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

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Branch

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A branch is a small congregation led by a branch president. A branch may operate anywhere in the world and unlike a ward is not constrained to operating within a stake. Branches are the only reported congregations in districts and at times are assigned directly to a mission in many remote or recently opened areas to missionary work. A branch president presides over a branch and generally has two counselors. The Church has operated branches since the first year the Church was organized, but at times called these small congregations "churches" until the term was later standardized. In general, branches operate in locations where there are few members and small populations, where an official church presence was recently established, or where there are low member activity and convert retention rates preventing the organization of wards and stakes.

The standards for a branch to function have varied over time and differ by location. In True to the Faith, the minimal criteria outlined for a branch to operate is that there must be at least one Melchizedek Priesthood holder or priest in the Aaronic Priesthood and at least two member families.[1] However, in recent years this standard has not applied in most areas of the world as indicated by reports from missionaries and church leaders. In many Central American nations, for example, missionaries report that six to ten active priesthood holders must reside in an area to organize a new branch. In the United States and Canada, branches generally have at least 20 active members, four to six active priesthood holders, and at least one active, full-tithe paying Melchizedek Priesthood holder. Minimal qualifications for a branch to function outside North America varies by area, but in recent years these qualifications appear to more closely mirror the same standards upheld in North America.

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Branches in some locations may reach upwards of 700 members on church records but cannot advance to ward status. This is generally because there are too few active members and Melchizedek Priesthood holders, or if the branch does not pertain to a stake. Church leaders and missionaries report that most branches have between 50 and 300 members on church records. In recent years, the Church has generally organized new branches in cities with a well-established LDS presence to service a specific subpopulation, in lesser-reached neighborhoods and communities within close proximity of other wards and branches to enhance outreach and spur growth, or in a city recently opened to proselytism.

Branches are independent church units like wards that are reported in the Church's official congregational totals for individual countries and for the entire world. The Church organizes new branches from dependent units (groups and dependent branches), or from a portion of one or multiple previously operating wards or branches. In recent years, the Church has favored the establishment of a group or dependent branch prior to an official branch. This has occurred to ensure that local church leadership can sufficiently meet administrative demands and that there are enough church members attending church services and holding callings to sustain the operation of a branch. The process to obtain approval to organize an independent branch can take several months or even a year as multiple church leaders must consent approval. Due to this lengthy process, church leaders generally create a dependent unit prior to formally organizing an independent branch. The process of creating a new branch from a portion of one or more wards or branches remains commonplace despite the recent emphasis on organizing a member group prior to creating a branch. The organization of a branch from one or more previously operating congregations generally occurs in many lesser-reached areas of stakes where church leaders aspire to ultimately form additional wards, but are currently unable to do so because church membership is unable to meet the qualifications to create a new ward at present. The Church frequently splits branches in districts to form new branches, especially in locations where there are large numbers of active members to provide sufficient leadership manpower to staff additional congregations.

Independent branches can also be designated to service a special subpopulation or ethnolinguistic group. Hundreds of language-specific branches function in the United States, over 400 of which are Spanish-speaking. In late 2012, other countries

and dependencies with branches designated as speaking a language other than the primarily spoken language in the country included American Samoa, Australia, Cambodia, Canada, China, Estonia, Germany, Hong Kong, Japan, Jordan, Latvia, Lithuania, Macau, Malaysia, Netherlands, New Zealand, the Philippines, South Korea, Spain, Taiwan, Thailand, Ukraine, and the United Kingdom. The Church maintains approximately 200 young single adult (YSA) branches for adult members ages 18-30 in several countries and a handful of single adult branches in the United States. Approximately 100 correctional facility branches function in the United States to service incarcerated Latter-day Saints and prospective members. In late 2012, there were 33 branches worldwide designated for American military personnel located in the United States, Afghanistan, Djibouti, Germany, Italy, Japan, Portugal, South Korea, and Turkey. At the time the Church operated 28 retirement-designated branches and approximately 100 care center-designated branches for disabled and elderly adult members in the Intermountain West of the United States. In the United States, there were approximately two dozen student-designated branches for single and/or married members attending colleges and universities. Four youth-center branches function in youth detention or treatment facilities in Utah for troubled teens.

Aside from ordinary independent branches, there are several kinds of specialized branches including mission, district, administrative, and area branches. Virtually all branches reported in official church congregational statistics are independent branches that consist of one congregation assigned to a stake, district, mission, or area led by a branch presidency. The purpose of mission branches is to provide organizational support for isolated members and member groups that do not fall under the jurisdiction of other units. Mission branches have names like the "Uganda Kampala Mission Branch" and may service multiple countries. The Church operates approximately 100 mission branches worldwide that service areas neither assigned to a stake nor district and where there are no unaffiliated independent branches function. Individual groups operating under a mission branch can mature into an official branch if a group sustains the minimal qualifications for a branch to operate.

