Central Area

The new Africa Central Area will be created from a division of the Africa Southeast Area (to be renamed Africa South Area) in August 2020 with headquarters in Nairobi, Kenya. Countries to be assigned to the area were also announced, which span from South Sudan and Eritrea in the north, to the DR Congo and Tanzania in the south, to Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea on the west, and Seychelles and Somalia to the east. The Africa Central Area will have 430 million people within its geographical boundaries. Countries to be assigned to the new area include: Burundi, Cameroon, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DR Congo), the Republic of the Congo, Djibouti, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Gabon, Kenya,

Rwanda, Sao Tome and Principe, Seychelles, Somalia, South Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda. The realigned and renamed Africa South Area will have 200 million people and include: Angola, Botswana, Comoros, Eswatini, Lesotho, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Mayotte, Mozambique, Namibia, Reunion, Saint Helena, South Africa, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. Sudan will be reassigned to the Middle East/Africa North Area. There will be more than 100,000 members in the new Africa Central Area when the area becomes fully operational in August 2020, with more than half of those members living in the DR Congo. The creation of the new area will provide for significantly more mission resources to Central Africa, East Africa, and Southern Africa – a region of the worldwide Church where receptivity to the Latter-day Saint gospel message is high but has lacked adequate resources to effectively proselyte 630 million people.

DR Congo

Four new stakes were organized in the DR Congo during 2019, including the Church's eleventh stake in Kinshasa. Kinshasa now ties with Accra, Ghana as the metropolitan area on the landmass of Africa, Asia, and Europe with the second most stakes. Currently Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire has the most stakes of any urban agglomeration on the Afro-Eurasian landmass with 12 stakes. There are 23 stakes and 1 district in the DR Congo. The Church in the DR Congo also organized its first branch in one additional city during the year (Muanda).

Republic of the Congo

The Church organized a branch in Dolisie (Loubomo) after many years of a member group that met in the city. Dolisie is the third most populous city in the country with approximately 100,000 inhabitants and is the first city in 22 years to have had a branch organized for the first time. There are now three cities in the country with a Church presence.

Kenya

Two new districts were organized in western Kenya during 2019, including the Kisumu Kenya District and the Kitale Kenya District. There are now two stakes and six districts in Kenya. There were also two cities where the Church organized branches for the first time (Luanda and Nyabondo). There was a net increase of six official congregations during 2019 – a 12.5% annual increase. Membership growth rates in Kenya have also recently accelerated compared to recent years. Membership increased by 4.0% in 2018 – the most rapid rate since 2012.

Mozambique

One new stake and one new district were organized in Mozambique during 2019. Both of the two most populous cities in the country (Maputo and Beira) now have two stakes with the creation of the fourth stake in the country. The new district was organized in Chimoio and is the Church's first district in that city. Significant congregational growth also occurred during the year as 10 new congregations were organized – a 29.4% increase from year-end 2018. The number of branches in the northern city of Nampula increased from three to six during the year. There were also two cities or villages where the Church reinstated a branch or organized a branch for the first time: Luaha and Nacala.

Tanzania

The Church organized its fifth and sixth branches in Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania in February. These are the first new branches to be organized in this city of 6.15 million people since 2004. The most recently organized branch in Tanzania prior to 2019 was the Mwanza Branch, which was created in 2011.

Rwanda

The Church organized the Kigali 4th Branch from a division of the Kigali 2nd Branch during June. The new branch is the Church's first new branch to be created in the country since 2013 albeit rapid membership growth has occurred during the past six years. Problems with securing meetinghouse space has been the primary deterrent to create additional congregations. Church membership in Rwanda grew from 17 in 2008 to 749 in 2018.

Uganda

Years of growth and careful preparation from outlying mission branches culminated in the organization of three new districts during 2019 – all of which were in cities where districts have never operated. These districts were created in Busia, Gulu, and Masaka. Attendance at the special conferences to create the districts was good, with more than 300 people present at each conference to create the new districts in Busia and Masaka, and 258 people in attendance to create the new district in Gulu. One additional city had its first branch organized during 2019 (Tororo).

5. Continued Rapid Growth and Expansion of the Church in West Africa

There were many noteworthy Church growth developments in West Africa during 2019. See below for some of the most significant updates by country.

