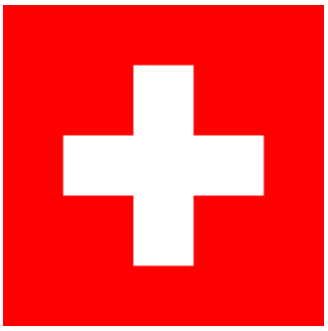
Reaching the Nations International Church Growth Almanac

Country reports on the LDS Church around the world from a landmark almanac. Includes detailedanalysis of history, context, culture, needs, challenges and opportunities for church growth.



Switzerland

Population: 8.06 millions (#96 out of countries)

By David Stewart and Matt Martinich

Geography

Area: 41,277 square km. Landlocked in Central Europe, Switzerland borders Italy, France, Germany, Austria, and Liechtenstein. The rugged Swiss Alps dominate central, southern, and eastern areas reaching heights over 4,000 meters, whereas plains, plateaus, and the Jura Mountains occupy northern and western areas. High diversity in local climate occurs as a result of dramatic elevation changes, but most areas experience temperate climate with cooler conditions in higher elevations. Lake Geneva, Lake Constance, and Lake Maggiore are among the largest natural lakes; the Rhine and the Rhone are the largest rivers. Avalanches, landslides, and flooding are natural hazards. Environmental issues include air pollution, acid raid, water pollution caused by fertilizer use, and loss of biodiversity. Switzerland is divided into twenty-six administrative cantons.

Peoples

Swiss: 69.5%

German: 4.2%

Italian: 3.2%

Portuguese: 2.6%

French: 2.0%

Kosovar: 1.1%

Other: 17.3%

Unspecified: 0.1%

Ethnic Swiss Germans constitute the majority in central, southern, northern, and northeastern areas. Ethnic Swiss French reside in the west, whereas Swiss Italians and Romansch live in the southeast. Other ethnic groups primarily consist of European and African immigrants.

Population: 8,403,994 (July 2020)

Annual Growth Rate: 0.66% (2020)

Fertility Rate: 1.57 children born per woman (2020)

Life Expectancy: 80.5 male, 85.3 female (2020)

Languages: German (62.6%), French (22.9%), Italian (8.2%), English (5.4%), Portuguese (3.7%), Albanian (3.2%), Serbo-Croatian (2.5%), Spanish (2.4%), Romansch (0.5%), other (7.7%) (NOTE: sum is more than 100% as some speak multiple languages). German, French, Italian, and Romansch are the national and official languages. Additional languages commonly spoken include Lombard, Kurdish, and Turkish. Languages with over one million speakers include German (5.3 million) and French (1.9 million).

Literacy: 100% (2011)

History

The Helvetic Celts were the first known inhabitants of present day Switzerland, which was conquered and became a Roman province in the first century BC. Roman rule increased commerce and economic development, continuing until the fourth century AD when Germanic tribes invaded and settled the area. Charlemagne annexed the region at the beginning of the ninth century and for the following four centuries it became part of the Holy Roman Empire. In the late thirteenth century, several ruling families signed a charter, pledging mutual support to keep peace and establishing greater local government autonomy as the Swiss Confederates. The Swiss Confederates originally consisted of three localities (Uri, Schwyz, and Unterwalden) that were later called cantons. Additional localities joined the confederates, which expanded to eight by 1388. The Swiss achieved success repealing efforts by the Habsburgs to reclaim administrative rule over the region, and by 1499, the Swiss Confederates were formally independent from the Holy Roman Empire. By 1515, there were thirteen localities, and Swiss mercenaries regularly served in the armies of other nations. The Swiss Confederation maintained stability during the Reformation despite religious conflict between the Catholic French and Protestant Germans. Switzerland maintained neutrality during many European wars in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Napoleon invaded and established a centrally governed state in the late eighteenth century. The original Swiss form of government was reestablished in 1815 at the Congress of Vienna that also declared Switzerland's permanent neutrality. The constitution was established in 1848, and in 1874, the constitution was amended to defer defense, trade, and legal responsibilities to the federal government but retained most aspects of cantonal autonomy. Switzerland remained neutral during both World Wars and uninvolved in either conflict. In 1960, Switzerland helped form the European Free Trade Area and by 2002, became a member of the United Nations. Switzerland remains outside of the European Union.[1]

