

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

>

Congregational Growth

Author: Matt Martinich

Posted: October 6th, 2014

The Church less frequently cites congregational growth as a sign of church growth and usually references other statistical indicators such as membership growth and increasing numbers of stakes and temples. Congregational growth consists of changes in the number of official LDS congregations or units reported in yearly statistical reports. The terms "congregation" and "unit" are synonymous and can be used interchangeably. There are two types of congregations included in official church figures: wards (large congregations) and branches (small congregations). Dependent units like dependent branches and groups operate under a parent organization and are not counted in official congregational totals for individual countries and the Church as a whole. Congregational growth occurs as a function of calculating the net difference between created wards and branches and consolidated wards and branches within a specific time frame. The Church achieves positive congregational growth when the number of created units exceeds the number of closed units, whereas the Church experiences negative congregational growth when the number of closed units exceeds the number of created units. Increases in active membership, national outreach expansion efforts, and reactivation and convert retention efforts influence congregational growth trends on a country-by-country and worldwide scale.

The Church annually releases official congregation figures on a global, area, and country level that are current as of December 31st of the reported year. Global congregation totals are announced during the subsequent April General Conference as part of the statistical report,[1] and are published on various locations on lds.org and in church magazines. Area congregation figures are only available through the Deseret News Church Almanac; an official church publication that is published every year until 2013. The most current country congregation figures can be accessed online through the Church's Newsroom website under the "Facts and Statistics" page. Updated daily, the Church Directory of Organizations and Leaders (CDOL) provides congregational data to authorized users. The Church releases official congregation totals for countries with an official church presence and a few semi-sensitive countries such as Jordan. All sensitive countries do not have official congregation totals available, such as Saudi Arabia. The Church has stopped reporting congregation figures for some countries due to changes in political and religious freedom conditions. For example, the Church once published congregation figures for Belarus, Lebanon, and Pakistan but at present only publishes congregation information on its online meetinghouse locator for Lebanon. Past issues of the Deseret News Church Almanac provide church area-specific and country-by-country congregation data from 1987 to 2011. More recent editions of the Deseret News Church Almanac include year-to-year global congregation figures back to the organization of the Church in 1830.

//

There were four congregations by year-end 1830. The number of congregations reached 100 in 1841, 500 in 1849, 1,000 in 1901, 2,000 in 1936, 5,000 in 1961, 10,000 in 1979, 15,000 in 1985, 20,000 in 1992, and 25,000 in 1998. At year-end 2013, there were 29,253 congregations. Annual congregational growth rates widely fluctuate year to year but averaged around five percent in the 1950s, four percent in the 1960s, five percent in the 1970s, five percent in the 1980s, four percent in the 1990s, one percent in the 2000s, and less than one percent in the early 2010s. The dramatic decline in congregational growth rates in the 2000s and early 2010s has been attributed to the creation of few new congregations in countries where most of the Church's congregations operate, and ongoing congregation consolidations in many areas of the world such as Latin America, Eastern Europe, and some locations in the Intermountain West. Reduced congregation growth has occurred due to low member activity rates in countries where the bulk of international LDS membership resides, heightened standards for organizing wards and branches, and a slowdown in outreach expansion efforts during the 2000s.

Congregational growth stands as one of the most robust indicators for real growth in the LDS Church as increasing numbers of active, contributing members are required to organize additional congregations. Active membership growth stands as the primary contributor to the creation of new wards and branches. Minimum requirements must be met in order for a ward or branch to operate in regards to the number of members on church records and the number of active Priesthood holders. When an established congregation fails to meet these minimal criteria, it can be downgraded to a unit that has fewer requirements to

operate such as ward downgrading to a branch or a branch downgrading to a group. However, many units that no longer qualify as a ward or branch become consolidated with a neighboring unit. The creation of new wards and branches occurs when established congregations are unable to effectively administer membership in the area due to growth, travel constraints, or language needs, and there is a sufficient number of active members to staff leadership for another congregation. The increase in the number of active members is intimately linked to congregational growth when congregations have too many active members to provide each member with a meaningful calling and when local leadership becomes overburdened with administrative responsibilities. Congregational growth stands as an excellent indicator of active membership growth and the development of local leadership as these two conditions must be met in order to organize additional congregations.