Benin

The Church organized its first branch within the interior of the country in the city of Bohicon. Since the organization of the first branch in Benin in 2005 (the Cotonou Branch), all other cities with congregations have been on the Atlantic coast, including Calavi (organized in 2014), Port Novo (2014), and Hilacondji (2017). Missionaries first began visiting Bohicon to investigate opportunities to organize a member group and teach isolated members and prospective members in 2017. The organization of the new branch is a major development for the Church in Benin as the Church has maintained an extremely limited national presence in only a few cities along the Atlantic Coast.

Burkina Faso

The Church organized its first member group in Burkina Faso in the capital city of Ouagadougou. The first convert baptisms also occurred in the country. Missionary activity in Burkina Faso has been assigned to the Cote d'Ivoire Yamoussoukro Mission. Mission leadership first visited Ouagadougou for the first time in late 2019. Approval has also reportedly been granted for the Ouagadougou Group to be formed into an official branch of the Church. However, the Church has yet to obtain official government recognition before full-time missionaries are assigned. Approximately 20 million people inhabit Burkina Faso. The population is 60% Muslim, 30% Christian, and 10% followers of indigenous beliefs (animism).

Cote d'Ivoire

The Church in Cote d'Ivoire continues to report some of the most rapid Church growth in West Africa. Four additional cities, towns, and villages had the first official branch of the Church organized in 2019, including Godoua, Grand-Lahou, Oume, and Tiebissou. There are now 56 cities, towns or villages in Cote d'Ivoire with a ward or branch – a significant increase from only eight cities, towns, and villages with a ward or branch as of 2009. Member groups in Cote d'Ivoire have also recently begun to operate in several additional locations without a ward or branch, such as Niakia and Zakaria. There are also plans in the immediate future to organize the first member group in northern Cote d'Ivoire in Korhogo where members informally meet on Sundays.

The Church in Cote d'Ivoire also organized five additional districts in 2019 – all located in the Cote d'Ivoire Yamoussoukro Mission. These districts are headquartered in Danané, Duekoue, Issia, Man, and Sinfra. There are now 14 stakes and 17 districts in Cote d'Ivoire, whereas there were only three stakes and one district in Cote d'Ivoire in 2009.

Guinea

The Church assigned its first young, full-time missionaries from the Sierra Leone Freetown Mission to the only Latter-day Saint congregation in the country in early 2019. Church membership doubled in 2018 from 30 to 61. In late 2019, the Conakry Branch was reassigned to the Cote d'Ivoire Yamoussoukro Mission and a second full-time missionary companionship was added.

Liberia

The Church organized its first branches in two additional cities in Liberia during 2019 (Gbarnga and Greenville). Two member groups were also organized in previously unreached cities during the year in Ganta and Kingsville. There was a net increase of five official congregations during the year. One new stake was also organized, the Gardnesville Liberia Stake, and there were 1,700 in attendance for the first stake conference in November five months after the stake was organized. There are now five stakes and one district in Liberia.

Mali

The Church obtained official government recognition in January 2019. In August, the first young, full-time missionaries were assigned to Bamako. Four Black African elders from the Cote d'Ivoire Abidjan East Mission were assigned. At the time, church attendance for the entire country was approximately 82. In late 2019, there was one branch (Bamako) and two member groups (Gomi [N'Gomy or Diatoula] and Frako [Mountougoula]). The Gomi Group was organized in late 2019. One hundred attended a special combined Christmas sacrament meeting for the branch and two member groups. There were 42 members in Mali in April 2018, and likely as many as 70 members in Mali by year-end 2018. Scores of convert baptisms occurred in 2019.

Nigeria

The Africa West Area Presidency announced boundary realignments for five of the seven Nigerian missions in April. As a result, most of the missions in Nigeria now have 9-10 stakes. The area presidency noted these changes "are being made to better position the missions in Nigeria for the future growth and establishment of the Church," and added, "We anticipate significant future growth of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Nigeria and recognize the Lord's hand in bringing this about." [3]

The Church in Nigeria surpassed the milestone of 700 congregations during 2019. As of late 2019, there were 722 congregations – an 11.3% increase from year-end 2018. The Church reached the milestone of 100 congregations in approximately 1992, 200 congregations in 2001, 300 congregations in 2010, 400 congregations in 2013, 500 congregations in 2016, and 600 congregations in 2017. Currently, the Church in Nigeria has the seventh most wards and branches of any country in the world after the United States, Brazil, Mexico, the Philippines, Peru, and Argentina. Five new stakes and four new districts were organized in Nigeria in 2019. There are now 59 stakes and 19 districts in Nigeria.

