



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

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Research

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Missiology researchers rely on a diverse research methodology to obtain and analyze data. Quantitative data (church-reported figures, census totals, church attendance figures, demographic data from government and academic sources) and qualitative data (missionary websites, interviews, news media articles, LDS-affiliated articles) play an equally important role in accurately conceptualizing church growth trends, reporting findings to the general public through the development of educational resources, and providing recommendations to achieve greater efficiency and productivity.

Official statistics released by the Church constitute the principle source of quantitative data utilized in the study of missiology and LDS Church growth. Primary quantitative data sources provided directly from the Church include the Deseret News Church Almanac, the online meetinghouse locator lds.org/maps, the online store for church materials and products, and the annual seminary and institute report. The Church released annual membership, congregation (ward and branch), stake, district, mission, and temple figures for all countries with a reportable presence between 1999 and 2011 in the Deseret News Church Almanac. Between 1987 and 1999, the Church published all of these data every two years as the Deseret News Church Almanac was published only every other year during this period. Between 1975 and 1987, only country-by-country membership totals and stake names (including creation dates) were published in the Deseret News Church Almanac. Prior to 1975, there were no country-by-country statistical data published in a systematic or standardized fashion. Researchers analyze membership and organizational data reported by the Church to estimate member activity and convert retention rates, track growth rates over time, and perform various calculations that provide insight into other church growth-related topics.

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The Church also maintains its online meetinghouse locator that provides the location and names of units in non-sensitive countries worldwide, and allows users to ascertain boundaries for organizations by placing a marker on the map to determine which congregation a specific address or area is assigned to. The online meetinghouse locator provides valuable insight into LDS national outreach, saturation of missionary activity, and member activity and convert retention rates. The Church's online store at store.lds.org catalogs translations of LDS materials and can be utilized by researchers to determine mission outreach. Seminary and institute enrollment figures may be obtained from annual seminary and institute reports provided from the Church Education System (CES) website and are also important to estimate member activity rates and self-sufficiency in church leadership.

Another important source for reliable quantitative data originates from government and scholarly sources. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) World Factbook supplies vast country-by-country statistics on geography, demographics, government, economy, transportation, and transnational issues.^[1] The United States (US) Department of State provides background notes that provide more detailed information on history, the economy, government, and foreign relations for each sovereign country.^[2] Religious statistics on other proselytizing Christian faiths published online through websites such as www.adventiststatistics.org permit researchers to compare and contrast the growth of the LDS Church with other denominations. Population figures available on website such as www.citypopulation.de offer detailed demographic data to calculate various growth indicators such as the most populous unreached cities, the ratio of congregations to the general population, and the percentage of Latter-day Saints in the general population. Data on the number and location of various languages can be obtained through websites such as www.ethnologue.com and can be utilized to determine the status of LDS outreach among the world's over 7,000 living languages. Government figures on religious affiliation provide insight into church growth and missiology research. Census data for some countries includes self-affiliated religious statistics for various Christian denominations including the LDS Church. A comparison of census-reported Latter-day Saint totals to church-reported membership often yields significant discrepancies as census numbers are less than half of church-reported numbers in all countries except Iceland.^[3] Estimates from outside sociology and religion researchers shed light into many issues relating to church growth. Some sociology researchers have calculated an estimated figure for the total amount of tithing the Church annually receives worldwide to illustrate the high dependence the international Church has on the Church in the United States to meet its global financial needs.^[4] The US

Department of State also produces yearly reports on the status of international religious freedom that include specific data on religious affiliation.^[5] Transparency International releases an annual corruption perception index that rates each country through administering a battery of assessments and opinion surveys.^[6]

Missionary websites and blogs provide a wealth of information on receptivity, member activity and convert retention, cultural conditions, geography, self-sufficiency, mission policies, finding, church planting, and additional missiology topics. These sites are available online for the public to view and are typically designed to help the friends and family members of missionaries to receive updates. The major benefit of utilizing missionary blog and website data in missiology research is that these sites provide current information regarding missionary work in most areas of the world. There are few opportunities for researchers to obtain up-to-date information, particularly from full-time missionaries rather than returned missionaries. Interviews are the only other method to gather current data. However, interviewing currently serving full-time missionaries is largely unfeasible as it detracts from missionaries effectively utilizing time to perform teaching and proselytism activities, and requires researchers to travel to locations where missionaries serve to conduct interviews.

