

 SEARCH

The Salt Lake Tribune

SUBSCRIBE

LOG IN

SUBSCRIBE



## Salt Lake County keeps losing Latter-day Saints, and there are multiple theories as to why

Utah's statewide population is now 60% LDS.

(Rick Bowmer | AP file photo) A silhouette of the Salt Lake Temple of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints on Jan. 3, 2018. Membership in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has dropped for the third straight year in the faith's home base of Salt Lake County.

By Lee Davidson | Jan. 14, 2021, 6:00 a.m. | Updated: 8:01 a.m.

**Editor's note** • *This story is available to Salt Lake Tribune subscribers only. Thank you for supporting important local journalism.*

For nearly 174 years, Salt Lake County has served as the headquarters of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and home for most of its presidents and apostles. Early pioneers created it as a remote refuge from persecution.

For a third consecutive year, the raw number of church members in the county has dropped significantly — by 5,734 members, according to 2020 data provided to The Salt Lake Tribune by Utah's predominant faith. It fell by 17,174 over the past three years, the equivalent to losing the population of Bluffdale.

That decline came as Utah's most populous county continued to grow, adding about 36,600 residents over those same three years.

[Salt Lake County is minority Latter-day Saint, a distinction it first received in 2017](#) — and since then the percentage continued to slide. Latter-day Saints now account for 46.89% of its population, the seventh year in row to see the percentage dip.



(Christopher Cherrington | The Salt Lake Tribune)

In addition, for the second straight year, church membership slipped in two of Utah's other four biggest counties: by 1,038 in Weber and by 508 in Davis. And the percentage of Utah's population that is LDS continues a six-year decrease, now down to 60.02% from 63.33% in 2014.

Utah County, meanwhile, the second largest in the state and home to church-owned Brigham Young University, continues to be a magnet for Latter-day Saints.

It accounted for all of the growth of church membership in the state last year and is 80.43% LDS. Utah County has now nearly matched the total number of church members living in the nearly twice-as-large Salt Lake County.

### **Explaining the trends**

Among the possible reasons for these documented declines are Utahns leaving the faith and resigning their membership.

"We know that there continues to be an exodus from the church," said Patrick Mason, head of Mormon history and culture at Utah State University. "This has [been one of the main stories of the church in the 21st century and may be accelerating over the past decade.](#)"

(Chris Detrick | Tribune file photo) Sarah Epperson mails her letter of resignation from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints near Temple Square in Salt Lake City Saturday, Nov. 14, 2015.

Matt Martinich, a Latter-day Saint and independent demographer based in Colorado, is skeptical of that explanation.

He said the church has reported a major net increase in new wards and branches organized in Utah within the past two years, including since the coronavirus pandemic started. "There is no evidence to indicate more people are leaving the church, or joining the church, in Utah in recent years."

(Christopher Cherrington | The Salt Lake Tribune)

Wider demographic shifts may account for some of the changes, said Pam Perlich, senior demographer at the University of Utah's Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute. That includes: more people who are not LDS moving to the state; more church members dying as Utah's population ages; and a plunging birthrate in recent years, adding fewer babies to church rolls.

✘

numbers it gives to the Utah Population Committee, a government group that uses it to help estimate the state's population.

The data reflects only those Latter-day Saints with a known address. It is possible the church has a higher number of members, but they are not active enough to let local lay leaders request their records and attach a current address to them.

Assessing the erosion in Utah's LDS head count requires identifying the ways members might be dropped from local rolls: They may resign membership, be excommunicated (or had their membership withdrawn), move to another area, die, or have records created when they were babies later removed if they were never baptized into the faith.

## **Doubts and resignations**

Mason said there has been a slide in the activity level of church members.

"There have been some surveys in recent years to show that retention rates among Latter-day Saints have declined significantly over the past generation," he said. Over the past five to 10 years, he said hard-to-quantify numbers of people have been leaving the church for a variety of reasons.

"The No. 1 issue in the last couple of years," he said, "has been over disagreements with the church's policy around LGBTQ issues and other matters related to gender equality and women's role and place in the church."

(Trent Nelson | Tribune file photo) Demonstrators at a rally about BYU's changing position on "romantic behavior" by same-sex couples gather in front of the headquarters of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Salt Lake City on Friday, March 6, 2020.

