

Counting Mormons: Study says LDS numbers inflated

by [John Dart](#) in the [August 21, 2007](#) issue

The Mormon Church claims to have some 5.7 million members in the United States, which would make the Utah-based denomination the fourth largest church body in the nation after the Roman Catholic Church, the Southern Baptist Convention and the United Methodist Church. Often cited as one of the fastest-growing churches, with a clean-cut image and a focus on family values, the Mormon Church would seem poised to rival within a decade the size of the UMC, which has suffered declines in recent years and now has just below 8 million members.

But many researchers say that the official figures for Mormon membership in the U.S.—as well as the church's claims of having 13 million members worldwide—are greatly inflated or overstated. At fault, studies say, is the church's policy of counting as members nearly all baptized Mormons, including those who are lapsed in membership or who cannot be located.

If more customary church tallies and membership estimates were used, scholars say, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the official name of the church) would have to cut its publicly announced figure nearly in half—to just a little over 3 million. For the sake of comparison, that would put Mormon membership on a par with that of the 3.1-million-member Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

The landmark American Religious Identification Survey of 2001 provided an eye-opener. Researchers at City University of New York projected from its random sampling of 50,000 households that there were 2,787,000 Mormons. In contrast, the LDS Church claimed 5.3 million members in 2001—nearly twice the number of self-identified Mormons that year in the ARIS survey. To make another comparison, that survey puts the Mormons at the same rank as Episcopalians in the United States. About 3 million Americans call themselves Episcopalians in polls (though membership figures for the Episcopal Church, compiled for the *2007 Yearbook of American & Canadian Churches*, lists the denomination as having 2.2 million members—15th place in membership rankings).

Virtually that same 2-to-1 ratio was noted in a detailed study reported in October at a national meeting of sociologists of religion by Kirk Hadaway, research director for the Episcopal Church, and Penny Long Marler of Samford University. “The LDS data are highly inflated according to the standards used by most other religious bodies,” Hadaway said in an interview this year.

Episcopalians, Baptists, Presbyterians and other Protestants tend to trim their congregational rolls periodically to eliminate people who have not maintained their connection to the church. “Being baptized is a serious issue in the LDS Church, so they do not think it is appropriate to remove inactive baptized members,” said Hadaway, who is also currently president of the Religious Research Association, which fosters social research for church leaders.

The Roman Catholic Church also tends to include many inactive members in parish and diocese totals, but its current figure of 69 million members roughly matches the number of self-identified Catholics reported in national polls. “For the LDS Church the situation is even worse in that they count many more people than they can even identify,” said Hadaway.

Officials of the LDS Church admit that there are plenty of nonpracticing Mormons, but they do not want to give up on them. Two years ago in Utah, one-tenth of the state's onetime Mormons—equivalent to the population of Salt Lake City—were listed in the church's "address unknown file," according to the *Salt Lake Tribune*. The church recruits volunteers to try to find lost Mormons in the U.S. and Canada who may have moved, changed their last name or joined another faith. But everyone who has been baptized Mormon—usually at age eight—is included in official membership totals, which undoubtedly include some who have died.

A disaffected Mormon may formally request removal from the LDS Church, and the church may remove someone from the rolls for reasons of apostasy. But any unaffiliated Mormons who cannot be located are still counted as members until they would have reached the age of 110. Only then is their membership dropped because they are presumed dead.

The ARIS survey concluded that the Mormon Church was baptizing converts about as fast as it was losing members. That ratio was also confirmed by the study last year by Hadaway and Marler, who were given access to "proprietary" data by the church. One graph from that study (see chart) shows that from 1999 to 2004 conversions roughly equaled "defections and apostasy." As a result, more than three quarters of Mormon growth in the U.S. was due to the high Mormon birthrate, which outpaces the rate of deaths.

The question of whether the LDS Church uses social statistics to promote itself in public was posed in January on the Web site of the Mormon Social Science Association, whose ranks include Mormons, ex-Mormons and non-Mormons. The unnamed questioner asked whether the church usually reports social statistics "in a comprehensive and honest way, showing both achievements and shortcomings, or just for occasional propaganda?"