Culture

Swiss culture varies by canton due to the high degree of autonomy and limited international influence over the past 700 years. German, French, and Italian cultures heavily influence cantons populated by these ethnicities. Most the population identifies with a traditional Christian denomination, yet most do not actively participate in their faith and hold many secular values and ideals. Political neutrality has been a proud enduring tradition for centuries. Music, dance, embroidery, wood carving, and poetry are common arts. The large, trumpet-shaped alphorn is the most renowned Swiss musical instrument. Swiss products and precision instruments are highly regarded internationally due to their high quality and accuracy. Skiing and mountaineering are

popular sports and attract tourism. Alcohol and cigarette consumption rates are high and comparable to most of Central Europe.

Economy

GDP per capita: $62,100 (2017) [103.8% of U.S.]

Human Development Index: 0.946 (2018)

Corruption Index: 85 (2019)

With one of the most advanced and prosperous economies worldwide, Switzerland benefits from low unemployment, a high GDP per capita, and a diversified economy. The global financial crisis in the late 2000s instigated a recession in 2009 due to Switzerland's interconnectivity in global finances and a decline in export demand. The government provided assistance to the largest Swiss bank in 2008 after suffering heavy financial losses. Long-standing banking secrecy laws have become eroded in recent years under international pressure to prosecute those accused of tax evasion. Services employ 77% of the work force and generate 74% of the GDP, whereas industry employs 20% of the work force and generates 26% of the GDP. Primary industries include machinery, chemicals, watches, textiles, precision instruments, banking, and tourism. Agriculture accounts for less than 5% of the GDP and work force. Grains, fruit, vegetables, meat, and eggs are agricultural products. Major trade partners include Germany, the United States, China, Italy, and France. Transparency International ranks Switzerland as being perceived among the top ten least corrupt countries worldwide.

Faiths

Christian: 65.6%

Muslim: 5.4%

Jewish: 0.3%

Other: 1.4%

Unspecified: 1.3%

None: 26.0%

Christians

Denominations – Members – Congregations

Catholic – 3,017,034

Reformed Evangelical – 2,100,999

Evangelicals – 336,275

Orthodox – 193,292

Jehovah's Witnesses – 19,281 – 270

Latter-day Saints – 9,071 – 35

Seventh Day Adventists – 4,757 – 60

Religion

One-third of the national population is Catholic or Protestant. Eighty percent (80%) of Catholics and Protestants reported that they are religious in the early 2010s, although church attendance rates are low. Other religious groups have significantly increased membership in recent years due to immigration, such as Orthodox Christians and Muslims. Most Muslims are immigrants from Southeastern Europe, Turkey, and North Africa, but less than 15% of Muslims practice their faith.[2]

Religious Freedom

The constitution protects religious freedom, which is upheld by the government. Most cantons use tax funds to financially support least one traditional religious group (Roman Catholic, Old Catholic, or Protestant). The relationship between church and state varies significantly by canton. A religious group must register with the government to gain tax-exempt status. Foreign religious groups may proselyte, but missionaries must obtain a religious worker visa. Foreign missionaries must hold a degree in theology, adequately speak at least one of the three most commonly spoken languages in Switzerland, and have awareness and respect for local customs. Moreover, the government may refuse residency or work permits for religious groups identified as fundamentalist or radicalized. There have been some isolated instances of societal abuse of religious freedom with Muslims and Jews.[3]

Largest Cities

Urban: 73.9% (2020)

Zürich, Genève, Basel, Lausanne, Bern, Winterthur, Luzern, St. Gallen, Lugano, Biel.

All ten of the most populous cities in Switzerland have a congregation of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Seventeen percent (17%) of the national population resides in the ten most populous cities.

