

Alternative Christianities: Mormons, Seventh-day Adventists, and Jehovah's Witnesses

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Introduction

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), Seventh-day Adventists (Adventists), and Jehovah's Witnesses (Witnesses) are three of the most successful American religious exports. All three groups started in the United States and have now expanded internationally, with a presence in most countries around the world. They are prominent in Latin America, where they now have millions of members, from Mexico to Chile. In this chapter we describe their origins, explain their motivations for international expansion—emphasizing their interest in Latin America—and detail their efforts and current status there. In describing their history and development in Latin America, we discuss their differing motivations, proselytizing styles and techniques, targeted converts, and examine how these differences have resulted in varying outcomes.

Origins and Proselytizing Motivations

The oldest of the three religious groups is the Mormon Church, which was founded in upstate New York in 1830 by Joseph Smith, Jr. Proselytizing efforts began immediately, with initial outreach to Canada, and then to Britain in 1837¹. As a millennialist religion, Mormons feel an urgency to spread their faith. They believe that the “fullness of the gospel” of Jesus Christ, which, as “the Latter-day Saints,” is theirs exclusively, and must be preached in every nation (Matthew 24:1–4) before Christ will return to usher in the millennium². This sense of urgency has led Mormons to evangelize in nearly every country around the world.

However, a number of factors have combined to tether that urgency. Early in their history a decision was made by the leadership to encourage “gathering” the Saints in Zion—a physical location—rather than “establishing” congregations throughout the world³. As a result, Mormons did not develop strong footings in most of the countries where they proselytized until much later than the Adventists or the Witnesses. Additionally, once their polygamy was made public in 1853, Mormons became engaged in significant struggles in the United States to ensure their survival, which dampened their outreach efforts⁴. It was not until the struggles over polygamy were resolved in the early twentieth century that outreach efforts were re-emphasized, which can be seen in their statistics.

People of Native American ancestry have been of particular interest to Mormon evangelistic efforts. This is because the Book of Mormon, the primary book of scripture that distinguishes Mormonism from other faiths, purports to be a history of Native Americans: it claims they are the descendants of Jews who left Israel before the invasion by Babylonians around 600 bce⁵. Missionaries were sent to Native American tribes within six months of the founding of Mormonism, following revelations received by Joseph Smith that are recorded in the Mormon Doctrine and Covenants (D&C 19:26–27; 28:8; 32:2)⁶. While today many Mormon apologists, and increasingly the LDS Church itself, have, on the basis of anthropological, archaeological, and genetic evidence, distanced themselves from the idea that the Book of Mormon details the history of Native Americans⁷, it is clear that there was—and for many Mormons, remains—a belief that Native Americans are the living descendants of the people described in the Book of Mormon⁸. Early outreach to Indigenous peoples was driven by an interest in sharing with them what Mormons

believed was a history of their ancestors⁹. Later outreach to Latin America may not have been driven by an urgency to convert the “Lamanites,” but Mormons believed that they had a special message for the Amerindians throughout the Americas—a unique record of their ancestors (though this is less emphasized today). This was used as a tool for proselytizing to those of Native American ancestry until recently.

Adventists were slow to launch an outreach program. They traced their origins to the “Great Disappointment” of 1844, when Christ did not return as founder William Miller had predicted, though they continued initially to see Christ’s return as imminent. Since only Millerites were eligible for translation, further outreach was pointless¹⁰. However, when others sought to join them, they were eventually persuaded that the door to salvation had not closed, and began to publish *Present Truth* and to recruit others around them¹¹. Their initial small numbers made it seem impossible to spread their message abroad. They comforted themselves by seeing immigration to the United States and Canada as God’s solution to their problem of taking the gospel to “all the world,” as Jesus had commanded: he was guiding representatives from “every nation” to the United States to hear God’s final warning message¹². When Adventists organized formally between 1861 and 1863, they made no endeavor to establish a foreign mission board to evangelize abroad¹³.

However, converts with foreign ties and roots proved eager to share their new beliefs with friends and relatives abroad: many sent Adventist publications. Consequently, church leaders received requests for teachers, and they began to see it as their responsibility to respond. In 1869 they created a Foreign Mission Society to respond to such requests when there seemed to be significant interest in hearing the Adventist message¹⁴. Within a few years, through their prophet, Ellen White, Adventist leaders came to understand that theirs was a mission to the whole world¹⁵. Some of the strongest early calls for help came from people in Switzerland, who were so eager that they sent a delegate to Church headquarters to press their request. The General Conference responded by sending the first missionary there in 1874¹⁶.

Adventists rapidly spread their activity to Germany and then many other parts of Europe, from Britain to Russia, Norway to Cyprus, since so many of their converts had roots in that continent. However, even as they spread throughout Europe, they also responded to requests from Egypt, Australia and New Zealand, South Africa, and parts of Latin America, the Caribbean, Asia, the South Pacific, and Africa. By 1900 they had established beachheads on every continent, and 20 percent of their members lived outside North America¹⁷. Expansion prompted Adventism to reshape its structure in 1903, when it formally created regional headquarters where decisions could be made promptly. Germany, Britain, Australia, and South Africa joined North America as “home bases” responsible for finding missionaries for particular regions¹⁸. These launched missions in rapid succession, as requests multiplied and Adventists sought to blanket the world. By 1921, 50 percent of Adventists were located outside North America¹⁹. Over time they extended gradually into poorer countries. Their numerical growth remained relatively slow, for demand in premodern societies was modest, but the service provided by their educational and medical institutions gained them credibility and positioned them for rapid growth when demand accelerated during modernization in other decades²⁰.

