



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

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## Membership Growth

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The LDS Church has most commonly emphasized and referenced membership growth when reporting and tracking the growth of the Church instead of other growth indicators such as congregational growth, increases in the number of stakes and districts, and the number of full-time missionaries serving. LDS Church membership consists of all baptized individuals on church records regardless of their current self religious affiliation or activity status, and children on record. Excommunicated and resigned members, investigators that were baptized but were not confirmed, deceased members, and children of record not baptized at age eight are eventually removed from church records. Membership growth rates reflect natural growth and the number of convert baptisms, but serve as a poor indicator for determining member activity rates and the strength of the Church in a specific area as this statistic includes all baptized individuals regardless of current activity status and self-affiliation. Church leaders and LDS media appear to emphasize membership statistics because there is a prevailing belief that they can be more easily understood by the general public than other growth indicators, membership statistics can be compared to other faiths, and that this statistic represents individuals rather than organizations.

The Church annually releases official membership figures on a global, area, and country level that are current as of December 31st of the reported year. Global membership totals are announced during the following April General Conference as part of the statistical report,<sup>[1]</sup> and are published on various locations on lds.org and in church magazines. Area membership figures are only available through the Deseret News Church Almanac; an official church publication that was published until 2013. The most current country membership figures can be accessed online through the Church's Newsroom website under the "Facts and Statistics" page. The Church releases official membership totals only for countries with an official church presence. Most semi-sensitive and all sensitive countries do not have official membership totals published to the public. The Church has stopped reporting membership figures for some countries due to changes in political and religious freedom conditions. For example, the Church once published membership figures for Belarus, Lebanon, and Pakistan but at present does not make any of these statistics available to the public. Past issues of the Deseret News Church Almanac provide church area-specific and country-by-country membership data back to the mid-1970s. More recent editions of the Deseret News Church Almanac include year-to-year global membership figures back to the organization of the Church in 1830.

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Church growth researchers estimate LDS membership totals for many semi-sensitive and sensitive countries without an official church presence through a variety of methods. Semi-sensitive countries have some aspects of a church presence reported (i.e. congregations and districts) but no membership totals, whereas sensitive countries have no aspects of a church presence reported at all (congregations, districts, and membership). There are times when church leaders or an LDS news article discloses the number of members on church records for a given country where no official membership figures are annually reported. For example, one news article of the Church's News and Events website reported that there were 133 members in Nepal at year-end 2010<sup>[2]</sup> notwithstanding the Church reporting no past membership data for Nepal. Some articles report the number of members attending church meetings instead of the total numbers of members on church records in a country. For example, an article on a Bangladeshi missionary reported that there were was a congregation of 43 members in the country at the time the missionary began his mission in 2012.<sup>[3]</sup> Membership in semi-sensitive and sensitive countries can be ascertained by calculating the difference between officially reported area memberships and the sum of individual country membership within the same area. This calculation yields the number of members outside of countries with an official presence and is vital towards estimating the individual church membership of non-reportable countries in the area. For example, in Asia the difference between the official area membership number and the sum of membership reported for individual countries within the area was approximately 12,400 in 2010. Reports from members and church leaders throughout the Asia area suggest that the majority of these unaccounted members included in the area membership statistic reside in China and Pakistan. Reports from ordinary members, church leaders, and missionaries provide vital insights into the number of membership in semi-sensitive and sensitive countries. For example, members and missionaries have provided specific figures or estimates on the number of members in former Yugoslav republics that until the early 2010s had no LDS presence, such as Kosovo and Macedonia.

The Church has experienced steady membership growth since its initial establishment. There were 280 members on church records worldwide at year-end 1830. Membership reached 1,000 in 1832, 10,000 in 1836, 30,000 in 1845, 50,000 in 1850, 100,000 in 1873, and half a million in 1919. The Church reached one million members in 1947; 117 years after the initial organization of the Church. Membership reached two million in 1963, three million in 1971, four million in 1978, five million in 1982, six million in 1986, seven million in 1989, eight million in 1991, nine million in 1994, ten million in 1997, 11 million in 2000, 12 million in 2004, 13 million in 2007, 14 million in 2010, and 15 million in 2013. Annual membership growth rates widely fluctuated year to year prior to World War II but were approximately four percent in the 1950s, six to seven percent in the 1960s, four to six percent in the 1970s, four to five percent in the 1980s, three percent in the 1990s, and two percent in the 2000s. The reduced percentage growth rates are attributed to arithmetic increases in raw membership totals during the last several decades.

Summing the number of convert baptisms and increase of children of record for a particular year does not equal the increase in total church membership for that year. This discrepancy is due to the Church removing membership records from official totals for members who pass away, become excommunicated, or resign their membership, or for children of record who never become baptized. The Church assigns the names of members whose whereabouts are unknown to the address unknown file and removes their names once they reach the age of 110 unless proof of death can be obtained prior to the unaccounted member reaching this age.<sup>[4]</sup> The difference between actual annual increases in total church membership versus the summation of increase in children of record and convert baptisms has averaged approximately 55,000 a year over the past two decades ranging from as low as -8,456 in 1999 to as high as 98,876 in 2013. Actual increase in church membership has exceeded the combined total of children of record and convert baptisms for some years due to adjustments in counting unbaptized children under age eight as part of a change in church policy, and lags in reporting membership increases from some areas of the world. For example, reported increases in church membership in 1989 and 1990 were 186,060 and 51,123 more than the combined total of children of record and convert baptisms, respectively. In the 2000s, the Church reported a steady increase in the discrepancy between the actual increase in church membership and the combined total of convert baptisms and children of record from the 30,000s to the 90,000s by the early 2010s. The increase in this difference appears rooted in several factors such as larger numbers of elderly members passing away, and possibly increasing numbers of excommunications and member resignations.