Church History

Latter-day Saint apostle Lorenzo Snow began missionary work in Italy in mid-1850 and called Thomas B. H. Stenhouse in November of that year as the president of the Swiss Mission. Most of the first Latter-day Saint converts came from rural areas in the Alpen Highlands. The number of converts baptized steadily increased year to year during the early 1850s (20 in 1851, 50 in 1852, and 116 in 1853).[4] The translation of the Book of Mormon into French and German by 1852 resulted in greater success among the local population.[5] Missionary work first commenced in Geneva and later spread to German Protestant areas. By 1853, there were branches operating in Zurich and Baselland. The local press portrayed the Church in a negative light as growth accelerated, resulting in members and missionaries being periodically fined, imprisoned, banished, and physically abused. Many Swiss converts immigrated to Utah in the late 1850s and settled in the Midway, Utah[6] and Santa Clara, Utah areas. In 1864, the Swiss government declared that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was a Christian faith and was entitled to the same rights as other Christian denominations. Persecution began to decrease over the following decades. The Swiss Mission office was relocated to Bern in 1869.[7]

The first Latter-day Saint temple in Europe was completed by the Church in 1955 in Bern. Seminary and institute began in the 1970s. A Latter-day Saint European youth choir performed at the 700th anniversary of Switzerland's independence in 1991.[8]

That same year, the Church assigned German-speaking cantons to the Europe Area and French and Italian-speaking Cantons to the Europe Mediterranean Area.[9] In 1994, Church President Howard W. Hunter visited Switzerland for eight days and praised Swiss cultural, academic, and social achievements.[10] The Mormon Tabernacle Choir performed in Switzerland in 1998.[11] Several international Church leaders attended the Second World Congress of Families, which occurred in Geneva in 1999.[12] In 2000, Switzerland became part of the Europe Central Area.[13] In 2010, the Church consolidated the Switzerland Zurich Mission with the Germany Munich/Austria Mission, creating the Alpine German-Speaking Mission. In 2011, the Church consolidated the Switzerland Geneva Mission with the France Toulouse Mission to create the France Lyon Mission. Switzerland has been assigned to the Europe Area since the late 2000s. New legislation in the early 2010s resulted in the government quota for Latter-day Saint missionaries being reduced from eighty in 2010 to fifty in 2011 and zero in 2012.[14] However, full-time missionaries continued to be assigned to most Swiss congregations in the 2010s through missions based in Germany, France, and Italy.

Membership Growth

Church Membership: 9,071 (2019)

There were over one hundred Latter-day Saints by the mid-1850s. By 1900, there were over a thousand members in Switzerland. Two thousand members immigrated to the United States during the first fifty years of proselytism.[15] Membership totaled 4,553 in 1972.[16] There were 5,449 members by 1975[17] and 6,500 members by 1992.[18] Membership reached 7,000 in the mid-1990s.[19]

By year-end 2000, there were 7,172 members. Church membership typically increased between fifty and one hundred during the 2000s, reaching 7,418 in 2002, 7,699 in 2005, and 7,939 in 2008. In the 2000s, annual church membership growth rates have ranged from a low of 0.1% in 2009 to a high of 2.7% in 2001. In the 2010s, the Church typically reported slow annual membership growth rates (less than 2.0%). Church membership reached 8,741 in 2013, 9,213 in 2016, and 9,071 in 2019.

In 2019, one in 920 was a Latter-day Saint.

Congregational Growth

Wards: 27 Branches: 8 (May 2020)

In 1904, there were fifteen branches in Switzerland.[20] The Church created its first stake in 1961 in Zurich. In 1975, there were four wards and twenty-three branches.[21] During the next decade, additional stakes were created in Bern (1981) and Geneva (1982).

By year-end 2000, there were forty congregations, including twenty wards. The number of congregations declined in the 2000s to thirty-nine in 2002 and thirty-six in 2008. Between 2000 and 2010, several branches became wards resulting in the number of wards increasing by six. The number of branches declined to ten as a result of branches becoming wards and congregation consolidations.

As a result of branches maturing into wards in the three Switzerland stakes, two additional stakes were created in the 2000s in Lausanne (2005) and St. Gallen (2007). By late 2010, the number of congregations in the each of the five Swiss stakes ranged from eight to eleven. The Church organized an English-speaking branch in Zurich in 2015. The Church discontinued the Bern Ward in 2019. In 2019, there were twenty-seven wards and eight branches for a total of thirty-five official congregations. Some stakes include congregations outside of Switzerland. One congregation, the Lugano Ward, does not belong to a Swiss stake and is part of the Milan Italy Stake.

