



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

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Convert Baptisms

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Convert baptisms consist of all individuals baptized into the Church over age nine. Eight-year-olds who join the Church that previously were not listed on church records as children of record are also counted as convert baptisms whereas eight-year-olds who are baptized and were previously listed as a child of record are not counted as convert baptisms. Children on church records who do not get baptized at age eight but are baptized at age nine or older are counted as a convert baptism.

The Church has not published the number of converts baptized a year prior to 1973. In 1976, the Church baptized more than 100,000 converts in a single year for the first time. The number of annual convert baptisms surpassed 150,000 in 1977, 200,000 in 1980, 250,000 in 1988, and 300,000 in 1989. Since 1990 the annual number of convert baptisms has ranged from a high of 330,877 in 1990 to a low of 241,239 in 2004 and has averaged approximately 286,000.

Convert baptisms are the primary influence on membership growth trends in the LDS Church. Since 1973, the number of convert baptisms has accounted for 71% of the combined increase of convert baptisms and increase of children of record for the average year. In other words, convert baptisms contribute over two-thirds of the membership increase the Church experiences on an average year. Within the past decade, the summation of convert baptisms and increase of children of record has surpassed the increase of total church membership by 61,000 for the average year. This discrepancy between the summation of new members added to church records a year and the total increase in church membership is attributed to the approximately 60,000 individuals a year who are removed from church records due to death, excommunication, or resignation. The Church retains all convert baptisms on church records regardless of the length of church activity and worthiness status and only removes those members as a result of death, excommunication, or resignation.

The Church does not publish a country-by-country breakdown of convert baptisms unlike total church membership. Due to the high correlation between membership growth and convert baptisms, the majority of convert baptisms occur in locations that report the largest numerical increases in membership. The United States, Mexico, Brazil, the Philippines, Chile, Peru, and Argentina appear to baptize the most converts year to year. Mission president and returned missionary reports have provided statistics on the number of convert baptisms within some missions for a particular year. The average number of convert baptisms a year varies widely by world region and between individual missions within the same geographical regions. In Europe, most missions baptize fewer than 200 converts a year. Some missions appear to baptize as few as 50 converts a year whereas others baptize upwards of 400 a year. In Latin America and the Caribbean, most missions baptize between 300 and 700 converts a year. Some missions appear to baptize as few as 200 converts whereas others have baptized several thousand converts in a single year. In North America, there is considerable variability among missions in the number of converts baptized a year. Most missions baptize between 200 and 700 converts a year although some appear to baptize as few as 150 whereas others baptize as many as 2,000. In Africa, most missions baptize 500 or more converts a year with some missions baptizing several thousand converts a year. In Asia, the number of convert baptisms varies dramatically by mission with some missions baptizing as few as 150 converts a year whereas others missions baptize over 1,000 converts a year. In Oceania, most missions appear to baptize between 100 and 500 converts a year. The number of convert baptisms in individual missions depends on the number of missionaries assigned, national outreach expansion and church planting efforts, convert baptismal standards, the population's receptivity to LDS teachings, the numerical size of LDS membership, the availability of LDS materials and scriptures in commonly spoken languages, and member-missionary participation.

Full-time missionaries, mission presidents, and area presidencies ultimately determine convert baptismal qualifications for their mission or area although international LDS leadership has established worldwide minimal standards for convert baptisms. In 2002, the First Presidency issued a statement on missionary work that outlined convert baptismal standards as follows:

- Make sufficient changes in their lives according to Doctrine and Covenants 20:37
- Develop faith in Christ
- Repent of transgressions
- Live the principles of moral worthiness
- Live the Word of Wisdom
- Commit to pay tithing
- Receive all the missionary lessons
- Meet the bishop or branch president
- Attend several sacrament meetings^[1]

Baptismal qualifications specified in Doctrine and Covenants 20:37 include:

- Humble themselves before God
- Desire to be baptized
- Come forth with broken hearts and contrite spirits
- Repent of all their sins
- Be willing to take upon them the name of Christ
- Have a determination to serve Christ to the end
- Manifest by their works that they have received the Spirit of Christ unto a remission of their sins