Some of the most impressive congregational growth in Nigeria occurred in Gboko, Benin City, and northern Abia State. In Gboko, the Church organized four new branches in one day. Prior to the organization of the new branches, there was only one branch in Gboko. Also, three of the branches in Gboko are designated as Tiv speaking, making these branches the first official Tiv-speaking branches in the worldwide Church. The Tiv are a people related to the Igbo located in Benue State. In Benin City, the Church organized at least 16 new congregations (4 new wards, 12 new branches) during the year – an increase of 20% from the previous total number of congregations in the city. The 82 congregations in the eight Benin City stakes provide the

most penetrating outreach by the Church of any city in Africa with more than one million inhabitants as the average ward or branch has 19,634 people within its boundaries. These findings indicate substantial increases in active membership, efforts to reduce travel times for church, and proactive measures to “plant” congregations in areas to spark greater growth. Benin City is now the metropolitan area outside of the Americas with the most stakes and congregations without a temple planned or dedicated. In northern Abia State, the Church underwent a significant expansion into previously unreached or lesser-reached areas as five new branches were organized. Lastly, the Church in Nigeria organized its first wards or branches in 12 additional cities, towns, or villages during 2019, including Ariam, Ekwulobia, Igbiri, Inyila, New Nyanya, Nnewi, Ogbogwu, Orozo, Ozuitem, Taabaa, Uturu, and Zaakpo.

Senegal

A second city in Senegal (Mbour) had full-time missionaries assigned and a member group organized. There were approximately 20 members who attended the first Church meeting in Mbour. Mbour is located approximately 50 miles (80 kilometers) southeast of Dakar.

Sierra Leone

Many significant church growth developments occurred in Sierra Leone during 2019. Two new stakes were organized during the year, including the third stake in the city of Bo and the first stake in the city of Kenema. The Church’s growth in Bo has been especially impressive. No other city in the world, where no stakes have ever previously operated, has had so many new stakes organized in such a short period of time as Bo. The Church in Bo organized its first three stakes within an approximately 22-month period. The percentage of members of the Church in the population is estimated at 4.0% given the number of congregations in the city (23) multiplied by the average number of members per ward or branch in Sierra Leone as of year-end 2018 (308) and the city's population of approximately 175,000 in 2015. Bo is also unique as it is likely the city with the highest percentage of Latter-day Saints in the population of any city with 100,000 or more people on the Afro-Eurasian landmass. The average ward or branch in Bo has 7,609 people within its geographical boundaries. There are 17 meetinghouses in Bo that provide high-penetrating outreach and access to the Church in the city. As for the Church in Sierra Leone as a whole, 10 new official congregations were organized in 2019 – a 14.5% increase from year-end 2018. The Church organized its first branches in two additional cities during the year, including Tongo and Pujehun, and its first member group in one additional city (Magburaka). There are now 16 cities, towns, and villages in Sierra Leone with an official Church presence (up from five in 2009).

Togo

Two new branches were organized on the outskirts of northern Lomé during 2019, namely the Sanguera and Djagble Branches. Full-time missionaries also reported regularly teaching prospective members in several villages and small towns northeast of Tsévié. Annual membership growth rates in Togo have been above 10% every year since 2009 with the exception of 2017.

6. Eight New Stakes Organized in the Philippines

The Church in the Philippines had a significant year for new stake creations in 2019. Eight new stakes were organized, six of which were from districts, including the Baliwag Philippines Stake, Ballesteros Philippines Stake, Batangas Philippines Stake, Camarin Philippines Stake, Iba Philippines Stake, Iriga Philippines Stake, Lubao Philippines Stake, and the Orion Philippines Stake. This is the highest net increase in the number of stakes in the Philippines since the year 2000 when there was a net increase of nine stakes for the year. The advancement of many districts into stakes was possible due to progress with updating membership records and increases in the number of active members. Only two stakes were organized from stake divisions (Batangas and Camarin). There is a high likelihood of many additional districts in the Philippines advancing into stakes within the near future given that there are 63 districts in the country and steady progress in many areas with increases in the number of active members. Since 2012, the number of stakes in the Philippines has increased from 85 to 115 and the number of districts has decreased from 84 to 63. Moreover, church attendance has also increased by approximately 50% during the past decade – a much more rapid rate than for total Church membership during this period (28%).

7. Census Numbers from the Pacific

Several countries in the Pacific have recently released data regarding religious affiliation as reported by participations. These data have generally indicated sizable increases in the number of self-identified Latter-day Saints in most countries where such data is collected and published.