Activity and Retention

Attendance at many nationwide church meetings or conferences has been high for Western Europe. In 1995, approximately 400 attended the open house for the first Church-built chapel in Richterswil, 150 of whom were not Latter-day Saints.[22] President Hinckley addressed 4,200 members from Switzerland and two French stakes in 1998.[23] 1,200 Swiss Latter-day Saints assembled for a celebration commemorating 150 years since the Church was established in 2003.[24] German-speaking Swiss young adults were among the 1,100 German-speaking young adults in Europe who assembled in Austria for a conference in 2006.[25] One hundred forty youth from two Swiss stakes and two French stakes attended a special conference in late 2007.[26] Five hundred forty-eight were enrolled in seminary or institute during the 2008–2009 school year. The average number of members per congregation increased from 179 in 2000 to 221 in 2009 and 259 in 2019. Most wards have approximately one hundred active members, whereas most branches have twenty-five to sixty active members. Approximately 60% of new converts in German-speaking areas remained active one year after baptism during the 2010s. The Alpine German-Speaking Mission generally baptized 100-200 converts per year in the 2010s for all of southern Germany, German-speaking Switzerland, and Austria. Nationwide active membership is estimated at no greater than 3,100, or 34% of total church membership.

Language Materials

Languages with Latter-day Saint Scripture: German, French, Italian, Serbian, Croatian, Albania, Portuguese, Spanish, English, Turkish.

All Church scriptures and most church materials are translated into German, French, Italian, Croatian, Albanian, Spanish, and Serbian. A Turkish translation of most of the Doctrine and Covenants became electronically available in 2020.[27] The Liahona magazine has twelve issues a year in German, French, Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish; six in Albanian; and two in Croatian.

Meetinghouses

Latter-day Saint congregations meet in over thirty locations, most of which are Church-built meetinghouses.

Humanitarian and Development Work

Decades of economic prosperity and stability have facilitated Swiss members' participation in regional humanitarian and development projects. In 2001, the Schaffhausen Branch delivered one hundred boxes of small gifts to children in a Romanian orphanage.[28] The Church has also provided some humanitarian assistance in Switzerland, such as donating appliances, Braille books, and baby clothes to the needy.[29]

Opportunities, Challenges, and Prospects

Religious Freedom

Latter-day Saints have enjoyed a long history of full religious freedom in Switzerland. Foreign missionaries regularly serve, and there are no restrictions regarding proselytism or assembly.

Cultural Issues

Secularism and nominalism in traditional Christian denominations are the greatest cultural barriers that challenge mission

outreach efforts. Most the native Swiss population does not appear to view The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in a negative light, but many have misconceptions about the Church and regard Latter-day Saints as somewhat odd. Most the population exhibits little interest and low receptivity to the Church through the efforts of full-time missionaries. There has been some success with member-missionary work and with full-time missionaries working with immigrant groups that often constitute sizeable minorities in many Swiss congregations. High alcohol and cigarette consumption rates reduce receptivity and create challenges for investigators and new converts to completely end their use of these substances before and after baptism. The high degree of political autonomy apparent in the individual 26 Swiss cantons can create challenges due to major differences in laws and government policies. Some cantons have a strong Catholic or Protestant tradition, presenting challenges for Latter-day Saints to overcome the religious historical identity of the indigenous population.

National Outreach

Forty-six percent (46%) of the national population resides in urban agglomerations and towns with a Latter-day Saint congregation. Twenty-two of the forty-five cities or urban agglomerations with 20,000 or more people have a Church presence. Thirteen percent (13%) of the national population resides in unreached cities over 20,000 inhabitants. Nine of the twenty-six cantons have no reported Latter-day Saint mission outreach centers and include, ordered in descending population, Schwyz, Zug, Jura, Appenzell Ausserrhoden, Nidwalden, Glarus, Obwalden, Uri, and Appenzell Innerrhoden. The lack of a Church presence in these cantons is primarily due to their relatively small populations as all nine of these unreached cantons number amount the ten least populated cantons in Switzerland. The combined population of unreached cantons is 591,000, or 7% of the national population.

Latter-day Saint national outreach expansion ended in the late 1990s and early 2000s as the number of congregations stopped increasing and began to decline in 2002. Congregations once operated in some cities in the early 2000s that at present have no known church units, including Thun, Vevey, Sion, and La Chaux-de-Fonds. The closure of congregations in these cities does not appear to be associated with the formation of wards from nearby branches but rather a lack of sustainability. With the exception of Martigny, congregations or mission outreach centers have not been established in any additional cities since 2000. Few convert baptisms, low mission productivity, and limited numbers of full-time missionaries prompted the Church to consolidate the Switzerland Zurich Mission with the Germany Munich/Austria Mission to create the Alpine German-Speaking Mission in 2010.

