



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

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Geography

Author: Matt Martinich

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The LDS Church is a highly geography-oriented denomination as virtually all leadership and membership have specific geographical boundaries and constraints. LDS Church stands as an anomaly in regards to geography and congregational organization as the Church requires members to attend the congregation designated for their particular area in order to be considered in full activity unless local church leaders grant special permission.

Geographical boundaries for wards, branches, stakes, and districts consist of a variety of natural, manmade, and political borders and features. Roads, streets, and highways most commonly delineate the geographical boundaries for many units and organizations. Rivers, waterways, creeks, lakes, canals, and irrigation ditches frequently demarcate boundaries for the Church. Mountain ranges, greenbelts, and landforms constitute some of the least common geographic features that separate organizations. Political boundaries frequently separate units, stakes, and districts, especially state/province borders, county lines, city limits, zip code/postal boundaries, and property lines. Jigsaw-like boundaries exist for many units as a result of local leadership defining individual ward and branch boundaries to incorporate the needed number of active, tithing Melchizedek Priesthood holder households to meet the minimal standards for individual units to efficiently operate if more practical boundaries do not adequately provide enough priesthood manpower to staff congregations in the area. Church leaders emphasize that unit and organization boundaries are carefully considered, and only presented for First Presidency approval after prayer and seeking revelation.

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Geography has encouraged and deterred the growth of the Church around the world. Distance from mission headquarters is one of the greatest determinants in expanding outreach. The Church has generally established a presence in most cities within close proximity of a city with a mission, with reduced likelihood of a presence in cities distant from mission headquarters. Travel times and costs have dissuaded the Church from actively attempting to open distant areas to proselytism within the past decade as it relies on full-time missionaries to accomplish this task. The Church may meet the needed membership and congregational qualifications to organize a stake in a specific area. However, the Church cannot operate a stake if congregations are distributed over a large geographical area and distance prevents church leaders from regularly visiting congregations. The increase in the number of stakes serves as one of the most reliable and valid measures of church growth in the LDS Church due to stringent member activity and priesthood requirements notwithstanding some locations being unable to have a stake due to large geographic distances between congregations.

Several factors relating to geography influence the degree to which the Church allocates mission resources and maintains congregations including economic development, political boundaries, physical geography, and population density.

The geographic distribution of wealth and economic development influence outreach expansion efforts. Low living standards in some countries has prompted the organization of groups and branches in lesser reached areas of large cities to reduce travel times and transportation expenses. Efforts to organize more smaller congregations that are more accessible to church members has occurred primarily in Sub-Saharan Africa, but also in the Philippines and areas of Latin America. Many of these locations experience good receptivity to the LDS Church, resulting in greater growth and national outreach expansion than in countries where populations experience high living standards. The Church generally does not encourage the operation of sizable numbers of small congregations in developed nations as church members can usually afford transportation costs and travel longer distances to church meetings.

Some stakes and districts span multiple countries. In Europe, porous geopolitical boundaries permit the Church to operate stakes and districts that cross international boundaries such as the Brno Czech District (Czech Republic and Slovakia), the

Chişinău Moldova District (Moldova and Romania), the Antwerp Belgium Stake (Belgium and the Netherlands), Nancy France Stake (France and Luxembourg), the Milan Italy West Stake (Italy and Switzerland), the Geneva Switzerland Stake (France and Switzerland), the Lausanne Switzerland Stake (Switzerland and France), the St Gallen Switzerland Stake (Switzerland and Germany), and the Zürich Switzerland Stake (Switzerland and Germany). In the Middle East, one stake and two districts include two or more countries, namely the Amman Jordan District (Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon), the Manama Bahrain District (Saudi Arabia and Bahrain), and the Abu Dhabi Stake (the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, and Oman). In Latin America, only one stake or district crossed international boundaries in late 2012: the Puerto Suárez Bolivia District (Bolivia and Brazil). In Sub-Saharan Africa, one stake crossed international boundaries as of late 2014: the Bloemfontein South Africa Stake (South Africa and Lesotho). In Asia and Oceania, there do not appear to be any stakes or districts that cross international boundaries.