Much of that had roots in reaction to a [2015 policy that labeled members in same-sex relationships as "apostates" and blocked their children from being baptized](#) until they were adults. The policy has since been [rescinded](#).

"There's always a certain number of people who become disenchanted over other doctrinal and historical issues," Mason said. "It's just really hard to quantify that, especially in any particular location."

Latter-day Saint writer Jana Riess' groundbreaking [Next Mormons Survey](#) showed that U.S. millennials are indeed leaving the church at higher rates than past generations.

"We used to keep about 75% of members," she said on a 2019 Tribune ["Mormon Land" podcast](#). "For millennials, it's about 46%, or less than half."

"Feeling judged," Riess noted, was the top reason Latter-day Saint women gave for leaving the fold.



Other factors have ranged from people [doubting stories about the origins of modern Mormon scriptures](#) to past polygamy and the church's former [ban preventing Black men from holding its all-male priesthood](#) and Black women from entering its temples.

All of that seems to “impact a lot of people in their 20s and 30s, who are in their child-rearing years,” Mason said. “So that could have an impact in terms of them deciding not to bless their babies or not to baptize their children. But it's hard to get hard facts on that.”

(Christopher Cherrington | The Salt Lake Tribune)

It may also lead to an increase in the number of people who formally resign their church membership.

Mark Naugle is a Salt Lake City-based attorney who started the website [QuitMormon.com](#) to help members resign without the need to contact church leaders themselves.

Requests “are steady,” he said, “but, no, we haven't seen any big jumps” recently.

“What used to happen is I would turn on the computer and see that 2,000 people had resigned this weekend, and I'd say, ‘What happened? What policy change happened or who said what in General Conference?’”

Naugle said he most recently noticed a bump [after stories that the church had amassed \\$100 billion in a “rainy day account” but kept it secret for fear it might discourage members from paying tithing.](#)

He added he found that many of those who resign “have been simmering for a while, or they're out [of the church] mentally and just need an excuse to be pushed over the edge.”

Ryan Sorensen with [QuitMormon.com](#) reports that it has submitted more than 16,000 resignation requests from Utahns since 2016. He said it has turned in nearly 36,000 total resignations from members worldwide in the same time.

The Utah resignation numbers by year are 1,361 in 2016; 3,542 in 2017; 5,501 in 2018; 4,474 in 2019; and 1,253 in 2020.

Naugle said numbers are down in 2020 partly because he said membership resignation is increasingly difficult, with the church [requiring his site to include notarized letters](#) beyond simple ID such as a photocopy of a driver license. He complains the church often does not act in a timely manner on letters, so his group resends applications. “They don't” ✕

Martinich, the independent demographer, believes other factors — such as Latter-day Saints moving — are a bigger driver of changes in LDS membership numbers.

He sees no truly significant changes in people leaving or joining the church in Utah over time, and he's tracked an increase in new congregations, called wards and branches, where people worship.

For example, he said at least eight new stakes, or regional clusters of congregations, were created in Utah in 2020 and no stakes discontinued. And there has been a net increase of about 65 congregations in Utah in 2020.

(Francisco Kjolseth | Tribune file photo) People listen during the Sunday morning session of the 189th twice-annual General Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints at the Conference Center in Salt Lake City on Sunday, Oct. 6, 2019.

So, Martinich said, “the biggest driver for the declining percentage of Latter-day Saints in the most populous Utah counties has to do with non-Latter-day Saints moving into the state in larger numbers.”

Perlich, the U. demographer, said more non-Mormons do appear to be moving into the state, diluting the percentage of Utahns who belong to the church.

In recent years, people moving to Utah accounted for a third of the population growth — with the rest coming from “natural growth,” or births minus deaths. In 2020, it was about 50-50.

“People are coming and bringing their characteristics from the outside world here,” Perlich said. “So there is less probability that you would get active LDS members moving in.”

Utah's birthrate also has plummeted. Last year, Utah had its lowest number of births in 21 years. The total fertility rate, or how many children a Utah woman would expect to have in her lifetime, is down to 2.03.

Perlich notes the average age in Utah has been climbing, meaning “deaths are going up because of the age of church members.”

Besides nonmembers moving in, Latter-day Saint numbers in Salt Lake County could be affected by residents moving to places with more affordable housing, like nearby Utah County.

