

Reaching the Nations International Church Growth Almanac

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



Nicaragua

Population: 5.85 millions (#111 out of countries)

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Geography

Area: 130,370 square km. Nicaragua is bound by the Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean Sea with Honduras bordering to the north and Costa Rica bordering to the south. Nicaragua is the largest country in Central America. Two large fresh water lakes, Lago de Nicaragua and Lago de Managua, are located centrally with the capital of Managua in between. Topographically Nicaragua is divided into three different regions. The mountainous, sparsely populated northeast and eastern portions of the country, named the Mosquito Coast, are covered predominantly by rainforest and border the Caribbean Sea. The northern, mountainous area bordering Honduras extends south through the country forming forested highlands. The majority of agriculture and farming in Nicaragua occurs to the east along the Pacific Ocean where the land is flat and fertile. Hurricanes and flooding are common natural disasters. Nicaragua is administratively divided into 15 departments and two autonomous regions.

Population: 5,666,301 (July 2011)

Annual Growth Rate: 1.088% (2011)

Fertility Rate: 2.12 children born per woman (2011)

Life Expectancy: male 69.82, female 74.09 (2011)

Peoples

Mestizo: 69%

White: 17%

Black: 9%

Amerindian: 5%

Most Nicaraguans (69%) are a mixture of white and Amerindian ancestry, referred to as Mestizos. Whites make up 17% of the population whereas blacks and Amerindians constitute 9% and 5% respectively.

Languages: Spanish (97.5%), Miskito (1.7%), other (0.8%). Spanish is the official and most widely spoken language of the country, spoken by 97.5% of Nicaraguans. Others speak Amerindian tribal languages such as Miskito, which has over 100,000 speakers concentrated in the Mosquito Coast.

Literacy: 67.5% (2000)

History

Nicaragua was populated by Amerindian tribes before its discovery by the Spanish, who colonized the area in the sixteenth century. Independence was granted to Nicaragua in 1821 from Spain. The British occupied the area of what is now the Mosquito Coast during the time Nicaragua became independent and did not completely leave the area until the mid 1800s. The Mosquito Coast had strong autonomy in Nicaragua until the end of the nineteenth century. This resulted in this area of Nicaragua being strongly influenced by the English language.

The United States gained interest in Nicaragua at the beginning of the twentieth century over the possibility of constructing a canal from the Caribbean Sea to the Pacific Ocean. Political and military instability resulted in the United States withdrawing from the country and abandoning the proposed canal project.

Military dictatorships ruled Nicaragua for most of the twentieth century. The Somoza Family provided many of these dictators who helped industrialize the country in the 1960s and 1970s despite instability. The Sandinistas took over the government in 1979 and experimented with introducing communism to Nicaragua and neighboring nations. Democratic elections were held in 1990 and resulted in the removal of the Sandinistas from office. President Ortega was removed from office at this time but was reelected in 2006 and remains in power currently.

Culture

Like many Latin American countries the Catholic Church has influenced Nicaraguan culture for centuries. Catholic holidays are national holidays and widely celebrated. Although poorer than neighboring Central Africa countries, the homicide rate is lower than most. Alcohol and tobacco use are less prevalent than the United States. Nicaraguans have faced difficult social challenges resulting from decades of political instability and poverty. Many do not attend church regularly.

Economy

GDP per capita: $2,900 (2010) [6.1% of US]

Human Development Index: 0.699

Corruption Index: 2.5

Nicaragua is the second poorest country in the Western Hemisphere after Haiti. Decades of political instability, damage to the country's infrastructure from war and natural disasters, and corruption resulted in slow economic development. Services account for over half of the GDP and workforce. Unemployment is reported to be less than 6% but inflation and underemployment are very high. The majority of exports (over 60%) go to the United States and consist primarily of agriculture products such as sugar, peanuts, and meat. Corruption is widespread and deters foreign investment. The government has attempted to reduce corruption but has seen little success. Corruption in government appears the most damaging to economic development.