Charles Taze Russell, founder of the Bible Students, a renovationist group, began to spread his ideas in 1879 through the magazine *Zion’s Watch Tower and Herald of Christ’s Presence* (“Watchtower”), early publications of what would come to be known as the Jehovah’s Witnesses²¹. He also published a six-volume series known as *Studies in the Scriptures*, often referred to as *Millennial Dawns* or *Dawns*, which he considered to be key to understanding the Bible. Russell incorporated Zion’s Watch Tower Tract Society

in 1884; the name was later changed to the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania (WTBTS). Its purpose, according to its 1884 charter, was to spread Bible truths through books, magazines, tracts, pamphlets, and other legal means²². Initially, there was little evangelism by the membership. Russell used colporteurs (bible sellers) to sell his books and to solicit subscriptions to the Watchtower²³. He also used “Pilgrims,” or traveling preachers who were WTBTS employees, to give talks at facilities rented by local congregations for that purpose. His weekly sermons were syndicated and, at one time, were published in over 3,000 newspapers, reaching an estimated 15 million people²⁴. By the time of his death in 1916, Russell’s Bible Student movement had adherents in about ten different countries, including the United States.

Joseph Franklin Rutherford, the Society’s legal counsel, assumed the presidency after Russell’s death. Rutherford’s ascension to the presidency led to conflict and eventually to schism. He advocated centralized control over the Bible Students and instituted organizational changes, such as eliminating Russell’s practice of local church governance. Rutherford required that congregational leaders be appointed by him. These and other changes resulted in numerous schisms. Eight Bible Study groups whose beliefs and practices were more closely aligned to those of Russell were formed. Most of these groups are still in existence today. To distinguish the segment that continued to follow him, Rutherford renamed them Jehovah’s Witnesses in 1931.

Entrance into Latin America

While Mormon evangelism in Latin America was sporadic before the twentieth century, about 4,000 Mormons migrated to Mexico in order to avoid prosecution over polygamy after the passage of the 1885 Edmunds Act, which outlawed the practice of polygamy in the United States²⁵. Many of these settlers returned to the United States after Mormons discontinued the practice of polygamy in 1890 and banned it formally in 1905²⁶. Some efforts at evangelism began in Mexico during these years, but more extensive and widespread efforts were delayed until the 1950s²⁷. Mormons began formal proselytizing efforts in many countries later than Adventists and Witnesses because of these conditions and their policy of refraining from outreach in countries until they received formal recognition²⁸.

Adventists were motivated to evangelize in Latin America by what they now saw as their God-given commission to broadcast their message globally. Since they believed that they alone were God’s “remnant” and the preaching of all other groups was incomplete and thus false, Adventists proceeded with energy and commitment. Members acting independently of the Foreign Missions Board to “share the Adventist Message” initiated first contacts with almost every country in Latin America. Some had personal ties to Latin America; others made it their focus. Some chose to become “ship missionaries,” persuading ship captains to take a parcel of Adventist publications and drop it on a wharf, in the hope that they would be found and distributed. For example, a resident of British Guiana, seeing such a parcel in 1883, shared the contents with friends, some of whom were persuaded, wrote for more, and requested a teacher; the Mission Board responded by sending a pastor and a colporteur, who arrived in 1887.

In other instances, immigrants converted in the United States, then returned home to share their new faith. One of these returned to the Bay Islands of Honduras in 1885. When a missionary followed her there in 1891, and a church-wide offering provided him with a 50-foot schooner, that vessel became the means whereby Adventism spread to English-speaking coastal and island communities from there as far as Venezuela. Other US immigrants sent Adventist books to their relatives and friends with similar results—for example, a parcel sent to Jamaica in 1889 resulted in requests for more publications that drew

colporteurs there. A pastor followed in 1893, and the first congregation was organized in 1894; by 1903 there were 1,200 members on the island. In other instances, people moved from the United States to various Latin American countries as self-supporting missionaries, founding medical facilities and English-language schools, selling books, or working at other occupations and evangelizing in their spare time.

Adventists were not prepared linguistically for widespread work in Spanish and Portuguese-speaking countries when its new Foreign Missions Board began operations in 1889. While colporteurs were the first Adventists to enter many countries, they were initially limited because Adventists had no publications in Spanish or Portuguese until 1899 and 1900. Consequently, they targeted English-, German-, and French-speaking people, depending on the country. Contacts made through German publications were the engine leading to the founding of the first Adventist churches in Argentina (1894), Chile (1895), and Brazil (1896); English publications in Honduras (1891), Jamaica, and Mexico City (1893); and French publications in Haiti (1907). Later, colporteurs bearing Spanish publications opened up Cuba (1905), Venezuela (1911), Ecuador (1912), and the Dominican Republic (1917) ²⁹.

Adventism grew fastest initially in the English-speaking Caribbean (Jamaica). German-speaking converts laid an important foundation for Adventism in southern Brazil, Argentina, and Chile. Once Spanish and Portuguese publications became available, Adventism initially grew fastest in Puerto Rico, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic, and later in Mexico, Central America, and South America, especially Peru, southern Mexico, and Brazil. By 1920 Adventism in that region had clearly become Latin³⁰. Adventists were established in almost all of Latin America decades ahead of both Mormons and Witnesses: once established in a country, they persisted and grew. By 1940, when they were active in all countries except French Guiana, their official baptized membership was 59,940, compared with 5,153 Mormons (4,307 of whom were in Mexico), and 1,838 Witness “publishers” ³¹.

The entrance of Witnesses to Latin America was, like that of the Adventists, not due to a special theological urgency, but rather to the general desire to spread their teachings and was driven largely by colporteur and pilgrim activity. Congregations established during the Russell years remained small. They only began to grow in number when Rutherford emphasized the idea that membership included an obligation to participate in the distribution of his books and to use them as source material for teaching others about what the Bible had to say. Colporteurs were renamed Pioneers in 1931³². Special Pioneer service was instituted in 1937³³. They were called that because they entered new territory, and were expected to work full time in field service³⁴. Branch offices in one country often had responsibility for the work in new mission territories and sent pioneers to develop congregations there.

Table 22.1 illustrates the entry into Latin America of Mormons, Adventists, and Witnesses. For each country, two dates are provided—the date when a country was entered, and when a permanent presence was established there. Initial entry includes events such as a member of the group moving there or a missionary making a visit. An established presence is typically some sort of permanent organization, such as the first organized congregation or mission in that country. We include both dates because entry into a country is more of a process than an event, as it takes time for a religious group to gain a foothold.

