



Reaching the Nations International Church Growth Almanac

Country reports on the LDS Church around the world from a landmark almanac. Includes detailed analysis of history, context, culture, needs, challenges and opportunities for church growth.



North Korea

Population: 24.85 millions (#50 out of countries)

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Geography

Area: 120,538 square km. Located in East Asia and officially known as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, North Korea occupies the northern half of the Korean Peninsula and borders South Korea, China, Russia, the Sea of Japan, and the Yellow Sea. Hills and mountains bisected by deep, narrow valleys comprise the terrain of the interior. A broad coastal plain occupies western areas. Climate consists of hot, humid summers and cold, dry winters. The majority of rainfall occurs during Changma - a brief, heavy monsoon. Periodic typhoons, drought, flooding, and hwangsa - harmful yellow dust mixed with pollution from China - are natural hazards. Environmental issues include water pollution, deforestation, inadequate fresh water supplies, soil erosion, and soil degradation. North Korea is administratively divided into nine provinces and two municipalities.

Population: 24,457,492 (July 2011)

Annual Growth Rate: 0.538% (2011)

Fertility Rate: 2.02 children born per woman (2011)

Life Expectancy: 65.03 male, 72.93 female (2011)

Peoples

Korean: 100%

With the exception of a few Chinese and ethnic Japanese inhabitants, the population is homogenously Korean.

Languages: Korean (100%). The entire population speaks Korean.

Literacy: 99%

History

Indigenous states or empires have ruled the Korean peninsula from as early as several millennia BC. Due to its location

between China and Japan, Korea has experienced many wars and conflicts with larger, more powerful empires and nation states. Korea became a unified nation starting in the seventh century. Christian missionaries began proselytism in the sixteenth century and by the late nineteenth century, Pyongyang was the center of missionary activity in Korea. With minimal interaction with its neighbors and Western powers, Korea was nicknamed the "Hermit Kingdom" due to its isolative stance. Japan annexed Korean in the 1900s, making the peninsula a protectorate in 1905 and a Japanese colony in 1910. Korea did not regain independence from Japan until 1945. A Soviet-backed government in the north and an American-backed government in the south divided the peninsula in the late 1940s. North Korea attacked the south in 1950, initiating the Korean War. In 1953, the two Koreas signed an armistice which divided the peninsula at the 38th parallel along a demilitarized zone. North Korea has maintained a highly centralized communist state for over half a century and is among the world's most closed nations. Military skirmishes between the north and south have continued since the signing of the armistice in 1953 and remain largely unreported. There have been proposals from both North Korea and South Korea to reunify the peninsula as a single nation, but these efforts have not come to fruition due to escalated hostility regarding North Korea's nuclear weapons program, belligerent attitude with periodic military hostilities, and conflicting political and ideological systems.

Culture

Communism has been the primary influence on local culture since the mid-twentieth century whereas Confucianism has shaped Korean culture and social attitudes for millennia. Many North Koreans follow authority and conform with the government and lack the expression of individualism. Koreans define their identity through their interpersonal relationships and grow strong emotional bonds with people and places with which they become familiar or share similarities. For Koreans, first impressions are very important in the development of lasting attitudes. Disappointment or pressure from others drives many Koreans to make personal decisions. Koreans are emotional, reserved, studious, and take great pride in their history and ethnicity. The Hangul script was created in 1444 by King Sejong. Commonly eaten foods include rice, vegetables, fruit, barley, potatoes, and corn. Due to poor standards of living, meat is not consumed regularly. Cigarette consumption rates are comparable to world averages.

Economy

GDP per capita: \$1,800 (2009) [3.84% of US]

Human Development Index: N/A

Corruption Index: N/A

North Korea faces many economic challenges due to its antiquated, highly centralized military-oriented economy, including excessive military spending, little domestic investment, stagnant economic growth, strict government control over farming and business activity, and stiff resistance to economic reform. Donations of food and medicine have been accepted from time to time to reduce hunger and malnutrition, but the government has restricted aid and generally only allows developmental assistance. A wide variety of precious and industrial metals and minerals are the primary natural resources. Services and industry employ 65% of the labor force and generate 32% and 47% of the GDP, respectively. Military products, machinery, electricity, chemicals, mining, clothing, food processing, and tourism are major industries. Agriculture employs 35% of the labor force and generates 21% of the GDP. Common agricultural products include rice, corn, potatoes, soybeans, cattle, pork, and eggs. China and South Korea are the primary trade partners.

The level of perceived corruption is difficult to ascertain as the government heavily controls outsiders visiting the country. The centralized government is highly susceptible to corruption as high-ranking government officials possess totalitarian powers.

Faiths

Nonreligious: 99%

other: 1%

Christians

Denominations	Members	Congregations
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Protestant	12,000	
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Catholic	800	
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Religion

North Koreans were traditionally Buddhist, Confucian, and Christian prior to the Korean War. Most appear to be nonreligious today. All reported religious activity appears to occur only in Pyongyang. Government officials estimated that there were 12,000 Protestants, 10,000 Buddhists, and 800 Catholics. With no reliable figures, estimates for the number of Christians number from 30,000 to the hundreds of thousands. A syncretic religious group known as Cheondogyo may have as many as 15,000 followers. There are four state churches in Pyongyang and up to 60 Buddhist temples nationwide. Religious institutions and buildings are perceived to offer the illusion of religious freedom to foreigners.^[1]

Religious Freedom

Persecution Index:

The constitution grants the freedom of religious belief, but the government severely restricts religious activity. Some religious groups are recognized by the government but these groups maintain close ties with the government and are generally regarded as a government effort to create an illusion of religious freedom. The government sought to eliminate Christianity from society in the 1960s, replacing preexisting faiths with a personality cult for high-ranking government leaders. The ownership of religious materials is prohibited. The government has permitted some faith-based nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to perform humanitarian work, but these groups are not allowed to proselyte, must be accompanied by an escort at all times, and are restricted in their interaction with nationals. Due to the isolated stance of the regime, little is known about the everyday life of citizens who are religious. The status of societal abuse of religious freedom is unknown.^[2]

Largest Cities

Urban: 60%

Pyongyang, Hamhung, Chongjin, Sinuiju, Wonsan, Nampo, Sariwon, Kaechon, Kanggye, Sunchon, Haeju, Tanchon, Pyongsong, Tokchon, Kaesong, Hyesan, Anju, Rason, Kimchaek, Kusong, Huichon, Sinpo, Chongju.