Faiths

Christian: 82.6%

Other: 1.7%

None: 15.7%

Christians

Denominations Members Congregations

Catholic 2,653,000

Evangelical 1,272,500

Seventh Day Adventists 113,020 209

Moravian 94,300

Latter-day Saints 67,275 103

Jehovah's Witnesses 22,848 341

Religion

Roman Catholicism is the predominant religion, followed by 58.5%. Evangelical groups constitute the next largest religious group (21.6%) followed by those who have no religion (15.7%). The remainder belongs primarily to other Christian groups. In 2008, Jehovah's Witnesses claimed over 21,000 active members in 324 congregations. Seventh Day Adventists are growing rapidly in membership and congregations and numbered over 100,000 in 2008.

Religious Freedom

Persecution Index:

The constitution allows religious freedom which is usually upheld by the government. The government does not tolerate religious discrimination. Although the Catholic Church has heavily influenced daily life and culture, Nicaragua has no official religion. Registration with the government is required for religious groups to enjoy the privileges of tax-exemption and to function as a legal entity. Visas for foreign missionaries are easily obtained but often take several months to process. Some religious groups vocal in controversial socio-political matters have experienced increased government intolerance.[1]

Largest Cities

Urban: 57%

Managua, León, Chinandega, Masaya, Estelí, Tipitapa, Matagalpa, Granada, Ciudad Sandino, Juigalpa.

All ten of the largest cities have a congregation. 33% of the national population resides in the ten largest cities.

LDS History

The first missionaries to serve in Nicaragua arrived in 1953. At the time, Nicaragua was part of the newly created Central America Mission. The first converts joined the church the following year and the first district was created in 1959, named the Nicaraguan District. Growth was slow during the first three decades. Membership only numbered in the couple of thousands by the 1980s when the first stake was created in Managua. The stake was discontinued in 1989. Missionaries were withdrawn from Nicaragua in September 1978 due to civil war which brought the Sandinistas to power in 1979. At the time there were 50 missionaries serving in Nicaragua. In the early 1980s the Sandinistas claimed the LDS Church was using missionaries in the country as CIA operatives and confiscated three church owned chapels. The Nicaragua Managua Mission was organized in 1989 from the Guatemala Guatemala City South Mission. President Hinckley visited Nicaragua in early 1997 and noted his desire for stakes to be established in the country, hoping that missionary work and membership in the area would be mature enough for such responsibilities. In 2010, the Nicaragua Managua Mission was divided to form the Nicaragua Managua North and Nicaragua Managua South Missions.

Membership Growth

LDS Membership: 67,275 (2009)

Slow growth occurred in the 1980s. In 1985 there were 3,100 members. Membership increased rapidly from 8,000 members in December 1990 to 18,000 in 1995. By the end of 2000 there were 34,791 members. Membership nearly doubled between 2000 and 2008 to approximately 64,000. Annual membership growth rates ranged from five to ten percent in the 2000s. The Nicaragua Managua Mission baptized over 400 people in one month at the end of 2008. At the time, the strongest growth was occurring in Chinandega. The Church baptized record numbers of new converts on a monthly basis in 2010, many of which were entire families. In 2009, one in 84 was nominally LDS.

Congregational Growth

Wards: 58 Branches: 45

The number of branches in the country increased from nine in early 1990 to 59 in 1995 and to 96 in early 1996. At least 20 branches were discontinued during the latter half of the 1990s. By the end of 2000 there were 81 wards and branches. The number of congregations increased to 82 in 2002, 87 in 2005, 90 in 2006, 92 in 2007, 93 in 2008, 100 in 2009, and 103 in 2010.

The first districts organized outside of Managua were in Chinandega, Matagalpa (1990), Granada (1991), and Rivas (1994). The number of districts increased from eight in 1993 to twelve in 1997. The Managua Nicaragua Stake was reinstated in 1998 and was created from the Managua Nicaragua District. The new stake included the Acahualinca, Altagracia, Batahola, Las Palmas, Lezcano, Linda Visa, and San Judas Wards and the Lorna Linda and San Juan Branches. In 2000, a second stake was organized in Chinandega. At the time there were eleven districts, half of which were in Managua. Rapid increases in the number of stakes began in 2004 as two stakes were organized in Jinotepe and Managua Villa Flor and a district was formed in Managua Tipitapa. In 2005, three stakes were organized, two in Managua (Universitaria and Bello Horizonte) and one in Masaya. In 2006, two districts were organized in Esteli and Juigalpa. Additional stakes were organized in Leon (2007) and Chinandega West (2009). In the late 2000s, the number of branches in Puerto Cabezas increased from one to four, resulting in the organization of a district in Puerto Cabezas in 2010. There were nine stakes and seven districts in early 2011.

