Reaching the Nations International Church Growth Almanac

Country reports for the nations of the world based on published statistics, church growth research, and expert analysis of history, context, culture, needs, challenges and opportunities for church growth

United States

Population 320 million (Rank 4 of 241 countries)

Reaching the Nations

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Geography

Area: 9,629,091 square miles

Arable land: 19.4%

Climate: temperate; continental; desert; arid; tropical and subtropical; polar; mostly mild with cold winters and hot summers; frequent severe storms (hurricanes, tornadoes, blizzards, thunderstorms, floods, mudslides, and occasional forest fires); Alaska is prone to earthquakes and volcanic eruptions; Hawaii is prone to volcanic eruptions and earthquakes

Terrain: Eastern and Western mountains, Great Plains, Central lowlands, Southern coastal plains, Alaska mountains and valleys, Hawaii volcanic islands

Natural resources: coal, petroleum, natural gas, phosphates, potassium, sulfur, lead, molybdenum, silver, nickel, rare earths, uranium, copper, gold, iron ore, magnesium, mercury, tungsten, zinc, lumber, arable land

Land use: arable land 19.4%; permanent crops 0.2%; other 80.4% (2005 est.)

Irrigated land: 277,000 sq km (2003 est.)

Total renewable water resources: 2,477 cu km (2000 est.)

Freshwater withdrawal (domestic/industrial/agricultural): 478 cu km/yr (2000 est.)

Natural hazards: tropical storms (Atlantic and Pacific Oceans); earthquakes (California, Alaska, Hawaii); volcanoes (Alaska, Hawaii, Pacific islands); tornadoes (Great Plains, Southeast); mudslides (California); forest fires (Alaska, Western states); hurricanes (Atlantic coast, Gulf of Mexico, Caribbean); floods

Environment - current issues: air pollution from industrial emissions; acid rain; water pollution from agricultural chemicals, sewage, industrial wastes, petroleum hydrocarbons, MTBE, pesticides, toxic metals, and solvents; habitat loss threatens wetlands, coastal areas, and wildlife habitats; wetlands loss; exotic species introduction; pesticide pollution; toxic waste; depletion of the ozone layer; deforestation; soil erosion; urban sprawl

Environment - international agreements: party to: Antarctic Treaty, Biodiversity-Wetlands, Climate Change, Desertification, Endangered Species, Hazardous Wastes, Law of the Sea, Marine Dumping, Marine Life Conservation, Nuclear Test Ban, Ozone Layer Protection, Ship Pollution, Tropical Timber 83, Tropical Timber 94, Wetlands; signed but not ratified: none of the above

Geography - note: 3rd largest country in the world; 1st in length of coastline; 1st in extent of navigable waterways; 1st in number of cultivated acres; 1st in number of cattle; 1st in number of chickens; 1st in number of pigs; 1st in number of sheep; 1st in number of turkeys; 1st in number of vehicles; 1st in number of computers; 1st in number of cellular phones; 1st in number of internet users; 1st in number of internet hosts; 1st in number of internet servers; 1st in number of airports; 1st in number of airport runways; 1st in number of roadways; 1st in number of railways; 1st in number of waterways; 1st in number of pipelines; 1st in number of merchant marine vessels; 1st in number of military personnel; 1st in number of military bases; 1st in number of nuclear weapons; 1st in number of nuclear power plants; 1st in number of nuclear reactors; 1st in number of nuclear submarines; 1st in number of nuclear aircraft carriers; 1st in number of satellites; 1st in number of satellite launches; 1st in number of satellites in orbit; 1st in number of satellite launch sites; 1st in number of satellite launch vehicles; 1st in number of satellite launch failures; 1st in number of satellite launch successes; 1st in number of satellite launch attempts; 1st in number of satellite launch failure rate; 1st in number of satellite launch success rate; 1st in number of satellite launch attempt rate; 1st in number of satellite launch success rate

The LDS Church in the United States operates a large number of non-English speaking congregations. In early April 2011, there were approximately 765 Spanish-speaking congregations in the United States (299 wards and 466 branches), accounting for 5.6% of LDS congregations in the United States. 22.7% of branches in the United States were Spanish-speaking during this period. Other language-specific LDS congregations in the United States in early April 2011 included Tongan (67), Samoan (40), Chinese languages (14), Korean (12), Hmong (9), Portuguese (6), Marshallese (5), Cambodian (4), Laotian (4), Vietnamese (4), Haitian-Creole (3), Tagalog (3), Fijian (2), Japanese (2), Navajo (2), French (1), German (1), Karen (1), Russian (1), and Swahili (1). One Laotian-speaking ward in Salt Lake City, Utah also accommodates Thai speakers. The LDS Church once operated a handful of congregations that meet the needs of Armenian, Nuer, and Polish speakers, but these congregations were discontinued in the 2000s. Dependent branches, groups, and Sunday School classes operate in several areas to meet non-English speakers.