Mason also believes there may be a “cultural and religious dimension” to relocations outside of Salt Lake County. Son ✕

“We continue to see some geographic segregation along religious lines,” he said. “I think most of that is going to be voluntary and people just choosing to go among other people more like themselves.”

(Trent Nelson | Tribune file photo) Missionaries at the Missionary Training Center of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Provo on June 18, 2013.

## Notable numbers

Several other findings from the church’s 2020 membership numbers are notable, including:

- Latter-day Saints are minorities in five counties in Utah: Grand (24.77%), Summit (28.49%), San Juan (36.22%), Carbon (45.38%) and Salt Lake (46.89%). Weber County is drifting close to that at 51.38%.

San Juan includes part of the Navajo Nation. Grand and Summit are home to vacation and tourist areas. Carbon County historically was home to coal mining, which attracted many non-Mormon miners.

- The counties with the highest percentage of Latter-day Saints are Morgan (82.68%), Rich (82.52%), Utah (80.43%) and Box Elder (74.92%).

- Utah County added 10,401 Latter-day Saints last year. Utah statewide actually added slightly fewer, 10,334, because of losses in such counties as Salt Lake, Davis and Weber.

- Utah County now has 539,573 Latter-day Saints, which comes close to matching the 546,163 who live in much larger Salt Lake County.

(Christopher Cherrington | The Salt Lake Tribune)



author

[ldavidson@sltrib.com](mailto:ldavidson@sltrib.com)

Follow @LeeHDavidson

[Donate to the newsroom now.](#) The Salt Lake Tribune, Inc. is a 501(c)(3) public charity and contributions are tax deductible

COMMENTS: (66)



88

Gary Grubb

I heard that many of them have moved to Mar-a-Lago to be with their Jesus when he retires next Wednesday.

77

T-love8  
Lehi, Utah

It would appear many Christians are choosing Trump over Christian teachings in recent years.

94

Thomas Thompson

To insist that the Church isn't true is to provide an answer to the wrong question.

[View all 66 comments](#)

## RELATED STORIES

RELIGION

Salt Lake County is now minority Mormon, and the impacts are far reaching

RELIGION

Utah sees Latter-day Saint slowdown and membership numbers drop in Salt Lake County

RELIGION

This week in Mormon Land: The Capitol gang, 'First Vision' poems, youth theme songs

RELIGION

This week in Mormon Land: Remembering an LDS prophet's surprising death and the decade's best General Conference talks

RELIGION

'Mormon Land': Scholar looks back at a historic year, from COVID to anti-racism sermons, and what it portends for the LDS Church



## THE LATEST

BYU's Zach Wilson is projected as a top-10 NFL draft pick, but how did he get here?

Tribune Editorial: Time for Dixie State University to get a new name

Salt Lake County keeps losing Latter-day Saints, and there are multiple theories as to why

Joseph Smith Memorial Building now has a mini-temple of sorts so top LDS leaders can meet while iconic temple is closed

Latter-day Saints are overrepresented in Utah's Legislature, holding 9 of every 10 seats

Should Salt Lake City police increase diversity among trainers? Bolster crisis training? Racial equity panel wants residents to weigh in.





- [Twitter](#)
- [Instagram](#)
- [YouTube](#)
- [RSS](#)

- [Podcasts](#)
- [Store](#)
- [Story Tip Line](#)
- [Archives](#)
- [Help and Contact Info](#)

**ABOUT US**

- [History and Mission](#)
- [Our Nonprofit Model](#)
- [Board and Advisers](#)
- [Officers and Staff](#)
- [Donors and Tax Filing](#)
- [News Literacy Resources](#)
- [Donate](#)

**TERMS OF SERVICE**

- [Privacy Policy](#)
- [California Privacy](#)
- [Editorial Policies and Ethics](#)
- [Advertise with Us](#)
- [Legal Notices](#)



**ABOUT US**

**TERMS OF SERVICE**

**PRIVACY POLICY**

**EDITORIAL POLICY**

**ADVERTISE**

**CONTACT US**

**SUPPORT**

**EMAIL NEWSLETTERS**

**PODCASTS**

**NEWS TIPS**

**APPS**

**DONATE**

sltrib.com © 1996-2021 The Salt Lake Tribune. All rights reserved.

**The Salt Lake Tribune**  
 Independent. Nonprofit. Pulitzer Prize winner.