Table 22.1 – Year of Initial Entry, Year Established, and 2011 Population of Mormons, Adventists, and Witnesses in Latin America

Country	Mormons Initial Entry	Mormons Established	Mormons 2011 Population	Adventists Initial Entry	Adventists Established	Adventists 2011 Population	Witnesses Initial Entry	Witnesses Established	Witnesses 2011 Population
Argentina	1924	1925	412,095	1890	1894	112,907	1924	1924	141,301
Belize	1980	1983	4,240	1885	1902	37,213	1933	1944	2,151
Bolivia	1961	1964	182,964	1897	1907	79,997	1924	1946	20,770
Brazil	1913	1930	1,209,974	1879	1896	1,309,791	1923	1924	720,896
Chile	1851	1956	577,716	1885	1895	113,022	1924	1933	71,128
Colombia	1960	1966	180,526	1901	1922	295,852	1929	1945	148,767
Costa Rica	1944	1950	41,353	1900	1903	66,516	1900	1941	26,264
Cuba	-	-	50	1903	1905	32,211	1913	1935	93,254
Dominican Republic	~1965	1978	124,435	1907	1917	284,789	1945	1945	32,876
Ecuador	1965	1966	211,165	1904	1912	46,896	1934	1947	73,500
El Salvador	1948	1951	114,674	1915	1916	210,272	~1931	1945	37,081
French Guiana	1989	1989	362	1944	1959	2,272	1947	1960	2,079
Guatemala	1942	1948	239,734	1908	1913	232,996	1932	1945	30,512
Guyana	1988	1989	5,415	1883	1887	58,323	~1914	1923	2,562
Haiti	1977	1980	18,165	1879	1907	374,399	1930	1944	16,412
Honduras	1952	1953	154,207	1887	1891	249,497	1930	1945	19,482
Jamaica	1853	1970	5,580	~1889	1894	263,168	1899	1924	11,866
Mexico	1874	1879	1,317,700	1891	1893	693,450	1910	1930	724,690
Nicaragua	1953	1959	80,605	1892	1914	118,747	1946	1946	22,633
Panama	1940	1941	48,669	1897	1901	96,999	~1909	1941	13,466
Paraguay	1939	1948	84,806	1892	1907	11,845	1924	1939	8,557
Peru	~1956	1956	527,759	1898	1905	355,873	1932	1947	108,264
Puerto Rico	1945	1970	21,174	1901	1903	37,442	1907	1941	25,814
Suriname	1969	1988	1,323	1894	1940	4,385	1918	1946	2,464
Uruguay	~1925	1944	99,758	1891	1896	7,441	1924	1938	11,447
Venezuela	1966	1966	157,795	1907	1911	251,979	1924	1946	120,533
Total			5,822,244			5,348,282			2,488,769

Patterns varied from group to group. In general, Adventists were the earliest to become established, followed by Witnesses and then Mormons. Adventists were established in twenty-four countries between 1887 and 1922; Suriname and French Guiana followed later. Although Mormons entered Mexico before Adventists entered any country, they did not enter another country until 1925. Witnesses, after establishing themselves in four countries in 1923–1924, expanded rapidly between 1930 and 1947, when they added twenty-one more countries. After entering Mexico in 1879, Mormons added two more countries in 1925 and 1930, and then twenty-two more countries fairly steadily over forty-eight years from 1941 to 1989. They finally became established in Cuba in 2012.

The Current Situation in Latin America

Understanding the current situation of Mormons, Adventists, and Witnesses in Latin America requires a clear understanding of a number of factors³⁵ but two of those are particularly important. First, the three groups differ in how they conduct outreach and evangelism. Second, they each count members in markedly different ways that make it extremely difficult to compare their membership statistics. We discuss these in turn.

Outreach and Evangelism

The fit of outreach strategies with the cultures where they are employed has an important influence on growth. Both Mormons and Witnesses primarily use door-to-door approaches as their prime strategy, their goal being to arrange studies with the occupants that will result in baptisms. These are essentially “one-size-fits-all” approaches. Adventists, by contrast, employ a variety of approaches.

Mormon proselytizing efforts have changed over time, but today they are uniform throughout the world. Their earliest missionaries were often married adult men, who typically traveled alone, preaching to those who would listen and relying upon the generosity of those they encountered for room and board³⁶. Over time, this pattern shifted, and by the mid-twentieth century, Mormon outreach was largely conducted by young, unmarried men, for specified periods of time (usually two years)³⁷. In addition to formalizing who served missions, the approach that missionaries used to share their message was also regulated, leading to uniformity in how missionaries contacted people, shared Mormon beliefs with them, and even in what missionaries wore³⁸. Several additional modifications have occurred more recently. Young Mormon women have been allowed to serve missions, though at a slightly older age (until 2012 it was 21 but is now 19; for men it was 19 until 2012 but is now 18)³⁹. Female Mormon missionaries serve for eighteen months instead of twenty-four. Additionally, elderly, retired couples are allowed to serve missions.

Adventist colporteurs also originally went door to door. However, Adventist strategies have always been much more varied. Where interest emerged, this usually led to “reaping” meetings and ultimately to Bible studies in homes or classes that usually lasted many months. Adventists typically opened grade schools soon after they organized churches, and often clinics. Their purpose was to meet the needs of people, to demonstrate and teach their lifestyle and beliefs, and to anchor the communities they formed. Schools were open to the children of members, to found them in the faith, and also to others, so they might spread their faith. High schools, colleges, and hospitals were added as Adventism expanded. In 2011 Adventists had 29 universities and colleges, including two with medical and dental schools, 603 secondary schools, and 1,060 primary schools in Latin America; student enrollment totaled 403,101. They also sponsored 27 hospitals and 17 clinics⁴⁰. Latin America was the first region in the developing world where Adventists transferred local leadership to nationals. In the late 1930s such leaders initiated a major shift in

evangelistic focus, from biblical prophecies to family, personal, and social health benefits⁴¹. The number of baptisms subsequently doubled, and the new approach spread widely.

