LDS Growth Encyclopedia on Missionary Work and Church Growth (Missiology)

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Resignation and Excommunication

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Posted: December 30th, 2013

The voluntary action of a disenchanted Latter-day Saint to initiate the removal of his or her name from church records members constitutes resignation whereas church-initiated action to remove a member from church records due to transgression constitutes excommunication. Resigned and excommunicated individuals do not remain on church records and are not included in membership statistics. The vast majority of members who no longer attend church, follow LDS teachings, and self-identify as a Latter-day Saints remain on church records and do not resign their memberships or become excommunicated.

Apostasy lies at the root for the vast majority, if not all, former members who resign their membership or are excommunicated. Resignation may occur for a variety of reasons such as inactive members insisting total disaffiliation from the Church due to little if any past church activity and desire to avoid contact from missionaries and members attempting to reactivate them, losing a testimony in the Church as a result of engaging in prohibited behaviors or challenging LDS teachings and church leaders, or as a method for protesting church policies or particular doctrinal issues that individuals feel are not sufficiently addressed or explained. Excommunication frequently accompanies individuals guilty of moral transgressions or gross mishandling of church finances by church leaders and failure to make proper modifications to their behavior after disciplinary action has occurred. Church leaders have stressed that the purpose of excommunication is not to discard unworthy and troublesome members from the Church but is rather designed to help these members properly repent and start over in their relationship with the Church and with God.[1] Many excommunicated members are re-baptized into the Church each year and have their previous blessings and ordinances restored. However, most excommunicated and resigned members do not appear to rejoin the Church later in their lives.

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There is little data on official numbers of members who annually resign or are excommunicated and no known estimates on the number of excommunicated members who are re-baptized into the Church. Anti-LDS websites and groups have frequently published statistics on these numbers although it is unclear whether these figures are reliable due to the biased nature of these individuals. The most reliable information on the influence of resignation and excommunication on church growth trends has recently emerged from a few church leaders who have publicly spoken on the subject. Some church leaders have indicated that members who resign their membership or are excommunicated has reached concerning levels. In 2012, official church historian Elder Marlin Jensen indicated that, "maybe since Kirtland, we've never had a period of - I'll call it apostasy, like we're having now" but added "I think we are at a time of challenge, but it isn't apocalyptic."[2] Other church leaders have downplayed the negative impact of apostasy and members leaving the Church, claiming that the number of excommunications and resignations has decreased. In 2012, church spokesman Michael Purdy reported that “those leaving the church are a fraction of 1 percent each year and it is a trend that is decreasing rather than increasing.”[3] Assuming that 0.5% of worldwide church membership resigns each year, there may be as many as 72,000 members who resign a year. There may be as many as one million former Latter-day Saints living at present who either resigned their membership or were excommunicated if there are even as few as 50,000 members who resign or are excommunicated a year. Maintaining this rate of resignations and excommunications for 20 years would result in approximately one million disaffiliated members at present if the vast majority of these former members are still alive and have not rejoined the Church. Some church leaders and church growth researchers have observed that rates of apostasy among young adults has been particularly alarming, especially relating to resolving doctrinal concerns and issues of church history.[4] The recent increase in the disparity of the summation of convert baptisms and increase of children on record and actual annual membership increase suggests that excommunication and resignation may be numerically increasing within the past decade as this statistic has doubled within the past decade. The Church does not publish statistics on the number of members who have died, children of record removed from church records due to not being baptized at age eight, or unaccounted members removed from records as part of record-keeping maintenance. Consequently, it is unclear from membership data published by the Church whether the annual numbers of resigned and excommunicated members have declined, increased, or remained the same.

There appears little indication that the rate of resignation and excommunication will noticeably change within the foreseeable future. The Church has recently taken action to help curb rates of resignation and excommunication through updating and reformatting its Sunday School manuals and teaching approaches to youth. This action as well as the recent lowering of the minimum missionary age for men and women may help reduce the number of members who are removed from church records. Information challenging LDS teachings and anti-LDS groups that engage in counterproselytism efforts will continue to be available and will likely contribute to the resignation and excommunication of some members. The growing influence of secularism in the world may instigate an increase in individuals who resign their membership or are excommunicated if they fail to develop testimonies and engage in prohibited behaviors encouraged or tolerated by secularist ideology.

[1] Ballard, M. Russell. "A Chance to Start Over: Church Disciplinary Councils and the Restoration of Blessings," Ensign, September 1990.
http://www.lds.org/ensign/1990/09/a-chance-to-start-over-church-disciplinary-councils-and-the-restoration-of-blessings

[2] Henderson, Peter; Cooke, Kristina. "Special report - Mormonism besieged by the modern age," Reuters, 30 January 2012.
http://uk.reuters.com/article/2012/01/30/uk-mormonchurch-idUKTRE80T1CP20120130

[3] Boorstein, Michelle. "Mormons struggling with doubt turn to online support groups," The Washington Post, 24 May 2012.
http://www.washingtonpost.com/local/mormons-struggling-with-doubt-turn-to-online-support-groups/2012/05/16/gJQASImHnU_story

[4] Sheffield, Carrie. "Column: Why Mormons flee their church," USA Today, 17 June 2012.
http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/opinion/forum/story/2012-06-17/mormon-lds-ex-mormon/55654242/1