In the late 2000s, the Church created a new classification of branches called district branches for districts that had multiple groups operating or that covered large geographical areas. In late 2012, there were 23 reportable district branches in Nigeria (9), Ghana (5), Russia (3), China (2), Argentina (1), Armenia (1), Papua New Guinea (1), and Sierra Leone (1). Due to rapid church growth and low levels of urbanization, two-thirds of district branches operate in Sub-Saharan Africa. District branches can only operate within a district. If a district matures into a stake, the district branch is discontinued as these responsibilities become assumed by the stake presidency or individual wards or branches within the new stake.

Administrative branches have rarely operated since the Church began this classification of branches in 2010. Administrative branches have generally operated in countries not assigned to a mission and where no formal missionary activity occurs. There were once four administrative branches worldwide in the early 2010s in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Falkland Islands, Macedonia, and Montenegro. In early 2014, there were only two reportable administrative branches functioning in the Falkland Islands and Montenegro as administrative branches in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Macedonia were discontinued due to the recent organization of ordinary branches in these two countries.

Area branches function like mission branches in that they cover areas not assigned to a stake, district, or branch and often include multiple countries where there are no independent congregations functioning. Only a handful of area branches have ever operated in the Church. In late 2012, there were five reportable area branches in the world: The Africa Southeast Area - Gabon Branch, the Africa West Area Branch, the Europe East Area Branch, the Middle East/Africa North Area Branch, and the Asia North Area Branch. The Africa West Area Branch covers a huge geographical area, including all 10 countries within the Africa West Area that are not assigned to a mission, namely Burkina Faso, Chad, the Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Senegal, and Western Sahara.

The growth of the worldwide number of branches has varied over the past 25 years. The worldwide number of branches increased sharply from 5,099 in 1987 to 8,347 in 1995. The annual growth rate for branches averaged 7-9% during this period as a result of opening hundreds of new cities to proselytism in Eastern Europe, Latin America, and East Asia; a renewed emphasis on saturating major cities with small congregations to spur growth; and the organization of many specialized branches in the United States to service ethnolinguistic minority groups. The number of branches decreased every year between 1997 and 2003 until the number of branches reached 7,741. This decline occurred due to a reduced rate of outreach expansion throughout the world, the consolidation of smaller branches within close proximity of other wards or branches in many countries, and the worldwide maturation of branches into wards both in established stakes and districts turning into stakes. The number of branches slightly increased for most years between 2003 and 2008 to reach 7,904 in 2008 but declined every year thereafter to approximately 7,500 in 2013. In 2013, the number of branches worldwide reached a 20-year low due to few new cities opening to missionary work, the consolidation of smaller branches in locations where multiple congregations functioned, stricter qualifications to create new branches, and the downgrading of small branches to dependent branches or groups due to changes in the minimal qualifications for a branch to continue functioning.

The creation and consolidation of branches is important to the study of missiology and church growth for many reasons. The creation of a new branch in lesser-reached areas of the world often signifies a milestone in local church leadership development and mission leaders expanding national outreach. Church leaders may create branches in urban areas covered by stakes with nearby wards and branches already functioning in order to concentrate mission efforts on a particular city, town, or neighborhood, or to extend specialized outreach to a specific subpopulation. This practice has been evident in the Church opening many new branches in several Sub-Saharan African cities like Bulawayo, Zimbabwe and Kumasi, Ghana over the past decade in an effort to make congregations more accessible to the population and spur greater growth. Within the past decade, the Church in the United States has created hundreds of new Spanish-speaking branches throughout the country in a renewed emphasis to reach Spanish speakers. Branches are often the first type of congregation created in an area that had no previously reported LDS presence. Many smaller cities and rural areas have too few members to organize a ward. Consequently, the distribution and growth in the number of branches for a particular country or the world as a whole serves as a

barometer for progress reaching small towns and rural areas, and expanding national outreach.

Prospects for the number of branches to increase worldwide within the foreseeable future appears mediocre as the number of new branches created year to year have been less than or equal to the number of branches that advance to ward status or that become discontinued. Inconsistent and under-developed outreach expansion efforts, a church-splitting versus a church-planting approach to growth in most areas of the world, and low member activity rates in most countries suggest no foreseeable reversal to the nearly two-decade long trend in stagnant or declining numbers of branches worldwide.

[1] "Church Administration," True to the Faith, p. 36