Mission and area leaders generally require potential converts to attend church for at least two Sundays prior to baptism although church leaders in some missions or areas have enforced stricter church attendance guidelines to qualify investigators for baptism. For example, in recent years mission presidents have more frequently required that investigators attend church for at least two consecutive Sundays before baptism. Some mission presidents have established strict baptismal qualifications to help curb against inactivity and convert retention problems. For example, one mission president in Nicaragua required investigators to attend church for at least two months before baptism although it was unclear whether this requirement was consistently enforced for a significant period of time. In the Armenia Yerevan Mission, a mission president in the late 2000s and early 2010s stressed stricter convert baptismal standards without obstinately enforcing certain sacrament meeting attendance qualifications. This change resulted in the average convert attending church six times prior to baptism and increasing convert retention rates to as high as 50% for one year after baptism.

The Church continues to engage in quick-baptism approaches in many areas of the world that rush poorly prepared converts into baptism with little foresight into retention. Although many of these programs are well-intended to accelerate church growth and baptize larger numbers of converts, the focus on numerical goals that are more quota-driven rather than doctrinally-based perpetuate low convert retention rates in many of the highest baptizing areas of the world. This, in turn, has led many to make the erroneous correlation between high baptismal rates and low convert retention and member activity rates. In Argentina, recently returned missionaries report that mission and area leaders have stressed baptizing converts as quickly as possible and that conversion would happen by itself at a later time. These policies continue to exacerbate many common problems that stunt church growth such few qualified members to serve in leadership positions and a disconnect between full-time missionary and member-missionary efforts. In the Church's official missionary guide *Preach My Gospel*, church leaders caution that "if you feel that the person you are teaching needs additional preparation, do not schedule an interview until the investigator meets the standards."^[2]

Children and adolescents comprise a large percentage of convert baptisms. In 2006, LDS apostle Elder Dallin H. Oaks reported that children ages eight to 15 constitute 40% of convert baptisms worldwide.^[3] Missionaries have baptized large numbers of children and adolescents as they are often more receptive to receiving the missionary lessons than adults. However, this young demographic carries with it several unique challenges that make child and youth converts more vulnerable to falling into inactivity and disaffiliation. Many children join the Church without a parent and may face opposition from family to regularly attend church and follow church teachings. Missionaries report that large numbers of converts under age 15 developed interest in the Church due to their attraction to individual full-time missionaries rather than to sincere interest in church teachings or socialization opportunities at church. Some missionary programs for finding investigators provide service in exchange for teaching the missionary lessons such as English tutoring programs. Although these programs have achieved success at helping investigators break down cultural inhibitions that prevent many from seriously talking with missionaries about religion and learning about the LDS Church, some converts have joined the Church to appease missionaries that pressure baptism and then become inactive following the transfer of missionaries to another proselytism area. Children and youth are frequently baptized through these programs and fail to develop regular church attendance.

The Church has achieved noticeable success in child, adolescent, and young adult converts serving full-time missions. Many young converts express the desire to "repay" the service performed for them by the full-time missionaries that introduced them to the Church through serving a mission. Converts who serve full-time missions are much more likely to remain active in the long run and marry in the temple. Early preparation for missionary service can improve the focus of youth converts to serve missions and transform these members from liabilities on church leadership to valued resources in strengthening the Church in individual congregations.

Prospects appear favorable for noticeable increases in the number of convert baptisms worldwide in the coming decade due to the augmentation of the full-time missionary force and recent outreach expansion efforts in locations where populations exhibit high receptivity to the LDS Church such as in Sub-Saharan Africa. There appears little indication that convert retention rates will noticeably improve from the past decade as mission and area policies for convert baptismal standards remain inconsistent and often encourage quick-baptism tactics to achieve numerical goals.

^[1] "Statement on Missionary Work," First Presidency letter, 11 December 2002.

^[2] *Preach My Gospel*, p. 204

^[3] Stahle, Shaun D. "Retaining converts begins with understanding difficulties," LDS Church News, 8 July 2006. <http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/49180/Retaining-converts-begins-with-understanding-difficulties.html>