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## Reaching the Nations: International Church Growth Almanac

Eric Eliason

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*Reaching the Nations: International Church Growth Almanac, 2014 Edition, Volume I: The Americas, Oceania, and Europe and Reaching the Nations: International Church Growth Almanac, 2014 Edition, Volume II: Asia and Africa*, by David G. Stewart Jr. and Matthew Martinich (Henderson, Nev.: Cumorah Foundation, 2013).

Since the *Deseret News Church Almanac* stopped publishing in 2012, David G. Stewart's publications have become the only ready in-depth resource for country-by-country statistical information on the membership of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. And Stewart's publications exceed what the former publication offered: they accessibly present numbers and graphs that show activity, retention, and growth rates for countries around the world. The authors also give *CIA Fact Book*-style country profiles and examine LDS growth trends and prospects for missionary work in each country.

Stewart was one of the first to make widely known the disparity between the membership numbers in the Church and the rates of self-identification as Mormon. In many countries, as few as 20 to 30 percent of baptized members call themselves Mormon when participating in sociological phone surveys. Of course, Church membership claims are entirely in keeping with the Church's covenant theology that people who have made baptismal promises are still beholden to them even if they decide to "check out" for a time. The Mormon Newsroom reminds members that "the Church cautions against overemphasis on growth statistics," but those who remain enthusiastic about dramatic LDS Church growth may not realize that the similarly fast-growing Seventh-day Adventists claim only people in pews on Saturday, and Jehovah's Witnesses claim

only those who report completing a rigorous ten hours per month of proselytizing. By these or similar standards, where would the LDS Church rank in terms of growth? There is an oft-repeated claim that the LDS Church is the fastest-growing church in the world, and this claim faces a challenge by these two other similarly-sized American-born new religious movements—not to mention the percentage growth claims that could be made by new, millions-strong Asian religions, such as Cao Dai, Bahá'í, and Tenrikyo, and the absolute number growth claims of far larger movements such as Pentecostalism and Islam.

Stewart's overall picture shows an LDS faith holding its own as a percentage of world population, and he gives a few examples, such as Mongolia, Vanuatu, and West Africa, that show truly dramatic sustained growth in active members and Church units. In many countries, especially in Latin America, poor retention rates hamper the growth of wards and stakes. Stewart uses the growth of Church units, rather than that of raw membership numbers, to indicate how many active, self-identifying Mormons there are in the world. Running a ward or stake requires a certain minimum number of reliably active Relief Society members and priesthood holders. Using this measure, Stewart finds dozens of countries that have shown thousands of new members over recent years, but little growth in numbers of Church units.

The authors provide numerous tips to help increase convert growth and retention. Perhaps ironically, the Church's apparent "go slow" policy in West Africa—which requires long evidence of attendance before baptism and focuses on building functional Church units and leadership, rather than just running up the baptismal count—has helped produce some of the most

dramatic Church unit growth in the world. This does not surprise Stewart, because his research-based prescriptions for increased growth follow this “go slow” model.

It is unclear how well received Stewart’s ideas are in the Missionary Department in Salt Lake City. His suggestions may be exactly the right course for those churches with robust growth as their only priority, but the Church also seems committed to expending limited resources on reactivation (by definition less useful in growing church numbers than proselytizing for new members), redeeming the dead, and retaining its members by investing vast time and personnel resources in youth and adult programs designed to build faith and by extension prevent LDS disaffiliation. Other factors may be involved: Does the Church simply send missionaries to whatever countries show the most potential for growth, or do they also focus on countries with financial and political stability? Does pioneer heritage, presumed Book of Mormon geography, “blood of Israel” considerations, and eschatological beliefs drive resource allocation?

For any serious Church growth statistics nerd, these volumes are not only indispensable; they are now the only game in town. These publications appear to be a self-financed labor of love, written by an orthopedic surgeon assisted by a clinical psychology graduate student. It would be a mistake to dismiss these publications by pointing out that Stewart and Martinich are not professionally trained demographers, mis-siologists, or sociologists. Stewart and Martinich have done their homework in these areas. At present, they stand virtually alone by publishing serious work in what could be a much more well-developed area of study.

—Eric Eliason

*Diary of Two Mad Black Mormons: Finding the Lord’s Lessons in Everyday Life*, by Zandra Vranes and Tamu Smith (Salt Lake City: Ensign Peak, 2014).

Zandra Vranes and Tamu Smith met through Genesis, a support group for black Mormons. As they moved to separate states, they created their blog *Sistas in Zion* to keep in touch, but it soon grew in popularity and they’ve been “chattin’ about church ever since” (xiii). Vranes and Smith, the sistas in Zion, have become very well known on the Mormon blogging scene and now co-host Sistas in Zion Radio. *The Diary of Two Mad Black Mormons* is their first book. Together they have sought to document their experiences of faith and humor as members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

This book contains entries from their blog that deal with themes of faith, courage, family, and service. They do not write specifically about race, although their life experiences come out in their writing. Especially poignant is a story in which one sista learned that letting go is not a sign of weakness as she finally forgave a boy who had assaulted her years before. As she changed her thought process from seeking revenge to seeking the Lord, she realized that forgiveness is not about winning or losing, but that “letting go means living in God’s promise” (141). Their writing style is highly personal and revealing, and their entries include entertaining childhood experiences, heart-wrenching essays, and uplifting gospel musings.

Though not explicitly connected, *Diary of Two Mad Black Mormons* follows closely the approach of the Church’s “I’m a Mormon” campaign, which might be seen as an answer to a recent trend: audiences today are often more open to the voices of ordinary people than to institutional messaging.