Physical geography has affected church growth in a variety of ways. Mountain ranges and landforms that impede travel have slowed the expansion of the Church in difficult-to-access areas. There remain dozens of unreached medium-sized cities in Latin America that appear unreached largely due to isolated location in mountain ranges such as in Peru, Ecuador, and Colombia. Tropical climate in some areas has prevented the assignment of missionaries or has resulted in reduced mission productivity due to risk of contracting infectious diseases and higher rates of illness among missionaries. Frigid subzero conditions in locations like Siberia prohibit missionaries from travel and missionary activity for most hours during the day in the wintertime due to risk of frostbite and hypothermia. Earthquakes, tropical storm systems, landslides, tsunamis, and other natural disasters have influenced rates of local receptivity to the Church and have interrupted missionary efforts for periods of time.

Population density plays a significant role in church growth and outreach expansion. The Church has avoided or prohibited mission outreach into rural areas for many countries due to low population densities in these locations. The limited number of full-time missionaries and mission president focus on the "centers of strength" paradigm has shifted any available missionary manpower to urban areas where a larger number of people can be reached with fewer congregations than in rural areas. Consequently, the Church has a miniscule presence in the rural areas of nearly every country in the world as it relies on full-time missionaries to expand outreach. For example, in Sub-Saharan Africa the Church extends rural outreach in only a few select locations. There have been extremely few instances of rural outreach occurring in Latin America notwithstanding a formal missionary presence for half a century in most countries. The resistance to plant congregations and proselyte in rural areas will continue to result in a limited worldwide LDS presence considering approximately half the world's population resides in rural areas.^[1]

The Church has experienced differing growth trends in individual countries and cities around the world for reasons that do not appear to be related to accessibility, wealth, or population density. There are very few instances of the Church experiencing commensurate rates of growth over a large geographical area. Growth has significantly varied even within areas as small as a city. In some cities, most members and congregations operate in one specific portion of a city whereas few members and congregations operating in other areas. Additional factors can vary over space such as the distribution of religious groups established prior to an LDS presence, differences in ethnic composition due to the formation of ethnic-specific communities and neighborhoods, the allocation of LDS missionary resources, the location of meetinghouses, and the social connectivity of Latter-day Saints and the general population.

The advent of various technologies since the founding of the Church has changed how it operates around the world. Telecommunication, radio, and satellites have helped bridge long distances, unite the Church, and relay information between Church Headquarters and local church leaders. These technologies appeared to play a significant role in the Church organizing its first stakes outside of North America as stakes require regular communication with international church leaders based out of Church Headquarters to grant approval to organize new congregations, issue mission calls, and set apart new local priesthood leaders. Within the past decade, internet technologies have redefined some aspects of how the Church operates in areas with few active members spread over large geographic areas and where the local population generally exhibits low rates of receptivity to the Church. In the early 2010s, the Church made preparations to form the first stake in Siberia from three former districts that were consolidated into one district that stretched 1,500 miles (2,400 kilometers) across from Omsk to Krasnoyarsk. Plans for a future stake stretching across such a vast expanse of Siberia appeared only possible through the use of internet technologies that provide for videoconferencing between stake and ward leaders instead of regular meetings that occur in person at a stake center.

Internet technologies and telecommunications will likely continue to redefine the role of geography in the LDS Church within the coming decades. There will likely be no major shift in the Church's longstanding policies on the importance of geography in determining congregation boundaries and the jurisdictions of missions, stakes, and districts. Future changes appear rooted in the Church's ability to bridge long distances between members, maintain stakes and districts that are geographically larger than ones in the past, and establish an LDS presence in rural areas where there is limited access to internet technologies such as in Sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia, and Papua New Guinea.

^[1] "Urbanization: A Majority in Cities," United Nations Population Fund, retrieved 21 September 2012.
<http://www.unfpa.org/pds/urbanization.htm>