Over time, Adventists became more eager to experiment with new outreach methods. They began regular radio broadcasts in the United States in 1930, and this was copied rapidly in Latin America. They began using television shortly after World War II. In 1971 they began broadcasting on short-wave radio. Meanwhile, their public evangelism became increasingly diverse, ranging from local meetings featuring pastors or laypeople as speakers to international satellite transmissions with instantaneous translation of professional evangelists⁴². The Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA), formed in 1956 and funded largely by governments, became a significant humanitarian presence in Latin America⁴³. In 1966, Adventists established an Institute of World Mission in recognition of the high demand that had appeared in many former colonies. The goal was to train missionaries to be culturally aware, in contrast to their earlier “one-size-fits-all” approach⁴⁴.

The trajectory of expansion for Jehovah’s Witnesses was somewhat different from that of Mormons and Adventists. The initial focus of the founder of the Bible Students was on outreach, though it may have been more about selling books and pamphlets than gaining converts. Even so, the early Bible Students relied heavily on colporteurs and then pioneers to spread their message. Over time, the focus shifted to having members do the proselytizing, and this eventually—by the 1940s—became a requirement. Once the name was changed to Witnesses, they also employed radio and other media advertising during the mid-twentieth century and opened a school specifically to train missionaries, but their focus has remained on door-to-door proselytizing by the lay members.

Witnesses are probably best known for their door-to-door ministry, though the other two groups also utilize this strategy. The goal of these efforts for all three groups is to start studies and gain new converts. Each group provides its own extra-biblical study materials and then draws selectively on scripture for proof texts. Adventist and Witness studies typically last longer than do Mormon studies; Mormons tend to urge baptism before converts are aware of some of the more central and peculiar beliefs⁴⁵.

All three groups also hold weekly services geared toward strengthening and reinforcing the beliefs of the members, but these services differ substantially. Mormons have a three-hour block of meetings on Sundays (two hours as of 2019) with three components—a combined meeting for all members that includes sermons from lay members with singing; the distribution of the sacrament or Lord’s Supper; and two Sunday School blocks, divided by age and sex, that alternate weekly as of 2019. Children attend the sacrament service with their parents, but are taught separately during the other two blocks; each block is roughly one hour. There are additional activities throughout the week as well as expectations that members will read scriptures and will study approved materials produced by the group—like their magazines and books—on a regular basis.

Adventist services—on Saturday, not Sunday—include a thirty- to forty-minute sermon, with hymns and choir or solo music. There are also Sabbath School classes, with divisions for all age groups. Adventists are encouraged to independently study approved materials, like the Sabbath School Quarterly, which explores a particular theme for a quarter. For Witnesses, each Sunday there is a thirty-minute public talk given by a male Elder, as well as an hour-long Watchtower question-and-answer study of a recent Watchtower article. The ones who answer do so by paraphrasing the printed answers. This question-and-answer format began in the late 1930s⁴⁶.

Witness services differ from those of Mormons in that there is no separation by age; children attend the same meetings as adults and are expected to be active in door-to-door ministry, except during school hours. There is an annual, rather than weekly, distribution of the Lord's Supper, shared by a select few. Witness services are also unique in that Elders are not allowed to deviate from the authorized lesson plans. Mormon and Adventist instructors are also discouraged from doing so, but often draw upon external sources to supplement lessons.

There are additional similarities and differences among the three religions. Witnesses are encouraged to restrict their association to other Witnesses⁴⁷, to not engage in "worldly" activities, and to spend as much time as possible in the preaching work⁴⁸. For Adventists and Mormons, who are not told specifically to distance themselves from non-members, their lifestyles—that is, food and activity prohibitions—often have the same effect of encouraging strong in-group ties. There is also no requirement for regular, formal evangelism for lay Adventists and Mormons in order to be considered a member of the religion. All three religious groups encourage members to marry members.

All three groups follow up on members who reduce their attendance at weekly meetings, but Witnesses are the most strident. Should someone miss a meeting, another Witness will call and inquire as to why. If meetings are frequently skipped or the hours spent in the preaching work slacken, Elders will make "shepherding" visits to ferret out the problem and see what can be done to rekindle interest. All three religions police their members with the threat of "dis-fellowshipping," or excommunication, based on adherence to the teachings and policies of the religion. Members who violate moral codes—or for Witnesses, those who question the leadership, smoke, or work for the military—and are not repentant can be "dis-fellowshipped" or excommunicated. This practice has declined in recent years among both Mormons and Adventists, but is still strictly enforced by Witnesses. Witnesses are also the only group to encourage shunning of dis-fellowshipped or disaffected members - a practice that is, among other Witness actions, heavily criticized by former members⁴⁹.

Women form a majority of the active members of all three groups, so the openness of each group to women's input and activity has an important impact on their strategies and growth. The Witnesses' governing body is exclusively male, and women are not eligible to lead congregations or, since 1986, attend Gilead classes, which offer advanced training in preaching and evangelization, unless their husbands are also enrolled; however, they are prominent among those witnessing door to door. In 2013 the School for Kingdom Evangelizers was established, which does accept single women⁵⁰.

Likewise, most Mormon missionaries are men, but women also serve. Women are absent from the highest levels of the Mormon hierarchy and from congregational leadership, but they play major roles in maintaining congregations locally⁵¹. Here, the Adventists are the exception that proves the rule. The Adventist prophet Ellen White was a woman, and during her lifetime women frequently served as officers, pastors, and evangelists. However, from 1915, when White died, through 1970 women were pushed into the background. Since then, however, Adventists have gradually made more room for women once again. Women have been appointed as elders of congregations since the 1970s; lay-women increasingly conduct evangelistic series in Latin America; the number of women attending seminaries and serving as pastors, chaplains, and departmental leaders has expanded steadily⁵².

Membership Statistics

Today, all three religious groups have a significant presence in Latin America, with membership totals listed in Table 22.1. However, these data are not readily comparable, for each group uses different criteria in counting adherents.