Beginning in 2010, several dependent branches and groups began operating throughout Nicaragua in previously unreached areas as a result of significantly increasing the number of full-time missionaries to staff a second mission. Some cities which received dependent branches or groups during this period included Ocotal, Rio Branco, San Benito, Siuna, and Somoto. In 2010, there were four mission branches, two in Bluefields and two between Managua and Leon (Mateare and Nagarote).

Activity and Retention

Nicaragua experiences low member activity rates. Inactivity problems became more apparent during the late 1980s; only 450 of the 3,453 members of the Church in 1989 were active. The following year, active membership increased to over 4,200 out of a total of 8,000 members.[2] The Nicaragua Managua Mission reported that sacrament attendance in the country increased by 2,600 between 2005 and 2009, just 14% of the 18,000 converts baptized during this time period. In the fall of 2009, only 55% of converts were attending sacrament meeting the month following their baptism. Such trends indicate a rush to baptize inadequately prepared converts who have not developed basic gospel habits. Over 650 were attending church meetings in the five branches of the Granada Nicaragua District in 2010. The ratio of members per congregations increased from 430 in 2000 to 688 in 2008. 2,919 were enrolled in seminary and institute during the 2009-2010 school year. The number of active members per congregation varies by location. In recent years, sacrament attendance in many wards in the Managua area increased to between 150 and 250 as a result of higher convert baptism standards and successful reactivation efforts. Active membership is generally between 100 and 150 for most wards and between 25 and 100 for most branches. Active membership may be as low as 10,000 or 16%.

Language Materials

Languages with LDS Scripture: English, Spanish

All LDS scriptures and most church materials are available in Spanish, including an LDS-edition of the Bible complete with footnotes, topical guide, and Bible dictionary.

Meetinghouses

In early 2011, there were approximately 50 LDS meetinghouses. Most larger congregations meet in church built chapels. Small or newly organized branches likely meet in renovated buildings or rented spaces.

Humanitarian and Development Work

LDS humanitarian and development work has included emergency relief, donations of clothing and shoes to the needy,

neonatal resuscitation training, and wheelchair donations.[3] In 2002, the Church sponsored "Rural Medicine Day" in which medical professional volunteers used 17 chapels to provide medical treatment to the poor in rural areas.[4] The Perpetual Education Fund has assisted members in obtaining higher education and finding self-sustaining employment.[5] Local fast offering funds alleviated hardship for members suffering from flooding in 2003.[6] In 2007, the Church quickly responded to victims of Hurricane Felix in Puerto Cabezas with emergency aid.[7]

Opportunities, Challenges and Prospects

Religious Freedom

No laws limit proselytism and the placement of full-time foreign missionaries. The Church appears to be on good terms with the government at present.

Cultural Issues

Poverty presents challenges for growth. Although this factor has likely increased receptivity to the LDS Church, many Nicaraguans only make the equivalent of a few thousand U.S. dollars a year in salary. Church funds for constructing meetinghouses and meeting welfare needs in Nicaragua are highly dependent on the international Church. Low literacy rates in Nicaragua may contribute to inactivity problems, as converts who are unable to read the scriptures and church materials face difficulties growing their testimonies. Violence and substance abuse is less prevalent in Nicaragua than several surrounding nations which provides greater safety for members and missionaries to enjoy and fewer addictive habits for potential converts to overcome. Low rates of church attendance among the general population has affected LDS member activity rates as many converts never develop habitual church attendance

National Outreach

45% of the national population resides in a city or town with an LDS congregation. Less than three percent of Nicaraguans inhabit the nine cities over 10,000 inhabitants without an LDS congregation (Nueva Guinea, San Rafael del Sur, El Rama, Camoapa, Somotillo, San Carlos, Larreynaga, La Trinidad, and Ticuantepe). All 17 administrative division have an LDS mission outreach center except the least populated department of Rio San Juan of 96,000. LDS mission outreach occurs in only one city in four administrative departments (Jinotega, Nueva Segovia, Boaco, and Madriz), two of which (Nueva Segovia and Madriz) began receiving LDS outreach in 2010. Approximately half of Nicaraguans reside in urban areas of less than 10,000 inhabitants or in rural areas and remain almost completely unreached by the LDS Church.

