

Global Mormonism and its growing pains

Most LDS members are not from the United States. The church's leadership and practices are another story.

by [Philip Jenkins](#) in the [April 7, 2021](#) issue



TRIPLE TAKE: Mormon temples on three continents—in Oklahoma City (left), Porto Alegre, Brazil (center), and Suva, Fiji (right). (l to r: © Timothy Rollins / Ricardo630 / Bhaskar Rao via Creative Commons)

Like many churches, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is being transformed by the rapid growth of its membership in the Global South. But with the LDS Church, that shift is all the more striking because the theology and traditions of Mormonism are so firmly bound up with the territory of the United States itself, where the narrative told by the Book of Mormon reputedly occurred. How does the church deal with globalization?

The LDS Church officially counts some 16.6 million believers worldwide, of whom just 6.7 million, or 40 percent, live in the United States. Another 6.9 million live

elsewhere in the Americas, and growth is marked in both Africa and Asia.

The same distribution emerges if we look at the temples that are essential to LDS ritual life. In 2019 there were more temples outside the United States than inside, and that trend is set to continue. Last October, the church announced the construction of six new temples: one in Utah and five outside the United States (in Guatemala, Brazil, Bolivia, and the Pacific island states of Kiribati and Vanuatu). A church once seen as quintessentially American has gone global and will be ever more so.

With this change has come a range of issues and controversies that are all too familiar to countless other denominations. In the Mormon instance, these have prevented the church's already substantial growth from developing into a still more explosive expansion. I will draw heavily on the excellent new *Palgrave Handbook of Global Mormonism* (2020), a rich and diverse collection of essays edited by R. Gordon Shepherd, A. Gary Shepherd, and Ryan T. Cragun. (The interpretations offered here are my own.)

One perpetual source of debate is inculturation, where Mormons stand apart from most denominations in their insistence that congregations worldwide follow norms and worship styles derived from the United States—the same musical instruments, the same hymns, the same attitudes toward bodily movement during worship. Mormons are extremely sensitive to any hint of syncretism and reject anything that might be seen as borrowed from older pagan ways. That is a particular issue in Africa, where the lack of inculturation has limited potential LDS growth, but it also affects other societies, such as the Maori of New Zealand, where cultural pride is very strong. In everyday life, individual members are encouraged to dress in approved American styles, inevitably giving the church a foreign stamp. The one-size-fits-all approach strongly applies to architecture as well, in the building of temples as well as of individual churches.

The issue of centralization is also problematic as the LDS Church globalizes but the highest levels of its leadership, based in Salt Lake City, remain White, male, and American (and commonly elderly). This is far more true than in other bodies, even notably conservative ones such as the Roman Catholic Church.

Traditionally, the LDS Church has loved to measure its growth through statistics. But as LDS observers admit frankly, membership figures conceal serious problems with

the retention of new members. Many drop out of active commitment within a few months or a year, less over theological quibbles than over the church's distinctive cultural demands—often over the prohibition of coffee, tea, and alcohol. That issue affects the church worldwide, but it is much more acute in Global

South contexts, where new converts cannot expect the solid community support and reinforcement they would receive in US contexts. Throughout Latin America, official membership counts differ widely from the number of active and practicing believers, and ex-Mormons are a sizable social category.

Obviously, the church has many positives to report, and in some ways, Mormons actually benefit from their differences from mainstream churches. For decades, their missionaries have built effectively on the idea that the Book of Mormon represented a distinctive revelation to the New World, and visual materials show the resurrected Christ preaching to audiences in appropriate settings, using Mesoamerican pyramids as a backdrop. That has a special impact in modern-day Central and South America. In practical terms, the church benefits from the often astonishing qualities of its social ministries and the support offered to members in distress.

Mormonism is also associated with a rich body of stories and customs that easily lend themselves to local adaptation, and we often read about various Global South congregations trying to evolve their own particular forms of religious life. But conflicts with the church's centralized authorities inevitably arise.

Mormon expansion worldwide is an exciting story, and there is no doubt that we are seeing the early stages of a sizable global church. But currently, it does pose long-standing debates over culture and inculturation in a particularly stark form.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Mormon growing pains."