Meaningful opportunities exist for the Church to establish additional congregations and mission outreach centers. In 1992, the Church created a congregation in Frauenfeld with just twenty members that met on the second floor of a business building. By 2002, the branch had seventy-five attending church regularly, and the Church built its first meetinghouse in the area.[30] By 2010, the branch had become a ward. In Geneva, three of the original French-speaking wards consolidated into two during the 2000s, but the international branch divided into an English-speaking ward and a Spanish-speaking ward during this period.

Shortly after the Church established an Internet site in 1997, Switzerland was among the top twenty countries for website visitors.[31] By 2003, Switzerland was among the first eight countries to receive a national Church website.[32] In 2010, there was a Switzerland Church website in French at http://www.eglise-de-jesus-christ.ch and a German site at http://www.kirche-jesu-christi.ch. Both sites provide local church news, information on Latter-day Saint beliefs and practices, contact information for meeting with full-time missionaries, and a meetinghouse locator.

The Church has carried out creative methods for introducing the Church to the community and creating situations for local members to make friendships with those outside the Church to find investigators. In 2004, the Church held a fireside in Winterthur for church members and their nonmember friends in which a commander of the top Swiss flight team spoke on leadership, friendship, and trust.[33] In 2005, the Church held an exhibit on the Dead Sea Scrolls in Geneva that sparked greater public interest in the Church. Sixty percent (60%) of those who attended the exhibit were not Latter-day Saints. The event was approved by the chief Rabbi of Geneva, and Protestant churches publicized the event.[34] In the 2010s, missionaries noted efforts to use musical firesides to attract interest.

Member Activity and Convert Retention

The established, long-term Latter-day Saint population primarily consists of native German, French, and Italian Swiss, whereas most recent converts over the past several decades primarily comprise immigrants, especially from Africa and Latin America. Member activity rates appear highest among African immigrants due to culturally-high rates of church attendance and activity. The increase in the average number of members per congregation during the past two decades points to modest convert retention rates or a deterioration in member activity rates during this period as membership growth rates have surpassed congregational growth rates. Lower member activity rates in some areas likely prevent the creation of additional congregations and threaten the closure of currently-operating congregations with few active members. Member reactivation efforts by local members have experienced some success.

Ethnic Issues and Integration

The number of nonnative Latter-day Saints has increased dramatically in the past two decades as full-time missionaries have achieved greater numbers of convert baptisms among immigrants. However, only a couple cities have congregations that meet in languages commonly spoken by immigrants, namely Geneva (English and Spanish) and Zurich (English). Most immigrants have few challenges integrating into Swiss congregations, as the majority appears to come from French-speaking African countries. Few, if any, ethnic integration issues have been encountered at Church in Switzerland, which has likely come as a result of increasing ethnic diversification in society in recent years. Native Swiss members may become the minority in some congregations as a result of higher receptivity among immigrant groups, which could create challenges in maintaining Swiss member activity rates and attracting new native converts. By the late 2010s, many Swiss congregations had a sizable non-Swiss membership or had non-Swiss members comprising half of active membership.

Language Issues

Latter-day Saint scriptures and materials are translated in the native language of as many as 98% of the population. Missionaries primarily teach in German and French. Accounting for 0.5% of the national population, speakers of Romansch have no Church materials available. Prospects for translations of Church materials in Romansch appear unlikely due to few monolingual speakers and the small numbers of Latter-day Saints who speak this language. The large number of English and Spanish speakers among Latter-day Saints necessitated the creation of congregations of each group in Geneva. Few active members and few new converts who speak other immigrant languages challenge efforts to create additional language-specific congregations.

Missionary Service

Full-time missionaries regularly serve from Switzerland, but their numbers remain too limited to staff the current missionary force on their own. In mid-2010, there were 175 full-time missionaries serving in the German Speaking Alpine Mission, which also included Austria and southern Germany. Increased emphasis on youth-directed mission outreach, seminary, institute, and missionary preparation classes may help alleviate the dependence on foreign missionaries to fill current mission needs by Swiss members. Low birthrates in the Church have further limited the size of the full-time missionary force among Latter-day Saint families in Switzerland.