Cities listed in **bold** have no LDS congregations.

None of the 23 cities with over 100,000 inhabitants have an LDS congregation. 34% of the national population resides in the 23 most populous cities.

LDS History

As of 2011, there had never been an LDS presence in North Korea. In the 2000s and in 2010, LDS international leaders visited North Korea and discussed possibilities of humanitarian work with government officials.

Membership Growth

LDS Membership: less than five (2010)

There are no known Latter-day Saints in North Korea. North Korean Latter-day Saints consist of those who escaped the country and their descendents who have primarily joined the Church in South Korea.

Congregational Growth

Wards: 0 Branches: 0

There are no LDS congregations.

Language Materials

Languages with LDS Scripture: Korean

All LDS scriptures and most church materials are available in Korean. The Liahona magazine has monthly issues in Korean.

Health and Safety

Standards of living are very poor. Waterborne diseases, malnutrition, and low quality medical care are major issues.

Humanitarian and Development Work

There had been no reported LDS humanitarian or development work as of early 2011. Missionaries in South Korea explored possibilities of holding English language classes for escapees in the Seoul area, but classes were never organized.

Opportunities, Challenges and Prospects

Religious Freedom

Any Latter-day Saint presence, whether official or unofficial, is currently unattainable in North Korea due to stringent government regulations and policies restricting religious freedom, especially for Christians. The Church may be able to perform some humanitarian and development work, but the government severely restricts the activities of NGOs and such service would have no realistic prospects of attaining government recognition and establishing a church presence at present.

Cultural Issues

A highly centralized government and strict adherence to communist principles has generated a nonreligious society that conforms to government policies and regulations with little hesitation and room for individualism. Prospective LDS mission outreach would need to adjust proselytism approaches accordingly to teach those with no background in religious practice. Some North Koreans or the descendants of North Korean escapees have joined the LDS Church, but appear to have a minimal understanding of their individual relationship with religion and how it influences their decisions and attitudes in everyday life. The disappearance of many non-Christian traditional beliefs and practices may reduce some cultural barriers toward LDS proselytism in the event that a church presence is established one day.

National Outreach

The entire population is unreached by LDS mission outreach. If government regulations prohibiting foreign missionary activity were lifted, Pyongyang and Kaesong would most likely be the first cities to open for missionary work as Pyongyang has a large population, central location, and state-controlled religious groups in the city whereas Kaesong is near the South Korean border and past dialogue and economic agreements that have bridged the two countries have centered on Kaesong. LDS mission outreach centers in the two cities would reach 12% of the national population. Members in South Korea and Korean members in other nations will likely play a pivotal role in the establishment of the Church in North Korea due to greater familiarity with language and culture and close proximity to South Korea.

Member Activity and Convert Retention

No LDS baptisms have occurred. The lack of Latter-day Saints in North Korea challenges any future efforts to establish the Church among the indigenous population if government restrictions on religious freedom were removed.

Ethnic Issues and Integration

With one of the most homogenous populations in the world, ethnic integration issues will not be an challenge for Latter-day Saints if a church presence is established one day. Conformity with the nonreligious population will likely be a challenge for North Koreans who join the Church.

Language Issues

All LDS scriptures and a wide selection of church materials are translated into Korean, providing outreach potential for the entire population if missionary activity were permitted. Language differences between North Korea and South Korea do not present a major obstacle as most vocabulary differences are for technology and products from the West.

Missionary Service

No LDS missionaries have been assigned to North Korea. There are no known North Koreans who have served a full-time mission.

Leadership

No North Korean church leadership has been developed. Initial church leadership will most likely rely upon South Koreans or North Korean converts who return to their home country in event that the political situation improves and religious freedom is granted.

Temple

North Korea is assigned to the Seoul South Korea Temple district.

Comparative Growth

North Korea and Timor-Leste (East Timor) are the only Asian nations which appear to have never had past gatherings or meetings of Latter-day Saints. Other Asian nations with restrictions on religious freedom and without an official LDS presence, such as China, Vietnam, and Brunei, have LDS congregations that meet in private. In 2011, North Korea, Iran, and a few nations in West Africa were likely the only sovereign nations without a single Latter-day Saint. Along with some nations in North Africa and the Middle East, North Korea will likely be one of the last nations to have an official LDS presence unless a dramatic change in government occurs. Missionary-oriented Christian groups report no presence in North Korea, although there are some reports that underground churches operate in secret.

Future Prospects

Unless a dramatic change in government policy regarding religion and international relations occurs, North Korea will likely be among the last nations to have an LDS presence as freedom of religious practice is not permitted, the government severely restricts and monitors any foreigners, and tense political relations with other nations and internal government policies prohibit the travel and communication of North Koreans. Conducting development work and providing humanitarian assistance appears to be the only realistic opportunity toward establishing any LDS presence in North Korea in the coming years.

[1] "Korea, Democratic People's Republic of," International Religious Freedom Report 2010, 17 November 2010.
<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2010/148874.htm>

[2] "Korea, Democratic People's Republic of," International Religious Freedom Report 2010, 17 November 2010.
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