The Church used to report a breakdown of church membership residing in stakes and outside of stakes from 1830 to present day in the Deseret News Church Almanac. These data were no longer reported in almanac editions after 2007. Stakes must meet certain membership and activity requirements in order to operate, whereas districts and independent branches outside of stakes and districts do not have to meet the same criteria to function. There were more members living outside of stakes than within stakes between 1847 and 1856 primarily due to the main body of church membership in the process of immigrating or resettling in Utah. By 1900, 83% of worldwide membership resided within a stake. The percentage of members living in a stake comprised 81% of membership in 1950, 83% in 1960, 85% in 1970, 93% in 1980, 92% in 1990, 92% in 2000, and 92% in 2005.<sup>[5]</sup>

The worldwide distribution of membership has significantly changed over the past half century. In 1973, 78.5% of worldwide church membership resided in the United States whereas 4.17% resided in South America, 4.15% resided in Europe, 3.96% resided in Central America and Mexico, 3.06% resided in Oceania, and the remaining 6.16% resided in Africa, Asia, and Canada.<sup>[6]</sup> Rapid membership growth occurred outside of the United States in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s resulting in half of church membership residing outside of the United States by early 1996.<sup>[7]</sup> By year-end 2011, 43.1% of worldwide church membership resided in the United States whereas 24.6% resided in South America, 14.6% resided in Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean, 7.09% resided in Asia, 2.49% resided in Africa, 3.36% resided in Europe, 3.34% resided in Oceania, and 1.28% resided in Canada.

Between 2000 and 2010, the largest numerical increases in church membership occurred in the United States (935,755), Brazil (362,918), Mexico (350,474), the Philippines (175,290), Peru (150,661), Argentina (91,417), Chile (54,097), Bolivia (53,509), Venezuela (53,307), and Nigeria (48,424), whereas decline in church membership occurred in Puerto Rico (-2,476), Macau (-255), the Northern Mariana Islands (-224), Denmark (-141), Nauru (-14), and Andorra (-4). The ten countries with the most rapid percentage growth rates between 2000 and 2010 included Laos (1100% - estimate), Togo (965%), Mozambique (921%), China (567% - estimate), Cameroon (547%), Malaysia (459%), Vietnam (400% - estimate), Cambodia (393%), Guyana (384%), and Moldova (328%). Between 2000 and 2010, membership growth occurred in many nations which had few or no Latter-day Saints in 2000. A dozen countries appeared to have 20 or fewer Latter-day Saints in 2000 but appeared to have 30 or more members in 2010 (Iraq, Afghanistan, Benin, Saint Lucia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Dominica, South Sudan, the Turks and Caicos Islands, Rwanda, Djibouti, and Brunei). In 2013, the 10 countries with the most members were the United States (6.40 million), Mexico (1.34 million), Brazil (1.25 million), Philippines (688,117), Chile (583,359), Peru (543,869), Argentina (421,971), Guatemala (247,708), Ecuador (220,247), and Canada (190,265). As of year-end 2013, there were 12 additional countries where the Church reported 100,000 or more members. Membership in countries where the Church reported 100,000 or more members accounted for approximately 90% of worldwide membership as of year-end 2013.

Membership figures exaggerate the actual size of the Church for most countries due to moderate to low member activity rates. Inactive members - many of whom no longer identifying as LDS - are retained in membership totals that are interpreted as a sign of church growth and strength. In Chile, the Church reports over 580,000 members on its records but we estimate member activity rates at approximately 12% nationwide indicating that only about 70,000 members are active. The Church in the United States has 6.23 million members on its records but approximately 40% are active, or approximately 2.5 million.

In the 2010s, the Church will likely perpetuate its arithmetic growth trends sustained over the past several decades that genuinely consist of adding 300,000 to 400,000 members a year. Low membership growth rates in countries with the most

church members will likely continue to reduce the Church's worldwide membership growth rates for many years to come. The surge in the number of full-time missionaries serving has potential to accelerate membership growth if surplus missionaries are assigned to unreached locations in receptive countries and if the Church can sustain or increase the ratio of convert baptisms per missionary. Low member activity rates will continue to convey an inflated size of the Church in many areas of the world unless convert retention rates improve and reactivation efforts achieve greater successes.

[1] Hales, Brook P. "Statistical Report," General Conference, May 2012.  
<https://www.lds.org/ensign/2012/05/statistical-report-2011>

[2] "Member Receives Humanitarian Award for Work in Nepal," Church News and Events, 31 December 2010.  
<http://www.lds.org/church/news/member-receives-humanitarian-award-for-work-in-nepal>

[3] Bird, Randall C. "Bangladeshi is eager to serve," LDS Church News, 4 August 2012.  
<http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/62591/Bangladeshi-is-eager-to-serve.html>

[4] Stewart, David. "Address Unknown File," retrieved 22 October 2012.  
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[5] "Church Statistics," Deseret News Morning News 2007 Church Almanac, p. 634

[6] "Membership Distribution of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1973," Deseret News 1974 Church Almanac, p. 116-117.

[7] "News of the Church," Ensign, March 1996.  
<http://lds.org/ensign/1996/03/news-of-the-church/more-members-now-outside-us-than-in-us>