Missionary Service

The LDS Church in the United States supplies the Church with the most full-time missionaries of any country. The Missionary Training Center in Provo, Utah provides foreign language education in approximately 50 languages and can accommodate up to 4,000 missionaries at a time,[12] although in recent years the number of missionaries at the training center has generally been only around 2,000. The number of American members serving full-time missions has declined over the past decade due to declining birthrates among Latter-day Saint families in the 1980s resulting in fewer mission-aged youth by the early 2000s, the percentage of members serving missions remaining unchanged or stagnant during this period, continuing challenges keeping youth and young adult active, inconsistent missionary preparation among teenage members, and higher standards for missionary service. The lack of progress in maintaining and increasing the number of American members serving missions during the 2000s is represented in the decline in the number of full-time missionaries serving worldwide during the 2000s from a high of 61,638 in 2002 to 52,225 in 2010. Coordination with parents and youth leaders on missionary preparation, financial planning, and the development of personal religious habits such as scripture reading, weekly church attendance, and daily prayer will be essential in overcoming ongoing challenges in increase the number of full-time missionaries serving. Additional emphasis on missionary preparation for non-English speaking American members is warranted as fewer Spanish-speaking members serve full-time missions compared to their English-speaking counterparts.

Leadership

Most areas have an ample supply of well-trained members capable of holding a myriad of administrative and leadership positions. Available leadership among non-English-speaking members remains limited, frequently necessitating returned missionaries with second language abilities to serve as branch presidents particularly for Spanish-speaking branches. The large number of returned missionary members provides a significant strength to local and international church leadership, but has at times been detrimental in fostering self-sufficiency on a local level among some foreign-language speaking congregations as local members rely on outsourced returned missionaries to perform administrative and ecclesiastical duties. American Latter-day Saints are overrepresented in international church leadership as in April 2011 two of the three members of the First Presidency, all members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, five of the seven members of the Presidency of the Seventy, 31 of the 57 members of the First Quorum of the Seventy, 16 of the 20 members of the Second Quorum of the Seventy, and all three members of the Presiding Bishopric were born in the United States. American Latter-day Saints constitute the majority of temple and mission presidents worldwide.

Temple

The first LDS temple was constructed in the United States in Kirtland, Ohio in 1836 followed by a second temple in Nauvoo, Illinois in 1846 at great sacrifice of local members. The Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (RLDS), today known as the Community of Christ, took ownership of the Kirtland Temple in 1880 whereas the Nauvoo Temple was destroyed by an arson fire in 1848 and a tornado in 1850. Additional temples were constructed following the relocation of the body of church members to Utah with temples dedicated in St. George (1877), Logan (1884), Manti (1888), and Salt Lake (1893). The first LDS temple constructed outside of North America was dedicated in Laie, Hawaii in 1919 and the first LDS temple constructed along the Pacific coast was dedicated in Los Angeles in 1956. The Washington D.C. Temple became the first LDS temple built east of the Mississippi River in 1974. The number of temples operating in the United States increased from four in 1900 to seven in 1950, nine in 1970, 13 in 1980, 21 in 1990, 51 in 2000, 66 in 2010. The large increase in the number of temples in the 1990s was attributed to the construction of dozens of small temples to service small LDS populations distant from larger temples. In April 2011, there were 77 LDS temples in the United States, 64 of which were operating, two were undergoing renovation, three under construction, and eight of which were still in the planning stages. 35 of the 50 states have an LDS temple and 20 have only one temple (Alabama, Alaska, Connecticut, Georgia, Indiana, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Montana, Nebraska, New Mexico, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, and South Carolina). States with more than one temple include Utah (15), California (7), Arizona and Idaho (5), Texas (4), Washington (3), and Colorado, Florida, Hawaii, Illinois, Missouri, Nevada, New York, Oregon, and Tennessee (2). Many states without temples have temples nearby such as Maine, Mississippi, Virginia, and Wyoming.

Large temples in the western United States are the most well-utilized by the Church worldwide, especially in Utah and Arizona where some temples schedule endowment sessions every 20 or 30 minutes from the early morning until late evening such as at the Jordan River Utah Temple. The busiest temples in the central and eastern United States generally offer endowment sessions no more than one per hour on weekdays and every 30 minutes on Saturdays. Most medium-sized temples are well-utilized, such as the Denver Colorado Temple and the Orlando Florida Temple. Member usage of the new generation of small, 10,700-square-foot temples unveiled in the late 1990s depends by location, with some small temples such as the Columbia South Carolina Temple and the Columbus Ohio Temple scheduling upwards of six endowment sessions on some days whereas other temples requiring appointments to attend due to few temple staff and patrons. Small temples are most well-utilized in the western United States but generally have four or fewer endowment sessions scheduled per day.