As indicated by the ratio of LDS congregations to administrative division population, the percentage of Latter-day Saints by department or region varies dramatically, with five departments (Granada, Managua, Carazo, Chinandega, Masaya) appearing to be the most reached by Latter-day Saints and possessing population to LDS congregation ratios of one per 50,000 people or less. Four departments (Jinotega, Nueva Segovia, Boaco, and Madriz) and one region (Atlantico Sur) appear the least reached and possess the smallest percentages of Latter-day Saints as each has one LDS congregation per 100,000 or more inhabitants. Prospects for expanding national outreach appear most favorable along the Atlantic Coast, smaller cities and towns surrounding Managua near the Pacific Coast, and areas along the Honduran border - all of which are minimally reached by the Church at present. The creation of a second mission in July 2010 has facilitated greater mission outreach to areas with little or no previous church presence. Unreached larger towns may soon have missionaries assigned and have congregations created as mission numbers increase to staff the new mission.

The Church maintains no country-specific website for Nicaragua at present and instead operates a website for the Central America Area at http://countrywebsites.lds.org/gt/. The internet site provides local news, a link to the meetinghouse locator, and explanations of church doctrines and practices in Spanish. Use of the website by local members and missionaries can facilitate the expansion of national outreach.

Member Activity and Convert Retention

Poor convert retention and low member activity has been manifested throughout the history of the Church in Nicaragua. Although membership nearly doubled between 1995 and 2000, the number of congregations declined. There were a total of 25,000 members of the Church in 1997 without a stake; possibly the largest number of members in a country without a stake in Church history. The delay in a stake created in Leon until recently and the absence of stakes in other large cities indicates poor member activity and retention, lack of mission focus outside of Managua, or lesser receptivity among Nicaraguans in these locations. Inactivity and low convert retention persisted in the 2000s as the number of congregations increased by 12 between 2000 and 2008. Membership increased at a rate around 4,000 per year in the 2000s, yet only one or two new congregations have been created annually for most years during this period. This indicates that relatively few converts are retained or that new baptisms barely compensate for attrition among existing members. Mission leadership has increasingly stressed preparing converts for baptism and reactivating less active or inactive members and has recently increased standards for baptism by

requiring investigators to attend church weekly for at least two months before baptism. It is unclear whether this standard is consistently enforced, but it demonstrates increased awareness of the relationship between poor retention and the history of rushed baptism of individuals who have not made adequate life changes. Guidelines that encourage greater activity and devotion among potential converts will increase the strength of the Church in coming years if consistently enforced, although it is unclear whether such policies will persist through changes in mission leadership.

One of the reasons that few new congregations have been created recently in Nicaragua is that the standards for new branches and wards to be organized were raised. One missionary serving in the town of Matearas outside of Managua reported that an independent branch did not function for the first three years the Church held Sunday services. This was due to a standard requiring at least nine active, worthy Melchizedek priesthood holders in the branch before an independent branch was approved. Several dependent branches or groups in Nicaragua are not strong enough to become their own independent Church units. The dependent branch in Matearas averaged over 60 people in attendance before becoming an independent branch in mid-2009.

Missionaries in early 2010 reported that retention of recent converts had risen and was maintained at over 50%. Mission and local priesthood leadership have increased emphasis on regular church attendance and have experienced recent success, but these policies may face challenges to remain sustained.

Ethnic Issues and Integration

Nicaragua is the Central American country with the highest percentage of blacks. Most congregations are primarily Mestizo and white. Issues integrating blacks and Amerindians into Mestizo congregations appear to have been minimal. Most blacks and Amerindians live in regions with a limited church presence. The separation of blacks and experienced marginalization during the Sandinista era and may still see some prejudice from the majority. In 2010, full-time missionaries reported breakthroughs working with the Miskito population in Puerto Cabezas, resulting in dozens of young adults submitting mission papers and the organization of three additional branches.