Accelerated congregational growth has occurred for reasons other than increases in active membership. National outreach expansion generally coincides with accelerated congregational growth as the Church organizes new units in previously unreached areas. Outreach expansion occurs on a local level through establishing congregations in lesser-reached communities and neighborhoods in major cities, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia. Increases in active membership occur through national outreach expansion efforts as larger numbers of converts join the Church in previously unreached or lesser-reached locations, and remain active.

There have been some periods when the Church has accelerated congregational growth for reactivation and convert retention purposes. In the 1990s, the Church created wards with few active members in many Latin American countries like Chile to stimulate leadership development and improve convert retention.[2] This logic centered on providing new converts greater opportunities to serve in leadership positions which would otherwise be less available in congregations with larger numbers of members. In Eastern Europe, the Church has undergone several iterations of dividing and consolidating branches in major cities like Moscow and Kyiv. Increases in the number of congregations in these locations occurred as a means to revitalize reactivation efforts by creating smaller branches that met in locations closer to members' homes, thereby reducing long travel times; a common complaint of less-active and inactive members for not attending church.

Negative congregational growth, or congregational decline, has occurred for several reasons. Increased standards for wards and branches to function has prompted church leaders to downgrade the status of a ward to a branch, or consolidate a ward or branch with another nearby congregation. For example, in Bulgaria the Church closed all of its branches with less than 15 active members in the early 2010s due to increased standards for branches to operate in the Europe East Area. As a result of this policy change, the Church closed half of its branches in Bulgaria. Affected membership either continued to meet in their locations as member groups or were reassigned to a nearby branch. Changing church policies to service specialized populations such as young single adults (YSAs) have also resulted in congregational decline. In the early 2010s, the Church closed scores of YSA and student congregations in Utah as part of organizing YSA stakes that service YSA members regardless of their educational status.

Church policies based on the "centers of strength" policy of building up congregations with large numbers of active members that provide more of the Church's programs has played a major role in congregational decline. In several Latin American and Western European countries, the Church has closed approximately one-third of its wards and branches within the past decade in an effort to create congregations with more active members to provide greater social support and reduce the administrative burden on church leaders that service large numbers of units with relatively few active members. Congregation consolidations in this context have not appeared to reduce the number of active members in most locations, but has not appeared to increase the number of active members either. The Church has experienced a decline in national outreach in some countries due to the large numbers of congregations closed, such as in Portugal and Belgium.

Active membership decline has instigated unit consolidations in many locations around the world. Reasons for active membership decline are complex and differ by region. A net decline in active membership due to active members moving away from a location at a greater rate than the number of new move-ins and retained converts has constituted the primary factor influencing congregational decline in most locations that have experienced negative congregational growth within the past two decades. For example, the currently Church operates fewer units in several urban locations with deteriorating socioeconomic conditions at present compared to a decade ago, particularly in major cities with high densities of Latter-day Saints in the Intermountain West of the United States. In Sub-Saharan Africa, political instability and economic conditions have spurred congregational decline in some locations as active members move elsewhere to find better employment and higher living conditions. Natural disasters have necessitated the closure of units as active members relocate elsewhere. Notable examples of natural disasters instigating active membership decline include Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and the eruption of Mount Pinatubo in the Philippines in 1991. There have been some instances of declining numbers of active members due to members becoming inactive. Declining active membership due to increasing inactivity rates has primarily occurred in locations where most church members are recent converts and where there has been poor local leadership development. This has occurred in some locations in Latin America, East Asia, and the Caribbean. Apostasy of active members in the United States has not significantly influenced congregational decline, but has had some impact on reducing the rate of congregational growth. This has occurred because the Church must reach a higher number of nominal members on its records to organize additional units due to reduced member activity rates.