Most churches tend to emphasize positive information, observed two association members, one of them well-known sociologist Armand Mauss, an active Mormon and retired Washington State University professor. The LDS Church rarely makes public internal data about itself, but when it does, "such data will certainly be used selectively to influence the public image of the church," wrote Mauss. "If that is 'propaganda,' so be it."

Mauss, who recently taught a course on Mormonism at Claremont Graduate University, pointed to "increasing numbers of studies by social scientists" that provide glimpses of Mormon membership trends. He said that the LDS Church in England is required to report extensive data to the British government—in contrast to the situation in the U.S. "At some point," he added, "we might well see a demand for churches to release 'fair and balanced' data to the public on at least some of their activities, since churches do benefit by tax breaks."

One historian of Mormonism said she believes that it would hard for the hierarchal LDS Church to reveal more data than it has to in the wake of a much-heralded 1984 prediction by sociologist Rodney Stark that Mormonism would become the next "new world faith," the first major religion since Islam. The Mormon Church was growing rapidly in the 1970s and 1980s, and Stark projected that exponential growth rates could give Mormonism 267 million members by 2080.

"The church bought into that prediction hook, line and sinker, and made it central to its 'juggernaut' public relations," said Jan Shippo of Indianapolis, who in 1980 became the first non-Mormon president of the Mormon History Association.

Mormon sociologist Rick Phillips concurs. Apologists for the church used comments like Stark's "to substantiate Mormonism's bandwagon appeal," he stated. Speeches by church leaders cite the expansion "as evidence of the validity and legitimacy of church doctrines and programs," wrote Phillips. That assessment was in a then-unpublished paper by Phillips and quoted by editor Reid L. Neilson in a 2005 book, *The Rise of Mormonism*, a collection of Stark's articles.

While most Latter-day Saints welcomed Stark's projections, Neilson said he thinks the official church reaction has been more ambivalent—especially about Stark's reference to Mormonism as the next large world religion. The LDS Church claims that it is the true, “restored” church of Christ with additional scriptures and revelations.

Mormons want to be different, but not completely different, Neilson said. “They want to be ‘in Christianity, but not of it,’ to turn a biblical phrase,” he said. They may be flattered to be called “a distinct, discrete, internally consistent religious tradition” by Shipps or “as much a separate revelation as ever Judaism, Christianity and Islam were” by Yale scholar Harold Bloom, but embracing such a view of the faith would undercut relations with the rest of Christianity, Neilson noted.

Judaism's concept of peoplehood has a parallel with Mormonism, Shipps said in an interview. Just as there are many U.S. Jews who say they are Jewish but are not religious believers, “there are lots of nonpracticing Mormons who like to call themselves ‘DNA Mormons,’” indicating that much of Mormon culture and lifestyle are part of their nature.

Stark, a former Washington State professor who is now at Baylor University, has a lighthearted view of the criticism he's gotten over his prediction about Mormon growth and Mormonism's rise to world-faith status. He noted in *The Rise of Mormonism* that if his “conservative” estimate of growth of 30 percent every decade came true, there would be nearly 64 million Mormons in the world in 2080 (instead of the much-quoted high estimate of 267 million).

“Everyone takes the thing too seriously,” Stark told the *Salt Lake Tribune* two years ago. It was a game of “let's pretend,” he said. But he noted that if Mormon growth has slowed, “it can always speed up again.”

Yet the “uncritical acceptance of the LDS Church's membership statistics,” as sociologist Phillips put it in an article last year in the journal *Novo Religio*, gives a distorted picture of Mormon strength in relation to that of other denominations. Recent studies show that the Nazarenes, Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses and Pentecostal churches give LDS missionaries stiff competition abroad, especially in retaining converts.