Kiribati

The 2015 Kiribati Census reported 5,857 Latter-day Saints,[4] whereas the 2010 Kiribati Census reported 4,802 Mormons.[5] This constitutes a 22.0% increase during the five-year period. Official Church-reported figures indicate that Latter-day Saint membership increased from 14,927 in 2010 to 17,462 in 2015 – a 17.0% increase. Therefore, self-affiliated Latter-day Saints on the census increased at a more rapid rate than Church-reported membership, suggesting improvements in convert retention and member activity rates during this period. Data from the 2015 census indicates that Kiritimati (Christmas) Island is the island in Kiribati with the highest percentage of Latter-day Saints per census data (8.3%). This is a significant development as the first branch was organized on the island only 20 years ago in 1999. Nationwide, census data indicate that self-affiliated Latter-day Saints constitute 5.3% of the population (compared to Church-reported membership for 2015 which constituted 16.5% of the population). The most dramatic change in membership by island occurred in Onotoa (population: 1,393) where the number of census-reported Latter-day Saints increased from one in 2010 to 35 in 2015. Many southern islands reported significant percentage increases in census-reported Latter-day Saints due to expansion of missionary work and establishment of member groups in previously unreached locations. Progress with the opening of more islands to missionary work has also warranted some member groups to become branches. Five new branches were organized in Kiribati during 2019.

New Zealand

The 2018 New Zealand census reported 54,123 Latter-day Saints[6] - a significant increase from the 2006 New Zealand census when there were 43,536 Latter-day Saints reported.[7] This is a 24.3% increase in self-reported Latter-day Saints in New Zealand during this 12-year period, whereas the total number of responses to the religious affiliation question on the census increased by only 13.6% during this same period. Even more impressive, Church-reported membership between 2006 and 2018 increased from 97,474 to 114,215 – a 17.2% increase. This indicates that self-reported Latter-day Saints on the New Zealand census increased at a rate that was 41% higher than Church-reported membership for the same period. Thus, member activity rates and convert retention rates in New Zealand appear to have improved during this period. This conclusion is further supported by the number of Latter-day Saint congregations in New Zealand increasing from 202 in 2006 to 225 in 2018, albeit this increase in the number of congregations was at a slower rate (11.4%) than census-reported Latter-day Saints or Church-reported membership figures. Lastly, the number of stakes in New Zealand between 2006 and 2018 increased from 25 to 30 – a 16.7% increase.

Palau

The 2005 Census reported 143 self-affiliated Latter-day Saints nationwide,[8] whereas the 2015 Census reported 273 self-affiliated Latter-day Saints nationwide.[9] This 91% increase in one decade is a major increase that totally surpasses membership growth rates per Church-reported figures for the country (437 in 2005 versus 491 in 2015). Nevertheless, the Church in Palau continues to struggle with low member activity rates and leadership development problems.

Samoa

The 2016 Samoa census enumerated 33,077 Latter-day Saints, whereas the 2011 Samoa census tallied 24,350 Latter-day Saints.[10] This indicates an increase of 8,727 self-reported Latter-day Saints in Samoa – a 35.8% increase in a mere five-year period. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints reported the highest percentage increase in self-affiliated members among the five denominations with 10,000 or more adherents (other groups reported growth rates of 6-22% during the same period). During this five-year period, the total Samoan population increased from 160,961 to 195,979 – a 21.8% increase. As a

result, the percentage of self-affiliated Latter-day Saints in the population of Samoa increased from 15.1% to 16.9%. Official Church-reported membership totals for Samoa noted an increase of 8.9% between 2011 and 2016 from 72,320 to 78,746. Thus, the census-reported number of Latter-day Saints increased at a rate more than four times than of official Church-reported figures. Congregation and stake totals for the Church also indicate a measurable increase in the number of active members during this period as the total number of congregations increased from 134 to 153 (a 14.2% increase) and the number of stakes increased from 16 to 20 (a 25% increase).

Tonga

The 2011 Tonga census reported 18,554 Latter-day Saints,[11] whereas the 2016 Tonga census reported 18,673 Latter-day Saints.[12] Although this is an increase of only 0.64%, the population of Tonga during this five-year period decreased by 2.70% from 103,043 to 100,266. As a result, the percentage of self-affiliated Latter-day Saints in Tonga increased from 18.0% to 18.6% between 2011 and 2016. Furthermore, all other religious groups with at least 1,000 self-affiliated members experienced membership decline or no change in the total number of members during this period. Church-reported membership increased from 59,490 to 64,156 between 2011 and 2016 – a 7.8% increase. In sum, the Church in Tonga has done better than all other major denominations in regards to a net increase of self-affiliated members, but convert retention and member activity remain a major challenge as the number of self-affiliated members as a percentage of Church-reported membership decreased from 31.2% to 29.1%. Double-affiliation is a major challenge for religious groups in Tonga as many, if not most, Tongans are listed on the records for two or more religious groups. Church-reported membership in 2018 constituted 61.6% of the population – the highest of any country in the world.