Mormons count baptized members, but also “children of record”—younger children blessed as infants in a church ceremony. In the United States, these may make up as much as 15 percent of the membership⁵³. The age of baptism for children raised in Mormon families is set firmly at eight, and the names of children who reach the age of nine without being baptized are removed. However, Mormons make no attempt to remove missing and inactive adult members from their rolls, and the whereabouts of large numbers of listed members are unknown. Indeed, it is Mormon policy to retain the names of missing members on their rolls until they reach the age of 110, to avoid the risk of removing any who may be active though apparently missing. Most of these are undoubtedly inactive or dead, and many likely no longer consider themselves to be Mormons⁵⁴.

Adventists count all baptized members but omit unbaptized children. The age at which they baptize their children varies widely with geographic region; in Latin America, the typical age for baptism is between ten and twelve⁵⁵. It is Adventist policy to purge the rolls of members who no longer claim to be Adventists or who cannot be located. They believe that accurate statistics are important to their credibility. When it became clear early in the twenty-first century that membership rolls had become exaggerated during previous decades when rapid growth had been the main focus, the General Conference launched a campaign reminding local organizations to audit their rolls to ensure their accuracy. Such efforts led to substantial decreases in reported membership in some countries. For instance, Adventist leaders in Brazil removed the names of 750,000 missing and inactive members from their rolls between 2006 and 2010, while membership in Bolivia and Ecuador was reduced by more than 50 percent.

Witnesses use the most stringent criterion, counting only “publishers”—those reporting regular witnessing to non-members. They exclude baptized members who are not witnessing regularly, but include both children and converts entering the ranks of publishers shortly before baptism⁵⁶. Their Yearbook lists both “peak” and “average” publishers. This study uses the latter because they are more representative.

Because of these differences in data collection, and the fact that member retention differs among the three groups, it is instructive to compare each group’s official statistics with the number of people identifying with them in available census reports from the region⁵⁷. While census respondents do not necessarily attend worship or involve themselves in other activities of the group, their responses do indicate an attachment to the particular religious identity. Moreover, unlike the groups’ official rolls, these are strictly comparable. Table 22.2 compares recent census reports with official membership/ publishers, using data for the same year as the census in each case.

Relevant census data are available for only seven countries in the region. The data from the seven census reports show similar patterns to a remarkable degree. This is revealed in the similarity of the ratios between the census and official totals for each group in each country. A ratio of 1.00 would indicate that the totals by both measures are equal. However, each of the three religious groups has very different ratios, which occur consistently in all censuses. From these we derived a ratio for each group, derived by weighting all available data.

Table 22.2 – Comparison of Census-and Religion-Provided Data on membership for Mormons, Adventists, and Witnesses

Country and Year	Mormons			Adventists			Witnesses		
	Census	Religion-provided	Ratio	Census	Religion-provided	Ratio	Census	Religion-provided	Ratio
Mexico, 2010	332,329	1,234,545	0.27	687,503	674,755	1.02	1,614,202	696,749	2.32
Brazil, 2010	226,509	1,138,740	0.20	1,561,071	1,267,738	1.23	1,393,208	706,699	1.97
Belize, 2010	1,293	3,852	0.34	16,665	35,945	0.46	5,114	2,041	2.51
Jamaica, 2011	322,228	263,168	1.22	50,849	11,866	4.29			
Paraguay, 2002	9,374	53,420	0.18	7,804	11,468	0.68	11,805	7,138	1.65
Chile, 2002	103,735	527,972	0.20	119,455	60,701	1.97			
Nicaragua, 2005	42,587	17,596	2.42						
Totals	673,240	2,958,529	0.23	2,595,271	2,253,074	1.15	3,237,220	1,502,790	2.15

The ratio for Witnesses was 2.15, indicating that more than twice as many people identify as Witnesses in the census data than are listed as publishers. These data show that many who are not active publishers continue to identify as Witnesses, at least when they are asked their religion. They also include children who are not yet publishing, and also probably indicate that some people who have studied at length with Witnesses identify with the group without (yet) becoming publishers or being baptized.

The Adventist ratio, 1.15, is partially due to censuses counting young children who do not appear on church rolls. However, given the youth and fertility of Adventist members in Latin America, we would expect the ratio to be somewhat higher than 1.15. However, the overall ratio hides two of the ratios included in Table 22.2, those of Belize and Paraguay, where their official memberships are clearly overstated relative to the census data. This discrepancy indicates that Adventist leaders there, as in some other countries, have not yet audited their rolls.

The Mormon ratio is very low, 0.23. This indicates that the number of people identifying as Mormons in these censuses is only about one-quarter of those on the church rolls. Since Mormons count the young children of members among their official membership statistics, this suggests that findings by researchers of rapid losses of up to 75 percent of people baptized in some countries of Latin America are in fact widespread⁵⁸. The Mormon ratio stands in sharp contrast to those of Witnesses and Adventists, indicating that Mormon membership data are grossly inflated.

If we assume that the ratios derived from comparing religious identity as found in these seven census reports with the official data also hold for the other countries in the region, we can estimate new total adherents for each of the groups for the entire region in 2011 based on the data in Table 22.1. Witnesses rise sharply from 2,488,769 publishers to 5,350,853 adherents; Mormons decline dramatically from 5,822,244 listed members to only 1,339,116 adherents; and Adventists increase more modestly from 5,348,282 to 6,150,524.

What kinds of people do each of the religious groups pursue, whom do they baptize, and whom of these do they retain? Contrasting social profiles helps to explain the dynamics behind the data presented heretofore. In the section that follows, we draw upon data from the detailed reports of the Mexican censuses of 2000 and 2010 to further examine the characteristics of these three religious groups.

Although all groups have adherents covering the entire range from no education to university graduate and beyond, their concentrations differ greatly: Mormons are the best educated, Adventists the least. In 2010, 48.2 percent of Adventists had either no or only some elementary education; 48.2 percent of Witnesses had completed elementary or had some secondary education; and 58.0 percent of Mormons had secondary or university education. The fact that Mormons had the highest education is unexpected, given Gooren's observation that their converts included a high proportion of poor people⁵⁹. This suggests that their retention of those from this class was especially weak. On the other hand, Adventists have a large parochial system of education throughout Latin America. These institutions make both education and employment available to members, while the other groups have none of these. One might therefore expect Adventists to be much better educated than these statistics reveal. On the other hand, Witnesses have long urged their youth to limit their education and to put their time into witnessing. It is therefore very surprising to find them better educated than Adventists. There are parallel contrasts between the mean income received by adherents of the three groups. In the 2010 Mexican census, the average Mormon earned more than three times the average Adventist and nearly twice the average Witness in 2010.