Prospects for the continued construction of additional temples are excellent due to moderate member activity rates, steady congregational growth, and high rates of temple attendance among active members in most locations as well as ample financial funds originating from the large body of tithe-paying American Latter-day Saints. Cities which appear most favorable for potential LDS temples in the coming decade include Jacksonville, Florida; Tucson, Arizona; Cedar City, Utah; Price, Utah; Layton, Utah; Pocatello, Idaho; Eugene, Oregon; Rogers, Arkansas; Charlotte, North Carolina; Richmond, Virginia; Cincinnati, Ohio; Bakersfield, California; Farmington, New Mexico; and Pensacola, Florida.

Comparative Growth

The LDS Church in the United States has the most members, stakes, congregations, missions, and temples of any country and possesses five times as many members as the country with the second most members (Mexico), six times as many stakes as the country with the second most stakes (Brazil), almost seven times as many congregations as the country with the second most congregations (Mexico), nearly four times as many missions as the country with the second most missions (Brazil), and six times as many temples as the country with the second most temples (Mexico). The percentage of the population residing in a city or location with an LDS congregation in the United States is higher than any other country with over 50 million people. The ratio of the general population to LDS missions in the United States of three million to one is lower than any other country with over 30 million inhabitants and is comparable to Central America. Generally at least half of the increase of congregations for the LDS Church occurs in the United States annually and in recent years between one-quarter and one-half of all new LDS stake organizations occur in the United States. The LDS Church in the United States constituted over half of international church membership until March 1996[13] and accounted for 43.5% of worldwide church membership in 2010, In recent years, American convert baptisms may account for as few as 20% of worldwide convert baptisms. Member activity and convert retention rates in the United States are among the highest for countries with over 100,000 Latter-day Saints notwithstanding the number of less-active and inactive American members surpassing the number of active Latter-day Saints outside of the United States.

Other major outreach-oriented Christians report comparable growth trends to the LDS Church in the United States but self-identified Latter-day Saints are among the most active and devote of all Christians. Self-identified Latter-day Saints in the United States report the second highest weekly church attendance rates (76%) of any religious group whereas Jehovah's witnesses report the highest (82%). Latter-day Saints and Jehovah's Witnesses report the highest percentage of church attendance on a week, monthly, or yearly basis (92%). Latter-day Saints are no less likely than the general population in sharing their religious beliefs on a weekly basis (24%) whereas Jehovah's Witnesses are nearly three times as likely (76%).[14] When taking into account inactive and disaffiliated members, the LDS Church reports activity rates comparable to most mainstream denominations, although active Latter-day Saints demonstrate more intense participation. Other missionary-minded Christian groups engage in more proactive member-missionary programs than the LDS Church, such as Jehovah's Witnesses.

Some Christian groups before greater outreach among ethnic minority groups than Latter-day Saints. The Seventh Day Adventist Church generally increases by 10 to 50 new congregations a year and 20,000 members while baptizing about 30,000 new converts annually. Adventists have established a greater number of congregations to meet the needs of non-English speaking minority groups and operate several congregations throughout the country for ethnic groups seldom reached by Latter-day Saints in the United States including Russians and Ukrainians. Adventists even operate a Hungarian-speaking congregation in New York City and several Indonesian-speaking churches. The extent of outreach directed toward Spanish-speakers is comparable to Latter-day Saints although Adventists maintain a far greater number of Spanish-speaking congregations in the Northeast whereas Latter-day Saints maintain a many more Spanish-speaking congregations in the Southwest and in Utah.

Future Prospects

Steady congregational growth for decades, a strong leadership base, a large number of youth and young adult converts serving missions, an increased emphasis on member-missionary activity, and an abundant supply of mission and administrative resources generate a positive outlook for future LDS growth in the United States. Greater consistency regarding convert baptismal standards, reactivation efforts, and missionary preparation for LDS youth will be required to sustain growth and reduce convert and seasoned member attrition. LDS proselytism approaches will likely need to be increasingly more modified to suit investigators and less-active members that have a secular background due to declining religious activity in public and family life. Dozens of additional LDS stakes will likely be organized on a yearly basis for the foreseeable future but prospects for increasing outreach among non-Polynesians and non-Spanish speaking minority groups is bleak due to low receptivity, inadequate LDS leadership manpower among minority groups in many areas, and a lack of vision by stake leaders in many locations. Additional missions will likely be consolidated in less-productive areas of the United States such as the northeast due to limited international LDS missionary manpower. The ongoing trend of temple construction will likely continue due to high rates of temple attendance among active members in many areas of the United States.

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