Language Issues

The homogeneity of Nicaragua's Spanish speaking population has simplified mission outreach. Over 97.5% of the population can attend church meetings, meet with missionaries, and communicate in Spanish as their first language. Low literacy complicates outreach and retention but provides service and finding opportunities for missionaries through literacy programs. There are no Church materials available in Miskito, the most widely spoken native language. Full-time missionaries began learning Miskito while serving in Puerto Cabezas in 2010 and church services in some branches in the area appeared to be conducted in Miskito. A lack of LDS materials in indigenous languages has been partially responsible for very limited or non-existent outreach programs to these native peoples.

Missionary Service

In 1997, there were 140 missionaries in the Nicaragua Managua Mission. In early 2011, the number of full-time missionaries serving in Nicaragua likely numbered around 400. The missionary force appears evenly split between North Americans and Latinos. Despite large inactivity problems in Nicaragua and throughout Central America, the Area Presidency reported in early 2009 in Guatemala that by the end of the year, the Central America Area would be self-sufficient in sending out missionaries to staff all 12 area missions at the time if needed. Increasing youth and young adult participation in seminary and institute can further contribute to greater self-sufficiency in missionary service.

Leadership

The recent increase in stakes in the past decade from two to nine indicates that local leadership has matured and increased in numbers on both a local congregation and national level. The number of local leaders remains insufficient to create additional congregations and stakes in the Managua area and in several member districts. Poor convert retention appears to be the greatest obstacle toward increasing the size and maturity of leadership.

Temple

In early 2010, Nicaragua belonged to the Guatemala City Guatemala Temple district. When the Tegucigalpa Honduras Temple was announced in 2006, it was noted that it would serve members in neighboring Nicaragua. Nicaragua is the country with the most members without a temple. Every other Spanish-speaking country in Central and South America has a temple under construction or operating. Missionaries reported that with the February 2010 announcement of the creation of the Nicaragua Managua North Mission, the Church was beginning to search for land to construct a temple although no official announcement was made.

Comparative Growth

With one of the lowest member activity rates in the world, Nicaragua had the third highest ratio of members per congregation after Chile and Hong Kong in 2009. Nicaragua is the Central American country with the second lowest percentage of Latter-day Saints. Only Costa Rica has a lower percentage of members. Other Central American nations had greater success in baptizing and retaining large numbers converts between 1960 and 1990, such as Guatemala and Honduras, both of which have more than twice as many members and stakes as Nicaragua. The LDS Church in Nicaragua possessed some of the most aggressive church-planting approaches in the late 2000s and early 2010s worldwide with nearly a dozen new cities or towns opening to missionary work. Annual membership growth rates in Nicaragua have been consistently the highest in Latin American for over a decade.

Other Christian groups have reported great success among Nicaraguans. The Seventh Day Adventist Church reports about 10,000 baptisms a year just in Nicaragua. Evangelical Christians have also grown rapidly over the past few decades and now constitute about a quarter of Nicaraguans.

Future Prospects

As in many Latin American countries, the Church has favorable prospects for continued growth in Nicaragua. Districts in the cities of Estelí, Granada and Matagalpa will likely become stakes. Additional stakes will likely be created in Managua and Leon once more congregations are organized as more converts are retained and less-active members are reactivated. Additional congregations may eventually be organized for members living in La Paz Centro, Nagarote, Bluefields, and independent branches will likely be organized in cities and towns with groups or dependent branches operating, such as Ocotal, Siuna, and San Benito. A temple may one day be announced in Managua when warranted by increase in active membership.

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[3] "Projects - Nicaragua," Humanitarian Activities Worldwide, retrieved 31 March 2011.
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[4] "7,800 attend ‘rural medicine day'," LDs Church News, 16 November 2002.
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[5] Weaver, Sarah. "Life-altering solutions," LDS Church News, 2 April 2005.
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[6] "Nicaraguan storms destroy 8 LDS families' homes," LDS Church News, 12 July 2003.
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