The differences in education and income are related to where the adherents of the three groups are concentrated. Mexican Mormons are concentrated especially in the Central region, which includes Mexico City and, to a lesser extent, in the prosperous Northeast and Northwest region. Witnesses have a similar pattern, though less in the Central region than Mormons. On the other hand, over three-quarters of Adventists are concentrated in the rural, mountainous region of the South and Southeast. Witnesses and Mormons are also well represented there, but their concentration there is only about one-third that of the Adventists. Adventists are much more rural than the others, with 52.9 percent of their adherents coming from communities of fewer than 2,500 persons. A greater percentage of Adventists speak indigenous languages, and they are more likely to be illiterate than either of the other two groups.

Adventists had the lowest average age in the 2010 census, while Witnesses had the highest. All three have slightly higher proportions of women than the Mexican population generally. Intriguingly, fertility rates differ from what might be expected based on data from the United States: Mormons had the lowest fertility rates, while Adventists had the highest. This suggests that socioeconomic status and rural location are stronger predictors of fertility rates than are religious teachings and cultures.

How can we account for these contrasting profiles? Mormon missionaries are usually stationed in urban areas, which typically have diverse populations. They often focus on poor residents because they want to be able to report baptisms. These often respond positively to the short series of visits from charming youthful missionaries. However, after the latter have moved on, they often find themselves uncomfortable in congregations with prosperous members who fail to nurture them because the newcomers seem too different and they expect that the latter will, like many before them, soon drop out. That is, most of the poor converts drop out, but the few converts with higher socioeconomic status prove more likely to feel comfortable and put down roots.

Witnesses also focus mostly on urban areas. Those they study with successfully need a certain degree of education in order to be able to digest their doctrine and retain interest in a long series of studies. This becomes visible in the educational level and income of adherents, even though Witnesses tend to discourage their youth from continuing their education.

The reasons for the low socioeconomic status of Adventists are complex. The early colporteurs throughout Latin America typically worked in cities because of the ease of travel and moving from one potential customer to another. However, Adventists are often concentrated in rural areas and small towns—partly because, suspicious of urban evils, their missionaries typically chose to focus their endeavors, including their educational and medical institutions, there, and partly because they have often proved to be especially successful in reaching fairly poor people who hope to improve their lot, either here or in the world to come. Indeed, Adventist preaching and the existence of its institutions are typically geared to attracting such classes, so that even their urban evangelism often attracts recent immigrants who migrated hoping to improve their situations but are currently fairly low in resources⁶⁰. Consequently, many members cannot afford the costs of an Adventist education. It is therefore not surprising that in Mexico in 2010, only 59.9 percent of the students enrolled in Adventist schools were Adventists or from Adventist families.

We have been unable to procure the level of detail from any other census that we have from the Mexican censuses. However, the data and observations available indicate that similar patterns occur throughout Latin America. Indeed, while Adventist colleges and universities continue to lift some young Adventists into the middle class almost everywhere, the proportion of Adventist students at their 1,692 schools, colleges, and universities throughout Latin America was only 36.7 percent in 2011, which suggests that on the whole Adventists elsewhere in the region are even poorer than are those in Mexico⁶¹.

Future Growth

Another area of recent research on these three religious groups in Latin America has been to consider their past growth and what that growth may indicate for future growth. Mormon growth has garnered the most attention, and some estimates of future Mormon growth, which have relied upon faulty assumptions and poor statistical estimates, have projected growth into the future for close to a century and have suggested that there could be hundreds of millions of Mormons in the not too distant future⁶². These have also come to similar conclusions concerning the likely future growth of Witnesses⁶³. These projections have assumed that the future growth of these groups will mirror their past growth, an assumption that ignores context, external and internal factors, and what is known about population growth generally.

Given the problems with officially reported data misaligning with census data, scholars may question if the official membership numbers have any relevance at all. We acknowledge the problems with the membership data, but assume that these are consistent over time. If that assumption is correct, then growth trends implied by those statistics are probably valid, even though the absolute numbers themselves are questionable.

We use the official statistics to describe the historical growth of each group, starting with the earliest years for which we have data, and continuing to 2011. Due to space constraints, we focus on just three of the countries, though combined they account for a very large percentage of the membership of Mormons, Adventists, and Witnesses in Latin America. Collectively, Mexico, Brazil, and Chile contained 53 percent,

40 percent, and 61 percent of the official membership of Mormons, Adventists, and Witnesses in Latin America in 2011.

Growth is commonly defined as change over time. That change can easily be calculated on an annual basis, simply by subtracting the reported number in any one year from the reported number in the succeeding year. Doing so shows that while there is a general trend with some variation among years, there are years where the variation is so large that the accuracy of the membership data is questionable. Therefore, we thought it was appropriate to subject the membership data to a smoothing process.

The smoothing function that best fit the data was LOESS, or locally weighted scatterplot smoothing. LOESS requires input of a smoothing constant. Small values result in a trend line that closely tracks the actual data, while larger values result in a trend line that is much smoother. We chose values for the smoothing constant in the range of 0.2–0.3. Growth calculated from the predicted membership reasonably matched growth calculated from the actual data, but the erratic values for some years were much more muted.

