



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

>

Convert Retention

Author: Matt Martinich

Posted: October 6th, 2014

Convert retention refers to the rate at which converts regularly attend church services, adhere to LDS teachings, and identify as a Latter-day Saint. The prescribed length of time between baptism and the time when a convert is considered "retained" varies, generally from as short as three months to as long as one year. Convert retention rates vary dramatically around the world on both a regional and local level. Some locations experience convert retention rates over 80% for the first year after baptism whereas others experience rates as low as 20%. Church leaders and church growth researchers emphasize church attendance as the most reliable measurement of convert retention because of its simplicity and objective nature. Researchers generally consider retained converts to constitute those members who attend church more often than not. Church leaders, returned missionaries, and ordinary members provide the majority of available convert retention statistics to researchers and the public as the Church does not officially release convert retention figures.

LDS leadership has emphasized the importance of convert retention over the past two decades as inactivity has surged in many areas of the world. In 1999, former LDS Church President Gordon B. Hinckley admonished the Church to ensure that new converts have a friend and a responsibility, and are nurtured with the "the good word of God" to curtail inactivity problems.^[1] Lackluster member-missionary participation constitutes the primary obstacle to convert retention problems in many areas of the world. In the late 1990s, one church leader regrettably observed that members in some congregations have not openly accepted and fellowshiped new converts in Latin America, the United States, and Spain resulting in diminished convert retention rates.^[2] In the 2000s, the Church frequently stressed the importance of member-missionary work in improving convert retention rates worldwide.^[3]

//

The Church has experienced moderate to low convert retention rates in most countries around the world over the past two decades as evidenced by incommensurate membership and congregational growth rates. The Church in countries that experience good to excellent rates of convert retention reports nearly equal percentage increases in the number of church units and members on church records year to year as larger numbers of active members necessitate the organization of additional congregations. There are many factors that influence convert retention rates such as the duration and quality of prebaptismal preparation, involvement of local members in the finding and conversion processes, cultural factors, mission baptismal policies, restrictions on religious freedom, accessibility to church services, and the development of LDS community.

The level of prebaptismal preparation appears one of the most robust predictors for whether the Church retains a convert. Longer preparation for baptism requires converts to develop habitual church attendance and a more solid understanding of LDS teachings, whereas shorter preparation is less likely to generate a lasting, genuine change. Prospective converts who demonstrate little sincere interest to become a lifelong member generally do not develop habitual church attendance and struggle to adhere to basic church teachings for a period lasting longer than a few weeks or a month. Prebaptismal preparation that lasts longer than one month and requires converts to develop habitual church attendance prior to baptism generally reduces the risk of convert attrition as there is increased time for personal testimony development and social integration; both of which act as protective factors to help inoculate against inactivity. Higher convert baptismal standards generally prevent the baptism of lukewarm converts that become inactive after baptism, and generate new converts more willing to serve within their local ward or branch. Higher baptismal standards generally reduce the number of converts baptized in a mission and may appear counterproductive. However, larger numbers of unretained converts create more long-term problems than smaller numbers of unretained converts as local and mission resources become channeled into time consuming and arduous reactivation efforts. Missionaries in many missions around the world where mission leaders implement stricter baptismal standards report fewer convert baptisms initially, but over time often the same number of converts are baptized and higher convert retention are achieved. This progress occurs due to the contributions of new converts to member-missionary work and less resources consumed by relatively unproductive reactivation efforts.

Local members and church leaders play a critical role in successfully retaining new converts. Locations where missionaries head finding efforts and baptize converts with little, if any, involvement from local leadership and ordinary members often experience the lowest convert retention rates as many converts become reliant on full-time missionaries to attend church services and meet their social needs at church. The often deep spiritual and emotional connection established between the full-time missionaries who baptize a convert and the convert himself inevitably become disrupted once missionaries transfer to other areas or complete their missions. Many converts who fail to develop genuine friendships and socially integrate with fellow members in their assigned congregation during the conversion process struggle to continue attending church once the missionaries who baptized them leave the area. Due to the frequent disconnect between local leadership and assigned full-time missionaries, many of these converts are overlooked by church leaders. The subsequent efforts to retain these new members are often motivated by administrative concern over keeping these members active rather than developing sincere, heartfelt rapport. The Church has achieved some of its highest convert retention rates in locations where ordinary members supply teaching referrals to full-time missionaries and actively participate in the conversion process. In these locations, ordinary members and church leaders have already established rapport with baptized converts as soon as they began meeting with missionaries or before a teaching referral is made. Following baptism, ward or branch missionaries review the missionary lessons and church leaders ensure that new converts are assigned home and visiting teachers, receive a church calling, and continue to progress towards additional goals such as receiving the Melchizedek Priesthood for men, attending seminary or institute for youth and young adults, and preparing to enter the temple.