Researchers utilize official LDS media articles, missionary websites, surveys, news media articles, and government and scholarly sources to obtain qualitative data pertinent to the study of church growth and missiology. Traditional sources to gather qualitative missiology data have almost entirely consisted of official LDS sources such as the LDS Church News, church magazines like the Ensign or Liahona, the Deseret News Church Almanac, and General Conference talks. The LDS Church News publishes articles on stake creations and reorganizations, milestones for church growth, mission creations and consolidations, international leadership changes, and the personal experiences of members, missionaries, and leaders living the gospel around the world. Specific data has been obtained from this media source relating to member activity rates, plans and forecasts for future growth by LDS leaders, reactivation efforts, demographic data on international leadership, cultural conditions that favor or detract from missionary efforts, and various measures of organizational growth. Church magazines, almanacs, and General Conference talks frequently contain qualitative data on church growth and missiology by relating the method and experience of establishing the Church in additional countries, reaching previously unreached ethnic groups, stories on testimony development, and highlighting concerns regarding worthiness, member activity, and convert retention.

Missionaries provide a wealth of information concerning member activity and convert retention rates such as cultural characteristics, mission-enforced baptismal standards, and descriptions of how local members and leaders participate in missionary activity. Many families of full-time missionaries maintain online blogs and websites that display weekly emails and letters for public view. These sites are accessible to the public and frequently contain details on member activity issues, perception of the Church by society, frequent testimony building challenges for investigators and less-active members, convert retention and member activity rates, mission policies on convert baptismal standards, plans to open and close cities to proselytism, cultural conditions that hamper or facilitate missionary activity, the self-sufficiency and maturity of local priesthood leaders, and other church-growth related topics. One of the greatest benefits of missionary sites to missiology researchers is the concurrent reporting of qualitative and quantitative data on church growth for specific geographic areas. In the past, this data was only accessible to researchers by visiting in person or conducting a phone interview. In the past, these data were obtained through interviewing returned missionaries. Surveys and interviews with returned missionaries, church leaders, and ordinary members continue to aid the study of missiology and church growth. Researchers can record and analyze the personal experiences of these individuals to ascertain various successes, opportunities, challenges, and future prospects for growth. Today internet technologies permit greater ease and speed in collecting qualitative data through online survey platforms such as through SurveyMonkey.com.

General news media articles raise awareness of various church growth-related issues worldwide and contain valuable data. For example, researchers have relied on media news articles to determine what local conditions have enhanced or deter the growth of the Church and the productivity of missionary efforts. Secular news media frequently announces milestones for church growth within their area such as the creation of a new congregation or stake and contributing factors to growth. On the other hand, other media articles at times have focused on negative church growth developments which are often not reported from LDS sources including member apostasy, member activity challenges, and government restrictions that interfere with missionary activity.

Government and academic reports and resources provide valuable information on history and cultural characteristics. The CIA World Factbook and U.S. State Department publish detailed historical, economic, and political analyses and descriptions in the CIA World Factbook and country background notes, respectively. Websites like everyculture.com catalog the world's ethnic groups and provide qualitative data on history, cultural relations, settlements, economy, marriage and family, sociopolitical organization, and religion and expressive culture.^[7] Ethnologue.com provides not only quantitative linguistic data but also descriptions of various cultural and interethnic issues.^[8] The US Department of State also produces yearly reports on the status of international religious freedom. These reports provide data on government restrictions on religious freedom, and societal and governmental abuses of religious freedom.^[9]

Although missiology researchers gather data from a variety of official and personal sources, efforts are made to ensure the privacy of individuals who contribute to the development of resources. Researchers do not publish sensitive information on individual members, specific details on the Church in sensitive countries, or information that be used in counter-proselytism efforts.

[1] <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/>

[2] <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/>

[3] "Religious organisations," Statistics Iceland, retrieved 13 January 2012.
<http://www.statice.is/Statistics/Population/Religious-organizations>

[4] Henderson, Peter. "Mormon church earns \$7 billion a year from tithing, analysis indicates," Reuters, 13 August 2012.
http://openchannel.nbcnews.com/_news/2012/08/13/13262285-mormon-church-earns-7-billion-a-year-from-tithing-analysis-indicates

[5] <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/index.htm>

[6] <http://cpi.transparency.org/cpi2011/results/>

[7] <http://www.everyculture.com/>

[8] http://www.ethnologue.com/country_index.asp

[9] <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/index.htm>