Smoothing the Adventist membership data for the countries of Brazil and Chile was particularly complex. Membership audits, which revealed that the membership numbers were inflated, have recently been done in both countries. Since there was no attempt to correct for earlier years in official membership data, the membership trajectory for both countries peaks around 2005, declines for the year(s) of the audit, and then increases again. We assumed that this pattern is an artifact of the audit process rather than a description of the actual trajectory, and attempted to reconstruct a trajectory that eliminated the peaks but transitioned smoothly from the years before them, passing through the post-audit data points. In order to do this, we had to discard some of the reported data. We then fitted a growth function to the data, choosing the best-fitting function based on which gave the lowest residual mean square (RMS). The three-parameter Gompertz function was the best fitting for Brazil, while the four parameter logistic function was the best fitting for Chile. Figures 22.1, 22.2, and 22.3 show the growth of the three groups in each of these countries over time from when they were first established there until 2011. The growth rates shown in Figures 22.1– 22.3 are the year-dependent growth rate, which is a compounded annual growth rate that brings the membership number in any year to the number in 2011⁶⁴.

Several points are apparent for Brazil. Year-dependent growth for Adventists shows the least variation. Adventist growth has been steadily dropping since the 1960s; the most recent rate is 3.8 percent. For both Mormons and Witnesses, the initial rates were much higher, but the decline has been steeper. Mormon rates appear to be increasing since the first decade of the 2000s, but it remains to be seen whether this is temporary. They also increased from 1972 to 1978, and then fell sharply until the first years of the 2000s. Based on the long-term trend, it is reasonable to conclude that they will likely drop again in the future. While the year-dependent rates of all three groups remain above the year-dependent population growth, the differences are narrowing.

Figure 22.2 tells essentially the same story for Chile, with one exception. That exception is that the annual growth rate for 2010–2011 has essentially converged with the population growth rate of 0.9 percent for the same period. Mormon growth for this last year is 1.0 percent and Witness growth is slightly greater at 1.3 percent. This may be a reflection of the increasing secularization in Chile, which has reduced demand for these religions⁶⁵.

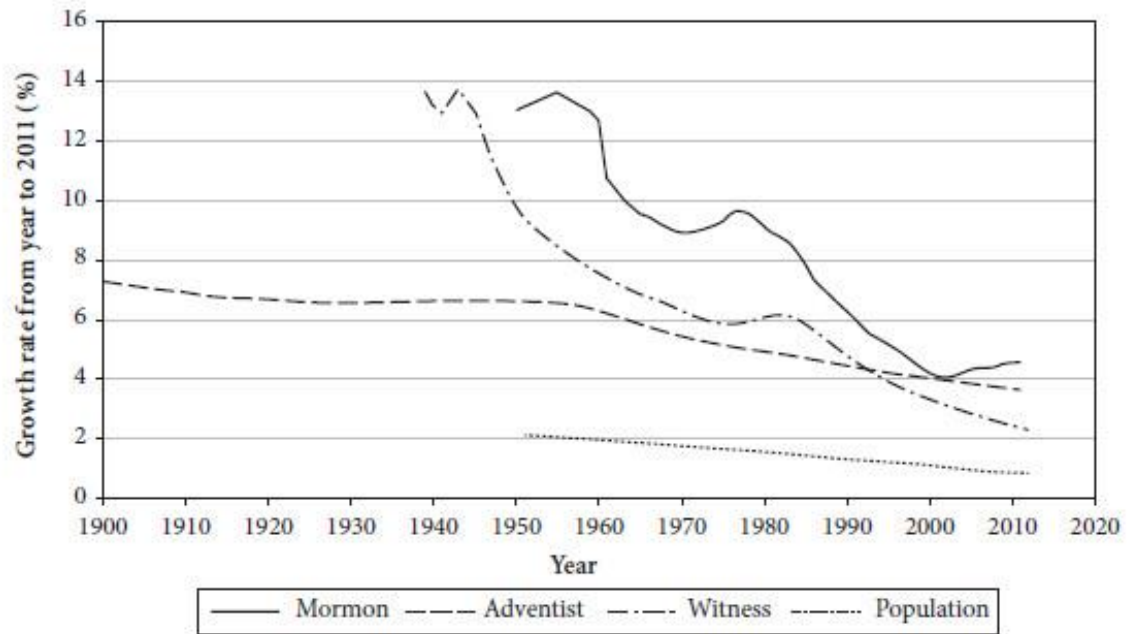


FIGURE 22.1 Year-dependent compound annual growth rate by group and population for Brazil.

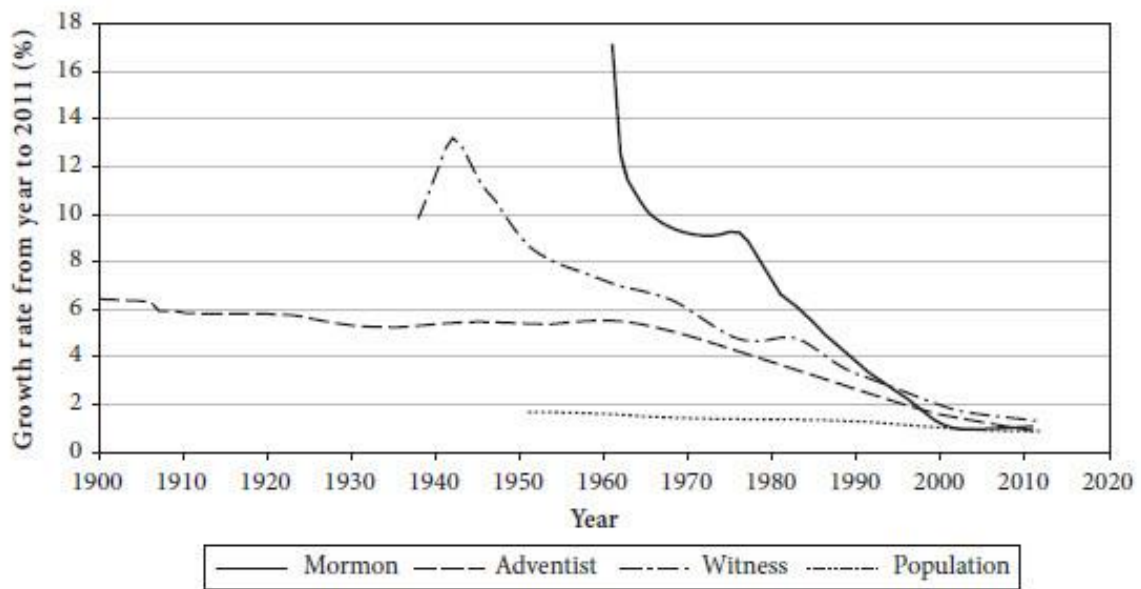


FIGURE 22.2 Year-dependent compound annual growth rate by group and population for Chile.