8. Accelerating Congregational Growth in Bolivia, Ecuador, and Peru; Stake Growth Accelerates in Peru

Bolivia

There were 270 congregations (wards and branches) in Bolivia at year-end 2019 (an all-time high for the total number of congregations in Bolivia), whereas there were 257 congregations in Bolivia at year-end 2018. Most new units have been created in Santa Cruz. This increase of 13 congregations in 2019 was a 5.1% increase from year-end 2018 and the highest annual percentage increase in the number of congregations in Bolivia since 1997 when annual congregational growth rates topped 10%. Annual membership growth rates in Bolivia have also accelerated in recent years from 1.65% in 2015 to 2.20% in 2018. Nevertheless, the Church in Bolivia reports one of highest members-to-congregation ratios in the world due to historically low member activity rates as the average ward or branch had 808 members in 2018. Only one new stake was organized in Bolivia during 2019. The Church in Bolivia has the fourth highest percentage of members of the Church in the population (1.84%) among South American countries after Chile (3.32%), Uruguay (3.15%), and Peru (1.93%).

Ecuador

The number of congregations in Ecuador increased from 305 to 313 during 2019 – a 2.6% annual increase. This is the highest percentage increase since 1997. The Church in Ecuador has experienced essentially stagnant congregational growth or a decline in the number of congregations for over two decades as the number of congregations decreased from 383 in 1997 to 290 in 2003 and vacillated between 300 and 310 between 2010 and 2018. Nevertheless, the number of wards in Ecuador has steady increased during this time as branches have matured into wards. More specifically, the number of wards has increased from 192 in 2003 to 224 in 2010, 231 in 2015, and 261 in 2019. Most new wards organized in 2019 were in Guayaquil.

Peru

There were 780 congregations in Peru as of year-end 2019 – a net increase of 21 congregations from year-end 2018 (a 2.8% annual increase). This is the highest percentage increase in the number of congregations in Peru since 1997 when annual congregational growth rates exceeded 10%. Eight new stakes were organized in Peru during 2019 – the largest number of new stakes created in Peru in a single year since the mid-1990s. There are now 112 stakes and 17 districts in Peru. Peru is the country with the fourth most stakes after the United State (1,643), Brazil (277), Mexico (222), and the Philippines (115). Despite this progress, the Church in Peru has struggled with low member activity rates as reflected by the average number of members

per congregation (797). Furthermore, the Church in Peru experienced a six-year long period in which the total number of congregations in Peru decreased from 2012-2017. As a result, there were more congregations in Peru in 2011 (788) than at present even though there were approximately 100,000 fewer members in Peru in 2011 than in 2018. Additionally, the Church in Peru reached its all-time high for the number of congregations in 1997 (974) and has yet to come close to this number of congregations in the country. Nevertheless, there has been significant progress in Peru during the past two decades in regards to the number of active members per ward or branch. Most wards appeared to have 50-100 active members in the 1990s, whereas today most wards appear to have between 100-200 active members.

9. Caribbean Developments – Rapid Membership Growth in Cuba, First District in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines Organized

Cuba

The Church reported significant membership growth in Cuba during 2018. Total membership increased from 242 to 357 – a 47.5% annual increase. One new branch was also organized during the year in the small town of La Portada. The first district of the Church in Cuba was organized in 2017. No full-time missionaries have appeared to serve in Cuba, and Cuba is not currently assigned to a full-time mission albeit Cuba has been previously assigned to missions headquartered in other nations such as the Dominican Republic and Jamaica.

Saint Vincent and the Grenadines

The Church organized its first district in Saint Vincent and the Grenadines during 2019. The new district includes six branches in three countries: Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Grenada, and Saint Lucia. The Church has experienced steady membership growth in all three of these nations since 2010, growing from 940 members to 1,504 members at year-end 2018.