Cultural and societal conditions strongly influence convert retention rates due to the common beliefs, attitudes, and practices regarding personal religious expression within a culture or society, and conformity with societal norms. The Church generally experiences its highest convert retention rates in countries where weekly attendance in a religious service is commonplace, such as in Nigeria and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The Church has not appeared to more strictly enforce prebaptismal qualifications in these nations but has achieved good convert retention rates due, in part, to the societal importance of religion. The Church has experienced some of its lowest convert retention rates in countries where the vast majority of the population is nominally affiliated with the traditional Christian denomination of that country. For example, the Church struggles to overcome casual attitudes regarding church attendance in investigators and new converts in Europe and Latin America as regular church attendance and personal religious habits are not societal norms. The Church has often experienced good receptivity in these nations as most have a Christian background and are not socially integrated into their religious communities. The lack of importance placed by society on church participation has negatively affected LDS convert retention rates in these nations as the Church can easily baptize large numbers of new converts within extremely short periods of prebaptismal preparation. Quota-driven baptismal practices have taken advantage of these conditions with little consideration to achieving acceptable convert retention. This, in turn, has resulted in catastrophically low convert retention rates as the vast majority of newly baptized converts bring few, if any, personal religious habits into the conversion process. Consequently, missionaries and church leaders struggle to emphasize the importance of church attendance and the significance of the baptismal covenant in new members. The Church has also experienced little, if any, involvement from local leaders and ordinary members in finding and teaching efforts in countries with low levels of religiosity and church attendance, further contributing to poor convert retention rates in these locations.

Convert retention rates can vary significantly between successive mission presidents within the same mission. Changes in convert retention rates largely coincide with changes in mission and area policies pertaining to prebaptismal preparation, coordination between full-time missionaries and local members in postbaptismal teaching and fellowshiping, finding methods, and the standards for congregations to operate. For example, the Armenia Yerevan Mission in early 2002 retained 75% of the 220 converts baptized the previous year. Low convert retention rates occurred in the mid-2000s and late 2000s when mission leaders implemented a policy that missionaries had to commit investigators to baptism during the first missionary lesson in order to teach the second lesson. This policy fueled rapid membership growth but with significantly reduced convert retention rates. No precise convert retention rates are available, but possibly as few as 20% of converts baptized during this period were retained one year after baptism. In 2009, mission leaders in Armenia reversed this policy and implemented higher convert baptismal standards resulting in one-year convert retention increasing to over 50%. LDS missions in the West Indies, Chile, the United States, South Korea, and Thailand have reported similar convert retention trends that have significantly varied between successive mission presidents as a result of changing mission policies.

The Church generally experiences the highest convert retention rates in countries that experience restrictions on religious freedom or that have minimal involvement from full-time missionaries in the finding and fellowship processes due to local members undertaking these responsibilities. Higher convert retention and member activity rates, and more self-sufficient local leadership, have not been entirely the product of church policy complying with governmental and societal laws, and standards for religious practice. Societal restrictions on religious freedom often occur in tandem with those enforced by governments. Converts who join the LDS Church in these locations must therefore make a major decision to incur any persecution, disapproval, harassment, and ostracism that stems from their conversion. The often higher level of devotion of converts when they are baptized in countries with restrictions on religious freedom has constituted a significant contributor toward the strength and efficiency of the Church in these nations.

Accessibility to the nearest LDS meetinghouse also plays a role in convert retention rates on a local level. The Church has generally experienced lower convert retention rates the farther new converts reside from their assigned meetinghouse. Although other factors are also at play in determining whether a convert continues to attend church or follow church teachings, long distance to travel to church can become the deciding factor or excuse that results in convert attrition. Convert retention problems often occur in locations where there are low levels of economic development and high transportation costs.

The size and strength of the local LDS community also influences convert retention rates for youth and young adults. Locations with a strong LDS community such as North America and Oceania have a wide variety of members and good socialization opportunities to fit the needs of many new converts as long as members warmly welcome new converts and provide genuine

fellowship. These locations generally have well-established traditions of missionary service and education at church-sponsored schools that propagate into younger generations. Youth converts in these locations often are more easily able to socially assimilate with their seasoned active member counterparts, thereby increasing convert retention rates for this demographic.

The outlook for improving convert retention rates worldwide appears bleak due to inconsistent application of Preach My Gospel in many areas of the world, continued focus on quota-driven convert baptismal practices that minimize prebaptismal preparation in locations with higher receptivity to LDS missionaries such as Latin America, and the disconnect between local church leaders and mission leaders in the baptism and retention of new converts. More commensurate membership and congregational growth trends will suggest improved convert retention rates once they occur. Increased involvement from local church leaders in the conversion process may help improve convert retention rates if consistently implemented on a worldwide scale.

[1] Hinckley, Gordon B. "'Every Convert Is Precious'," Liahona, February 1999.
<http://www.lds.org/liahona/1999/02/every-convert-is-precious>

[2] Pratt, Carl B. "Care for New Converts," General Conference, October 1997.
<http://www.lds.org/general-conference/1997/10/care-for-new-converts>

[3] Ballard, M. Russell. "The Essential Role of Member Missionary Work," General Conference, April 2003.
<http://www.lds.org/general-conference/2003/04/the-essential-role-of-member-missionary-work>