Leadership

Swiss leadership is self-sufficient, fulfilling local administrative needs with few problems. The creation of two additional stakes indicates some growth in the number of active Melchizedek Priesthood holders, as stakes generally require over 120 active Melchizedek Priesthood holders to operate. Few, if any, Church employees have served in stake presidencies during the past several decades. Local Latter-day Saints have been called to serve as regional and international leaders. Hans B. Ringger from Basel served in the First Quorum of the Seventy from 1985 to 1995.[35] In 1988, Denis W. Bonny from Geneva was called as a regional representative.[36] In 1995, Roberto Mario Tavella from Geneva was called as a mission president[37] of the Zaire Kinshasa Mission.[38] In 1996, Georg Julius Birsfelder from Zollikofen was called as the Bern Switzerland Temple president.[39] In 1998, Roland R. Datwyler from Biel was called to preside over the Russia Yekaterinburg Mission.[40] In 2002, Roland Robert Dätwyler-Schmucki from Biel became the Bern Switzerland Temple president.[41] Robert Koch from Zurich was called as an Area Authority Seventy in 2003,[42] and Louis Weidmann from Recherswil was called as an Area Authority Seventy in 2008.[43] In 2013, Robert Koch from Dielsdorf was called as the Frankfurt Germany Temple president.[44] Louis Weidmann was called as the Adriatic South Mission president in 2014[45] and the Bern Switzerland Temple president in 2020.[46]

Temple

The Bern Switzerland Temple became the first Latter-day Saint temple constructed in Europe in 1955. International Church leadership reported that the decision to build the first European temple in Switzerland was due to the self-reliance and strength of Swiss membership, which outpaced many other areas at the time.[47] Following extensive renovations, 32,900 attended the temple open house for the Bern Switzerland Temple in 1992.[48] In 2010, there were five endowment sessions held daily Tuesday through Thursday, seven on Fridays, and eight on Saturdays. The temple is easily accessed by most Swiss members due to its central location in Bern and was heavily utilized by Italian Latter-day Saints for decades until the dedication of the Rome Italy Temple in 2019. Upon completion of the Rome Italy Temple, the Bern Switzerland Temple district was dramatically reduced in size to only Switzerland, three stakes in eastern France, and Israel.

Comparative Growth

Switzerland has the highest percentage of Latter-day Saints in Central Europe and the fourth highest percentage of Latter-day Saints in Europe after Portugal, the United Kingdom, and Spain. The decline in the number of congregations in Switzerland is representative of most nations in Europe since the early 2000s. Contraction of national outreach has occurred in most Western and Central European nations like Switzerland during the 2000s and 2010s. Member activity and convert retention rates appear higher than in most Central European nations.

Most missionary-oriented Christian groups report slow or stagnant membership and congregational growth in Switzerland. The number of Seventh-Day Adventist churches declined by ten, whereas Adventist membership increased by 250 during the 2000s. Adventist membership increased by six percent between 2006 and 2016. Adventists baptize fewer than one hundred converts per year. Jehovah's Witnesses baptize several hundred new converts a year and have been among the most successful nontraditional Christian groups, numbering over 19,000 active members in 270 congregations in 2019 despite a shorter historical presence than Latter-day Saints.

Future Prospects

Slow Latter-day Saint membership growth and a decline in the number of congregations during the 2000s and 2010s indicate modest convert retention rates and no recent expansion of national outreach. The creation of two new stakes and the maturation of several branches into wards during this period illustrates some progress strengthening existing congregations and local leadership, but many of these developments may be due to the influx of immigrant converts. Switzerland demonstrates that a mature church presence that has been established for decades longer than in most European nations does not guarantee greater potential for national outreach expansion, and, more often, national outreach declines over time as active Latter-day Saint populations form tight-knit socio-religious communities and reduce their interaction with the general population. Latter-day Saint populations appear much more stable in Switzerland than in many other Central European nations, but little church growth will likely occur unless greater member involvement in missionary activity occurs, along with adapting proselytism and teaching approaches to nominal Christian and secular Swiss populations. The creation and growth of the Frauenfeld Ward in the 1990s and 2000s and the growth of the church among English and Spanish-speakers in Geneva and Zurich illustrate that potential for church growth remains but requires vision, flexibility, and utilization of opportunities by local members and church leaders alike.

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