10. First Convert Baptisms in Timor-Leste

The first convert baptisms occurred in Timor-Leste in 2019 when at least nine new converts joined the Church. These converts joined the Church after months of church attendance and careful mentoring by senior missionaries stationed in Dili and formal teaching from Indonesian-speaking full-time missionaries via the internet. The Church remains unregistered with the government albeit it is unclear why this is the case given widespread religious freedom in the country. However, distance from mission headquarters in Jakarta, Indonesia and the lack of native members with leadership experience have likely deterred the Church from obtaining official government recognition and assigning proselytizing missionaries. Senior humanitarian missionary couples have served in Timor-Leste since 2015 when Elder Jeffrey R. Holland dedicated the country for missionary work.

TOP TEN DISCOURAGING CHURCH GROWTH AND MISSIONARY DEVELOPMENTS

1. 2018 Statistical Report – Global Membership Growth Continues to Decelerate, Slowest Year for Congregational Growth since 1953.

Total Membership

The 2018 Statistical Report provided some of the bleakest numbers ever reported by the Church during the past 80 years.

These numbers are current as of year-end 2018. Total Church membership stood at 16,313,735, which was a mere increase of 195,566 from year-end 2017, or only a 1.21% annual increase during the previous 12 months. This is the lowest numerical net increase in Church membership reported since 1978 when there was a net increase of 194,000 members. The percentage increase for Church membership in 2018 was also extremely low compared to historical numbers within the past several decades. Total Church membership increased by 1.21% during 2018 – the lowest reported by the Church since 1937.

The number of membership records added to the Church in 2018 through convert baptisms and increase in children of record (usually children born to parents who are Church members) was 336,434. Most years in the past two decades have had 340,000-400,000 new members added to the Church through convert baptisms or increase in children of record. The summation of convert baptisms and increase in children of record minus the net increase of church-reported membership generates a number that represents the approximate number of membership records removed from Church records. This number is 140,868 for 2018, whereas it was only 104,748 for 2017. As a result, 2018 was the year with the largest number of membership records ever removed by the Church in a single year. The second highest year was in 2014 when the discrepancy in convert baptisms/increase in children of record and net increase in church membership equaled 122,903. The Church has removed 100,000 or more membership records a year since 2014.

Convert Baptisms

The number of converts baptized during 2018 (234,322) was nearly the same as for 2017 (233,729), and 2017 was the year with the fewest convert baptisms since 1987. The annual number of convert baptisms averaged 267,476 in the 2000s and averaged 263,553 from 2010 to 2018. However, the average annual number of convert baptisms in the 1990s was 305,748. Convert retention rates one year after baptism have increased significantly outside of the United States since the 2000s, but in the 2010s only half of converts continued to regularly attend church one year after baptism.

Increase of Children on Record

The number of children under age 8 who were added to Church records during 2018 was 102,102 – the lowest reported by the Church since 2007. The Church has generally added 110,000-120,000 new children under age 8 to its records per year since 2008. The all-time high for increase of children on record was set back in 1982 (124,000). However, increase of children on record decreased in the 1980s and 1990s, and generally ranged from 70,000-85,000 between 1989 and 2002. Nevertheless, with more than three times as many Latter-day Saints in 2018 compared to 1982, it would be expected for there to be more young children added to Church records in 2018 than 1982 even with decreases in global birthrates among Latter-day Saint women.

Congregational Growth

The number of congregations (wards and branches) reported by the Church as of year-end 2018 was 30,536 – a mere increase of only 30 from year-end 2017. This constituted the lowest annual net increase in the number of congregations reported by the Church since 1953. Although there were fewer new congregations organized in 2018 compared to most previous years, this statistic was heavily influenced by the closure of approximately 150 congregations in Mexico during the year. Nevertheless, congregational growth rates number among the statistics that correlate best with increases in active membership, suggesting challenges with the Church's efforts to augment the total number of active members. However, as noted previously in this article, 2019 has been a significant year for congregational growth, with a net increase of approximately 400 congregations worldwide.

2. Congregation Consolidations in Southern South America

Chile

The Church in Chile reported a notable decrease in the number of congregations during 2019. As of year-end 2018, there were 590 congregations, whereas at year-end 2019 there were 568 congregations. This net decrease of 22 congregations was attributed primarily to the closure of many wards in southern Santiago where three stakes were also discontinued. The Church in Chile has one of the lowest, if not the lowest, member activity rates in the worldwide Church. In 2018, the average ward or branch had more than 1,000 members. Despite increases in the number of missions in Chile during the past two decades (8 missions in 1999 versus 10 missions in 2019), there has been little indication of improvements with member activity rates. Southern Santiago appeared a particular area of focus by the Church to strengthen wards albeit these efforts yielded few results.