“Growth stagnated in the 1990s and has topped off at about 200,000 new members per year over the last decade or so,” said Ryan Cragun, who is completing his doctoral studies at the University of Cincinnati. “Growth has fallen in many countries around the world to about the level of population growth generally, around 2 percent,” said Cragun. “The implication is that most of the new members are actually children of members,” said Cragun, an ex-Mormon who joined the University of Tampa faculty this year.

One factor in lowered growth rates, LDS officials and social scientists agree, may have been the decision by the church in 2002 to “raise the bar” for those who qualify as Mormon missionaries. That move dropped the worldwide number of missionaries from 62,000 to 51,000 in recent years, reported the *Salt Lake Tribune*.

LDS apostle M. Russell Ballard told the church's General Conference in 2002 that some Mormon teens had “the mistaken idea” they could engage in sinful behavior until they were 18, then repent and go on mission service at age 19. “This isn't a time for spiritual weaklings,” Ballard said. Church leaders wanted young men who were already “worthy, qualified, spiritually energized missionaries.”

The shift toward seeking higher-quality missionaries came as two national censuses in Latin America asked people to identify their specific religious affiliation. In 2000, Mexico tallied 205,229 Mormons ages five or older. But the LDS Church there claimed 846,931 members as of the end of 1999. “Even if one recognizes that the census figure includes only people five and older while the church numbers include infants and small children, the difference is stunning,” wrote David Clark Knowlton of Utah State Valley College in an article.

Chile's 2002 census said that 103,735 people 15 and older identified themselves as Mormon, whereas the church reported that Mormons in Chile numbered 520,202 at the end of 2001. The census reports in Mexico and Chile, after accounting for the different ages included, both listed Latter-day Saints in their nations at numbers only about 25 percent of what the church counted, according to Knowlton, a specialist in religion in Latin America.

Another specialist, Henri Gooren, formerly of Utrecht University in the Netherlands, concluded last October on the basis of his field work in Costa Rica, Guatemala and Nicaragua that "anyone joining the LDS Church in Central America had a 50 percent chance of becoming inactive in the first year." In addition, "core members" who meet all the expectations of LDS membership "made up no more than about one-quarter of all registered members."

Eventually, because of birth rates and a special Mormon focus on the region, "most Mormons will be Latin Americans by 2020," predicted Gooren, who now teaches at Oakland University in Michigan. That would occur, he said, despite the heavy study requirements and volunteer time demanded by the Mormon Church compared to the spiritually emotional Pentecostal churches and the familiar traditions of Catholic culture.

"The church knows it has a retention problem, and it experiments with [ways] to address this," said Philip Barlow, a Mormon who teaches at Hanover (Indiana) College and is co-author of the *New Historical Atlas of Religion in America*. In the United States, "perhaps less than half of those on the membership records are actively involved in the sense of attending church at least once a month," he said in an e-mail interview.

Barlow, a past president of the Mormon History Association, emphasizes that he is neither a spokesperson for nor a "disparager" of the church, but rather a scholar of religion, with Mormonism as one of his specialties. "Many LDS Church members take pride in their church's growth; some even construe it as evidence of providential approval," he said.

Yet, as far as he knows, church leaders do not claim that theirs is the fastest-growing church or make comparisons with other churches. "The Catholics, for instance, dwarf LDS growth simply by natural births."

One way to gauge the growth of the LDS, he suggested, is to note the building of Mormon chapels and temples. "The organization has careful standards about growth and activity before they expend considerable funds for these expensive buildings."

In fact, the LDS Church reported in April that its number of chapels, each of which accommodates several congregations, which share the facilities, has grown nearly 10 percent in the last five years. The Mormon Church has 6,391 chapels in the U.S. and 8,254 worldwide.

David Stewart, an LDS orthopedic surgeon in Las Vegas who did private research on LDS growth patterns for his book *Law of the Harvest*, published this year, said he does not anticipate a change in the way the church reports membership figures anytime soon. "Recognizing that most members experience periods of inactivity before returning to the fold," Stewart said, "leaders do not wish to further alienate already disaffected members by labeling them inactive."