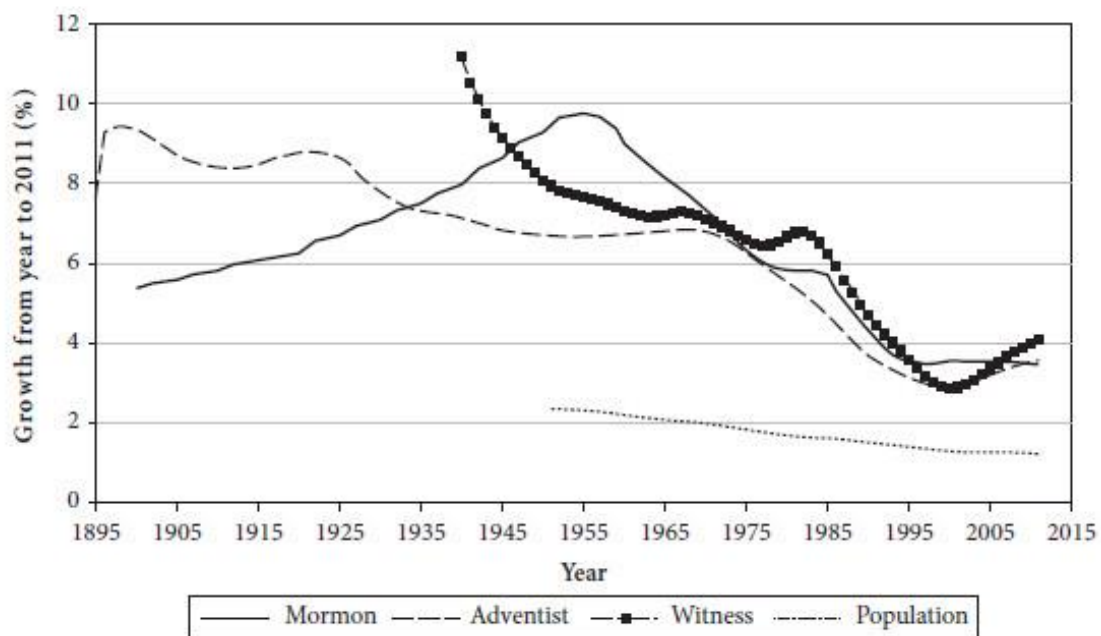


FIGURE 22.3 Year-dependent compound annual growth rate by group and population for Mexico.

Figure 22.3 tells a slightly different story for Mexico. The year-dependent rates for Adventists in 1895 were almost as high as those for Mormons and Witnesses in their peak years. Adventists remained in the 6.5–7.0 growth rate range for three decades beginning in 1943, and slowly dropped to 2.6 percent by 2001. Mormons entered Mexico in the late 1800s largely to avoid prosecution for polygamy, and outreach in Mexico was limited, like it was in most of Latin America during the early part of the twentieth century. However, it slowly increased and reached its peak in the 1950s. The pattern depicted in Figure 22.3 is also a reflection of the smoothing function and growth calculations. For Mormons, the year-dependent growth rate increased to 1950 because they had become established in only 30 percent of Latin America by that time and numbers were small. After that point, membership increased enough relative to 2011 membership that the growth rate declined. Growth trends for Witnesses are similar to those of the other countries. For all three groups, growth declined until the 1990s and early 2000s. However, unlike in Chile and Brazil, it appears as though there has been a slight reversal in growth rates in Mexico since the early 2000s. Whether the slightly higher growth rates will continue remains to be seen.

Readers will note that the year-dependent growth rate for all three groups in all three countries—and similar trends that are observable in most of the other countries of Latin America—have been converging toward the population growth rates of their respective countries. This suggests that the growth of these three alternative Christianities is slowing substantially from their growth apexes in decades past. Outreach efforts are resulting in fewer converts relative to time expended⁶⁶. Current growth rates are aligning with population growth rates. This may not necessarily indicate that current and future growth will come from retaining offspring, since there is evidence that many young people are leaving all three of these religious groups. What it likely suggests is two things. First, some offspring are retained and some people are converted, which, combined, lead to a growth rate that is close to the population growth rate. Second, both population growth and the growth of these three religious groups are likely related to

development⁶⁷; higher levels of societal development reduce both growth rates. In contrast, then, to other projections of growth for Mormons, Adventists, and Witnesses, we believe their period of rapid growth is over—likely the result of many of these countries passing through the secular transition⁶⁸—and that their membership trajectory in Latin America and elsewhere will, for the foreseeable future, mirror the population trajectory.

Conclusion

Mormons, Adventists, and Witnesses all originated in the United States during the nineteenth century, but have all engaged in substantial international evangelism. Latin America has played a prominent role in that evangelism for all three, though Mormons imbued the Americas with added incentive because they believed their new book of scripture recounted the history of Native Americans. The dates at which the three religious groups entered the various countries of Latin America varied based on a variety of issues, including whether or not the group waits to be formally recognized by the government of a target country; the specific approaches to proselytizing used; whether the group provides charitable goods and services; and external forces like wars and economic development. In addition to entering the various countries in Latin America at different times, these groups employ different proselytizing techniques that result in both different rates of conversion and converts with differing characteristics. Mormons and the Jehovah's Witnesses tend to be better educated and more affluent than do Seventh-day Adventists for a variety of reasons. We also noted that these groups count their members in different ways, which, when combined with census data, results in confusion over the actual number of members in various countries. Finally, we modeled the growth of Mormons, Adventists, and Witnesses in three of the larger countries in Latin America and showed that growth tends to follow expected patterns, and that the growth of all three groups is slowing in the region. Mormons, Adventists, and Witnesses will continue to see limited growth in some countries in Latin America, but the days of rapid growth are over in most countries.

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