Church apostle Elder Jeffrey R. Holland was assigned to Chile for approximately two years in the early and mid-2000s given concerns with leadership training and understaffed wards and branches that resulted from cursory teaching of new members and high-pressure tactics to baptize new converts. This resulted in the discontinuation of 42 stakes during the first-half of the 2000s and a net decrease of 344 congregations. Reports from Chilean members indicate most wards in Chile today have between 75-150 active members, and that there do not appear to be many likely future consolidations within the foreseeable future.

Argentina

The Church in Argentina continues to report ongoing net decreases in the number of congregations – a trend that began in 2008. There were 751 congregations as of year-end 2018, whereas there were 734 congregations as of year-end 2019 (a decrease of 17). This is not the largest annual decrease in the number of congregations for the Church in Argentina, but it is the largest net decrease for the Church in Argentina since 2014 when there was a net decline of 27 congregations. Unlike many other Latin American countries, the Church in Argentina has never undergone a widespread restructuring of congregations and stakes. Instead, the Church in Argentina experienced slow, but steady, decreases in the number of congregations as Church leaders have sought to strengthen congregations and augment the number of active members in individual congregations. There is no evidence to indicate that congregations in Argentina have ever had more active members than at present, but instead there has been an emphasis on wards and branches to function with larger numbers of members. Also, the Church in Argentina is one of the only South American countries where a stake has never been discontinued, suggesting that there is a stable and strong body of local leadership albeit this leadership is limited in numbers. Most recent survey data indicate that wards generally have between 50-120 active members, whereas most branches have fewer than 50 active members.

3. Membership Growth Rates Decelerate in Brazil despite World’s Second Largest Missionary Force

The Church in Brazil reported its lowest annual membership growth rate in at least 80 years. Official Church membership increased by a mere 0.78% during 2019. In contrast, the Church in Brazil has typically reported annual membership growth rates of 2-4% for most years since the early 2000s. Congregational growth rates in Brazil also remain slow, as the total number of congregations in Brazil increased by 1.05% in 2018 and 1.47% in 2019. The Church in Brazil has also reported major discrepancies between Church-reported membership and the number of census-reported Latter-day Saints in Brazil due to low member activity rates and convert attrition. For example, the 2010 Brazil census tabulated 225,695 Latter-day Saints – only 19.8% of Church-reported membership for the year (1,138,740). Brazilian members have noted that membership record updates and cleanup have been a major contributor to the significant deceleration in the 2018 membership growth rate in Brazil (i.e. removal of members from records who have died). Nevertheless, the Church in Brazil with its 35 missions (soon-to-be 36 missions) has appeared to struggle with the long-term conversion of sizable numbers of converts in many areas of the country. The amount of growth reported by the Church in Brazil in recent years has appeared disproportionately low given that the Church’s second largest missionary force is located in Brazil. Only four new stakes and one new district was organized in Brazil in 2019 – a small number given that there are 277 stakes and 39 districts.

4. No Countries Had Stakes Organized for the First Time during 2019

The Church in 2019 did not organize its first stake in a country where no stakes previously operated. In contrast, there were 19 countries where the Church organized its first stake between 2010 and 2015. Only two countries since 2016 have had a stake

organized or reinstated (Liberia in 2016 and Angola in 2018). Although certain critical mass thresholds must be met for the Church to organize a stake in a country for the first time (at least 1,900 members), there are several countries where there are enough members concentrated in a specific geographical area to organize a stake, such as in Malaysia, Guyana, Belize, Pakistan, Armenia, Romania, and Bulgaria. However, the Church in these countries has struggled with chronic member inactivity problems and/or local leadership development challenges which have prevented the organization of stakes.

5. Slow Church Growth Continues in India

Despite its status as the second most populous nation in the world with approximately 1.3 billion people, the Church in India continued to experience slow growth during 2019 based upon information available. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints experienced moderate-to-rapid growth in India between the late 1980s and early 2010s. However, annual membership growth rates have decelerated to only 3.0-3.6% since 2015. Furthermore, there has been a net increase of only six congregations between 2012 and 2019. Returned missionaries and local members report that the focus by mission and area leadership has been on the establishment of stakes and the training of local leadership. This has resulted in the organization of the Church's first four stakes in India since 2012, but at the cost of slowing growth rates. There are several reasons why the Church in India has experienced a marked deceleration in growth (as indicated by membership and congregational growth), including the use of only English in Church meetings and proselytism, minimal efforts to open member groups or branches in previously unreached cities, lackluster member-missionary efforts, and frequent shortages of foreign missionary visas.

