

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

>

Member Activity Rates

Author: Matt Martinich

Posted: October 6th, 2014

The simplified definition of member activity centers on whether a member regularly attends church or not. Regular church attendance can be defined as a member attending church on more Sundays than not for a particular period. The number of active members divided by the number of members on church records generates the member activity rate for a particular geographic area.

Member activity is not completely dichotomous between "active" and "inactive." Attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs for measuring activity exist on a continuum that can be difficult to precisely determine which members are active and which members are not. Consequently, there are additional terms such as "less-active" for individuals who irregularly attend church or who attend church but do not follow church teachings. There is a wide range of beliefs and behaviors exhibited by inactive members who do not attend church. These individuals vary from those who intend on resigning their membership and seek to discredit the Church to individuals who follow many or most church teachings except regular church attendance. There is also a wide range of beliefs and behaviors exhibited by active members who regularly attend church that vary from individuals who primarily attend for social or family reasons, follow few if any church teachings, and do not meet worthiness qualifications to hold a calling or hold a temple recommend to individuals who pay a full-tithe, hold callings, and regularly attend the temple.

The LDS Church does not publish statistics on member activity. Country-by-country and worldwide church data is accessible to the public but limited to nominal membership, congregation, district, stake, mission, area, and seminary and institute enrollment figures. The Church collects data on church attendance, activity status, personal worthiness, priesthood ordinations, and other demographic indicators measuring activity rates and member participation, but does not release this information to the public.

//

Researchers compute member activity rates on a country level through a variety of methods. Nominal membership in regards to the number of congregations (the average number of members per congregation or members-to-units ratio), the percentage of members enrolled in seminary and institute, the number of temples for countries with sizable membership, the ratio of members to stakes, the timing of organizing the first stake in a country in regards to membership growth, and the degree of representation of international leadership for a given country are statistics for which the Church releases data that provide insight into activity rates. Self reports from members, church leaders, and missionaries, the average number of members per congregation, and census data are more reliable measures of activity. The most accurate estimates of member activity rates combine all of these indicators to produce a comprehensive, multi-faceted approach for calculating member activity rates. The true member activity rate (actual number of members who regularly attend church) for a particular country is most likely within three percentage points of the estimated value.

Member activity rates depend on several factors. Convert retention rates strongly influence member activity rates as converts who are not retained become inactive members and lower the percentage of members on church records who are active. Insufficient time and depth of prebaptismal preparation often incurred from rushed quick-baptism techniques aimed at reaching arbitrary baptismal quotas, converts found through full-time missionary efforts, poor retention and member fellowshipping after baptism, long distance to the nearest church meetinghouse, language barriers, and cultural conditions that do not encourage active participation in religious groups are common factors that adversely influence convert retention rates. Cultural conditions also affect member activity rates. Countries where secularism predominates (such as France and Sweden) or where there is a strong ethnoreligious link to a particular religious group but little importance is placed on attending religious services (such as Portugal and Chile) generally experience moderate to low member activity rates, whereas countries where there is a high cultural expectation to regularly attending religious services (such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Nigeria) experience good to high rates of member activity. Additional factors that influence member activity rates include the development of LDS community within individual congregations, distance to the closest LDS meetinghouse, government and

societal restrictions on religious freedom, the perceived compatibility of LDS teachings with local culture, the support or criticism of non-LDS family members and friends, and testimony development.

The majority of members on church records are inactive or less active. Approximately 30% of worldwide membership was active as of 2012, suggesting that 30% of members attended church regularly and followed most basic church teachings. The majority of LDS membership in most countries is inactive as indicated by less than 40 countries with member activity rates higher than 50%. The ten countries with the most members account for 79% of worldwide membership and experience an average member activity rate of 22%. Member activity rates range from as low as 12% (Chile) to as high as 40% (the United States) among these 10 countries. The average country or dependency has a member activity rate of 49% in South Asia, 44% in the Middle East and Africa, 39% in the Caribbean, 38% in North America and Oceania, 31% in the Caucasus, Central Asia, and Western Europe, 30% in East Asia, 27% in Eastern Europe, 21% in South America, and 19% in Central America. The 10 countries that appear to have the highest percentage of active members include Burundi, Vanuatu, Rwanda, Cuba, Nepal, Saint Lucia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the United Arab Emirates, Madagascar, and China. All 10 of these countries appear to have activity rates ranging between 60-85%. The 10 countries that appear to have the lowest percentage of active members include Portugal, South Korea, Chile, Panama, Hong Kong, Palau, Croatia, Nicaragua, Serbia, and Venezuela.

Member activity rates have increased in extremely few countries during the past decade, primarily in Sub-Saharan Africa and Oceania. Improvement in member activity rates is only possible through improving convert retention, the retention of natural increase through children of record, and reactivation efforts. Members, missionaries, and church leaders report some successes in reactivation efforts. However, these successes generally occur on a congregation, stake, or mission level and are seldom reflected in national or worldwide member activity rates due to the relatively small number of reactivated members. Reversing stagnant or declining member activity rates is a long and complex process that takes years or decades to make noticeable improvement, especially in countries with low member activity rates because of the massive size of inactive membership. Leadership on a congregation and a mission level must work cooperatively to improve activity rates. Local leadership must focus on member-missionary activity that includes convert retention and reactivation, whereas mission leadership must demonstrate consistency in upholding reasonably high baptismal standards and involve ordinary members early in the conversion process. Holding church meetings in a location closer to members' homes and promoting seminary and institute attendance can also contribute to improving member activity rates.

Member activity rates in the LDS Church number among the lowest for nontraditional outreach-oriented Christian groups. However this occurs in part due to differences in counting membership between various denominations. For example, official Jehovah's Witness membership totals include only members who meet certain activity standards such as engagement in weekly proselytism activity. Seventh Day Adventists also appear to only count active membership within their ranks. In recent years, Adventists have removed hundreds of thousands of individuals from church records because these members no longer attended church or were unable to be located. Other Christian groups may have member activity rates closer to that of the LDS Church if all members were counted in official totals regardless of activity status, but the LDS Church would still appear to have one of the lowest activity rates due to rushed baptism practices that result in very low convert retention rates. Most denominations maintain similar or stricter qualifications for membership, specifically longer periods of preparation and activity that are observed and approved not only by local leaders but also the entire congregation.

There will likely not be any noticeable changes in member activity rates in the LDS Church for most countries during the next decade due to few, if any, recent changes in convert baptism qualifications and historically few lasting results from reactivation efforts. Accelerating growth in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia may result in some improvement in worldwide activity rates due to higher member activity rates in these countries, but there will be no noticeable impact until membership in these regions increases substantially more than at present. Maintaining reasonably high prebaptismal standards throughout the world will be crucial to improve member activity rates.