

FAITH

The Angel Moroni statue sits atop the Layton Temple. The latest membership statistics reveal surprising strength in growth for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

LDS Church grows at 'surprising' clip. Lag in new congregations a 'concern.'

The faith's expansion in its home state of Utah, however, remains mired near historic lows.

By DAVID NOYCE and PEGGY FLETCHER STACK

For The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, there is much to celebrate in the latest statistical report. The worldwide growth rate in the 122 million-member faith is growing. The expansion of congregations is expanding. And the number of U.S. states with declining membership is well, declining.

Some regions including East Africa are booming. The U.S. is rebounding, and many growth measures have met or surpassed pre-pandemic levels.

Still, there are causes for concern. West Africa, unlike the continent's eastern and central regions, has seen its Latter-day Saint growth slow. In addition, California continues to bleed members, and growth rates in Utah, home to the global faith's headquarters, remain near historic lows.



Matt Martinich «Recently surprised» by 2023 growth

To get a real sense of what's happening with the Utah-based faith, here are excerpts from The Salt Lake Tribune's latest "Mormon Land" podcast in which Matt Martinich, an independent researcher who tracks church movements for the websites cunorah.com and ldschurchgrowth.blogspot.com, dissects all this data and deciphers what the numbers say about the state of the church.

What did you think when you first examined the 2023 membership statistics announced at April's General Conference?

I was pleasantly surprised with membership growth in 2023 compared to recent years. [It] increased by the highest rate since before the COVID-19 pandemic, at about 1.5% for the year. It was about 1.54% in 2019. So we've recovered the rate of membership growth from what things were like before the pandemic, but also we saw some really positive developments in many different regions and countries.

What other positive developments?

We had a significant increase in the number of converts baptized in 2023, the highest



Top » Latter-day Saint missionaries walk among the narrow streets of the Philippines, where there has been growth in congregations and stakes. **Above** » Attendees fill the seats at General Conference in April.

since 2015. When we have more converts in the church, that's usually a positive as long as qualifications for baptism are being upheld to a reasonably high level. But we also had a good increase in the number of new children of record added. It's still lower than we've seen in terms of what it was about 10 or 15 years ago, but it was higher than we've seen in the last few years.

Was there anything in the statistics you found disconcerting?

There are some areas that are a concern. One of those is that the net increase for 2023 of the number of official congregations in the church still was not very high. It's lower than we've seen historically. There was a net increase of 160 congregations in 2023. That's about a 0.51% annual increase. And that's just

about a third of what we're seeing for membership growth for the year. Where congregational growth rates in the church are consistently lagging behind membership growth rates, it suggests ongoing problems with convert retention and member activity.

You blogged about "the unprecedented church growth in East Africa." Is there a country there that stands out?

What's fascinating with these East Africa developments has been that it hasn't been really limited to one country. It's really a very big deal to see the type of growth going on in East Africa, just because it hasn't happened before in church history. East Africa has over a billion people, a very highly populated area of the world, where Latter-day Saints have numbered just in the tens of thousands. In the last couple of years, Mozambique is one of those countries. We had membership increase by 34% in 2023. That's a massive amount, considering there are now about 25,000 Latter-day Saints in Mozambique.

What about other areas of growth?

Some areas of the Pacific [showed real growth]. The Solomon Islands was one of the countries that had a membership growth rate of at least 10% last year. We've also seen some fairly good progress even with countries like Spain. Last year in Spain, membership growth rate was the highest seen in about 20 years. Some other European countries, particularly around the Mediterranean and Portugal and Italy, had an increase in membership growth rates as well. ... In the Philippines, though, what's been so encouraging is the growth in the number of congregations and stakes [or clusters of congregations]. We've seen some really great active membership growth and that has resulted in many different things — whether it's new stakes and congregations being organized and also the number of temples that have really proliferated. There was only one temple 20 years ago, and now there's going to be 13. That really speaks to just what a transformation the church has had in the Philippines from being a country with a lot of problems to today being a very functional country for the church administratively.

What about Europe?

It really depends on the country as well. For example, in Germany, we've had new wards being created because there's so many active members, especially in the Frankfurt area. We have also had Spanish-speaking wards and branches being organized in Germany. Historically, Germany has not had Spanish-speaking units before. One of the transitions we're seeing, especially with this growth, hasn't necessarily been with the native populations in these countries. They have been with immigrants who have come to these countries.

What's happening in the U.S.?

The issue we're having in recent years is that the church is not growing very fast in Utah. It used to grow like 2% or 3% a year. Now, it's like 0.75%. I think that reflects a lot of Latter-day Saints moving away from Utah. When that happens, the membership growth rate in Utah goes down. And, in other states, it can go up quite a bit. ... We can see outside of Utah and the Mountain West, where we have some states that have had booms in convert baptisms, like we had that in Tennessee about 10 years ago. ... What's probably driving a lot of that growth is people moving around.

Do you foresee a lot more contraction of stakes or congregations in some states? And where do you think there might be more expansion?

I definitely think we're going to see more of that. ... But if we look at the average number of members per congregation for the United States, it hasn't noticeably changed in 30 years. It's been remarkably stable at about 470 to 480 members per ward or branch. That really says that member activity rates are actually quite stable in the United States. It has not appeared to have worsened in recent years based on looking at this data.

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Meet our two dogs. One is an angel. The other is a devil.

In January 2017, I rescued a dog. I like to word it that way because it makes me sound like a hero. Truthfully, I didn't do much. A friend saw a little black Cavalier poodle mix on an emotionally manipulative rescue website and sent me the link, asking if I was going to let that poor creature never find a forever home.

The next day I met an employee of the rescue organization in a Petco parking lot. I told myself I was just going to meet the puppy and then decide if I wanted to go through with it. When she handed me the 7-pound shaggy dog, who smelled like horse poop, his face drenched with tears, he wrapped all four of his legs tight around my arm and stared at me so desperately I started crying.



ELI MCCANN

Duncan's tale

I took him home that night, named him Duncan and gave him a gentle bath in the kitchen sink.

I don't know Duncan's history, but it seems clear he knows he comes from humble circumstances. He's highly claustrophobic, which made it impossible to crate him. Fortunately, he was easy to train. It was like he was just grateful to have a safe home and wanted to thank me by causing as little trouble as possible.

He potty-trained immediately and never chewed anything he wasn't supposed to. Before long, he started doing chores around the house. One year he helped me file our taxes. He's the kind of dog who would call 911 if one of us started choking. I love him more than I've ever loved any



Duncan, left, a black Cavalier poodle mix, is the "angel" dog in the lives of Eli McCann and Skylar Westerdaal. Louis, a Bernese Mountain Dog poodle mix, is the "absolute terror."



Courtesy of @EliMcCann

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