6. Stagnant Growth in Mexico Continues

The Church in Mexico continues to experience essentially stagnant growth – trend that has persisted for several consecutive years. Annual membership growth rates have decelerated in the 2010s to only 1.3-1.9% since 2014, and the number of congregations has decreased year-after-year for three consecutive years. The total number of congregations in Mexico has decreased from 2,016 in 2016 to 1,843 as of late 2019 albeit there was a decline of only three congregations in 2019.

7. Many African Countries with Adequate Religious Freedom to Permit a Church Presence Continue to Have No Church Presence

There remain many countries in Sub-Saharan Africa where the Church has no known presence. As of late 2019, there were eight countries (The Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Equatorial Guinea, Niger, Chad, South Sudan, São Tomé and Príncipe, and Seychelles) where there has been religious freedom to permit proselytizing Christian groups to operate for many years or decades. Although some of these nations have experienced significant political instability or violence, like South Sudan, all of these nations have had nontraditional, proselytism-focused Christian denominations for years, such as Seventh-day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses. Only a few of these nations have conditions where open proselytism is inappropriate or banned (such as Niger due to security concerns among Islamist extremists). Furthermore, there are other countries where religious freedom conditions appear likely to improve given recent political change, such as Sudan.[13] There are also other African countries where the Church has a minimal presence where there are good opportunities for growth, but no formal proselytism by full-time missionaries occurs such as in the Central African Republic. Failure to establish a Church presence in unreached nations may result in missed opportunities in the future if conditions change that seriously impede or prohibit missionary activity and registration with the government.

8. Discontinued Stake and Congregation Closures in Taiwan

For the first time in Church history, the Church discontinued a stake in Taiwan. The Pingtung Taiwan Stake, organized in 2010, was discontinued in 2019 and retained units were combined with the two Kaohsiung stakes. Southernmost Taiwan has struggled for many years with lower activity rates and a relative lack of church growth compared to other cities in Taiwan. These

changes appeared associated with a lack of growth since the Kaohsiung Taiwan North Stake was organized in 2015, and problems associated with stakes and wards running with fewer than the minimum number of active members needed to properly operate. The Asia Area appeared to make an emphasis about five years ago to organize wards with fewer active members, likely in an effort to reduce travel times and assist in reactivation efforts (such as in Hong Kong). Membership growth rates in Taiwan have slowed the past five years to only 1-2% a year versus 3-10% a year in the 2000s. The Church reported a net decrease of nine congregations in Taiwan during 2019 – a 7.7% decrease – due to congregation consolidations in multiple areas of the country. The Church in Taiwan has also historically struggled with very low member activity rates, which delayed the establishment of stakes in several areas of the country. There are now 16 stakes in Taiwan.

9. Discontinued Branches and Stagnant Growth in Malaysia

The Church closed two of its branches in Malaysia in the cities of Butterworth and Sitiawan. This marks the first time that the Church in Malaysia has ever closed its only branches in a city. Both branches previously functioned in West Malaysia. The Church in Malaysia has struggled for many years to achieve noticeable growth after a decade of rapid growth even with the publication of Malay Latter-day Saint scriptures in the past decade. With 10,500 members, Malaysia is the sovereign country with the most members without a stake.

10. Significant Consolidation of Wards in Singapore

The Church announced a significant restructuring of wards in Singapore. The 10 wards in the Singapore Stake were redistricted into seven wards (four wards were discontinued, one young single adult [YSA] ward was organized). The Church in Singapore has historically reported steady membership growth, but in the past few years membership growth has been stagnant or has slightly declined. As of year-end 2018, there were 3,449 members.

LIMITATIONS

The subjective nature of determining which missionary and church growth developments numbered among the most significant for 2019 constitutes the greatest limitation to this article. Some developments have likely been unknown to the author due to limited access to statistical data and a lack of reports from members, missionaries, and church leaders from some areas of the world. Data obtained regarding the organization of new congregations/stakes and the expansion of national outreach was retrieved from official Church sources such as lds.org/maps. Local member, full-time missionary, and church leader reports also contributed to the findings in this article. Official country-by-country membership data for year-end 2019 will likely not become available until April 2020 shortly after General Conference. Some 2019 data regarding congregational growth and stake and district growth in this case study may be inaccurate due to lags in the Church updating congregational and organizational totals for the year 2019.

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