Church growth researchers estimate LDS congregation totals for sensitive countries without an official church presence through a variety of methods. There are times when church leaders or an LDS news article discloses the number of congregations in a given country where no official congregational data are released on the Church's website. For example, articles in the LDS Church News or on lds.org have reported that there are congregations in Bangladesh,[3] Nepal,[4] and Pakistan[5] notwithstanding the Church not reporting the operation of these congregations on its online meetinghouse locator or its official statistics webpage. The number of congregations in sensitive countries can be ascertained by calculating the difference between officially reported area congregation totals and the sum of individual country congregation totals within the same area.

This calculation yields the number of congregations operating outside of countries with an official presence and is vital towards estimating the individual congregation totals of non-reportable countries in the area. For example, in Asia the difference between the official area congregational total and the sum of congregations reported for individual countries within the area was 80 in 2010. Reports from members and church leaders throughout the Asia Area suggest that the majority of these unaccounted branches included in the area congregation statistic operate in China and Pakistan. Reports from ordinary members, church leaders, and missionaries also provide vital insights into the operation of congregations in sensitive countries.

The Church in the United States accounts for nearly half of the Church's congregations. At year-end 2011, 47.4% of congregations operated in the United States whereas 19.51% operated in South America, 11.82% operated in Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean, 6.55% operated in Asia, 5.03% operated in Europe, 3.97% operated in Oceania, 3.66% operated in Africa, and 1.66% operated in Canada. Most of the remaining 0.45% of congregations operated in sensitive countries.

Between 2000 and 2010, the 10 countries with the largest increases in the number of congregations were the United States (2,039), Mexico (237), Brazil (162), Nigeria (112), Ghana (59), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (58), Venezuela (53), Argentina (49), and South Africa (47) whereas the 10 countries with largest decline in the number of congregations were Chile (-260), the Philippines (-57), Guatemala (-36), Panama (-32), the United Kingdom (-32), Ecuador (-31), Japan (-31), South Korea (-31), Italy (-30), and Portugal (-19). Among countries with at least one LDS congregation in 2000, the 10 countries with the most rapid percentage growth rates in the number of congregations between 2000 and 2010 were Suriname (500%), Cameroon (400%), Togo (400%), Ethiopia (300%), Guyana (275%), Mozambique (260%), Madagascar (260%), Belarus (200%), Vanuatu (189%), and Cote d'Ivoire (159%). However all of these countries reported less than 10 units in 2000 with the exception of Cote d'Ivoire. The 10 countries with the greatest percentage decline in congregations between 2000 and 2010 were Niue (-50%), Belgium (-35%), Chile (-30%), Panama (-29%), Poland (-28%), the Netherlands (-23%), Italy (-23%), Austria (-23%), Portugal (-22%), and Sweden (-22%). Between 2000 and 2010, there were a dozen countries that had an LDS congregation organized for the first time or reorganized after a period of no LDS presence including Benin, Burma, Burundi, Cuba, Dominica, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Laos, Mayotte, Nepal, Rwanda, and St. Lucia. In 2013, the 10 countries with the most congregations were the United States (13,866), Mexico (1,980), Brazil (1,972), Philippines (1,148), Argentina (792), Peru (776), Chile (614), Canada (479), Guatemala (417), and Nigeria (378).

In the 2010s, the Church will likely continue to experience slight annual increases in the number of congregations year to year by between 200 and 500 as there is no indication that there will be an acceleration in active membership growth, outreach expansion, or reactivation efforts from the previous decade. The surge in the full-time missionary force may provide manpower to expand outreach in lesser-reached countries and spur greater congregational growth. However, low member activity rates in the majority of countries with the most church members and where the bulk of the full-time missionary force is assigned currently suggest little, if any, improvement in congregational growth trends compared to the previous decade.

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

[2] "Chile," Deseret News 2012 Church Almanac, p. 453

[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] "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

[5] "Members impacted by 7.6 quake in Pakistan," LDS Church News 15 October 2005. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/48008/Members-impacted-by-76-quake-in-Pakistan.html