



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.



New Caledonia

Population: 0.27 millions (#186 out of countries)

By David Stewart and Matt Martinich

Geography

Area: 18,575 square km. Located in Oceania in the Coral Sea, New Caledonia is an overseas territorial collectivity of France consisting on a long, large main island and several smaller islands such as Iles Loyaute (Loyalty Islands). Plains occupy coastal areas, whereas forested mountains dominate the interior. Hot, humid climate occurs throughout the islands. Cyclones are natural hazards, usually from November to March. Invasive species and soil erosion resulting from mining and forest fires are environmental issues. New Caledonia is divided into three administrative provinces.

Peoples

Kanak: 39.1%

European: 27.1%

Wallisian/Futunian: 8.2%

Tahitian: 2.1%

Indonesian: 1.4%

Ni-Vanuatu: 1.0%

Vietnamese: 0.9%

Other: 17.7%

Unspecified: 2.5%

Kanaks are Melanesians who populated the islands prior to the arrival of Europeans. French account for the majority of Europeans. Other Pacific Islanders and Southeast Asian immigrant groups have arrived since European colonization of the

Pacific.

Population: 282,754 (July 2018)

Annual Growth Rate: 1.3% (2018)

Fertility Rate: 1.92 children born per woman (2018)

Life Expectancy: 74.1 male, 82.2 female (2018)

Languages: French (24%), Wallisian (6.5%), Dehu (4.6%), Tahitian (1.8%), Javanese (3.0%), Nengone (3.1%), Paicî (2.6%), Vietnamese (2%), Ajië (1.9%), Xârâcùù (2.0%), Iaaï (1.4%), New Caledonian Javanese (1.4%), East Futuna (1.0%), Cemuhî (0.9%), Yuaga (0.8%), Numèè (0.8%), Faguvea (0.8%), Nyâlayu (0.7%), other/unspecified (40.7%). French is the official language and 97% of the population are literate in French as first or second language.[\[1\]](#)

Literacy: 96.9% (2015)

History

The Lapita first inhabited the region followed by Polynesians around 1000 AD. Europeans arrived in the late eighteenth century. The British and French began settling New Caledonia during the early nineteenth century, and by 1853, France took full possession of the island. The French used the island as a penal colony for forty years beginning in 1864. New Caledonia served as a valuable Allied base in the Pacific and headquartered military units and personnel for fighting Imperial Japan. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, an independence movement began to gain momentum and aroused political and social conflict. The Nouméa Accord was signed in 1998 and grants the possibility of independence from France sometime between 2013 and 2018. However, the majority of voters rejected independence and instead opted to retain territorial status with France. Nevertheless, two additional independence referendums may occur in 2020 and 2022.

Culture

New Caledonia exhibits some of the strongest European influences among South Pacific Islands due to the large European population and status as an overseas department of France. Most of the population converted to Catholicism as a result of French proselytism. Traditional cuisine consists of seafood, yams, taro, fruit, pork, and bats. Rice and beef have become more common due to European influence in the Noumea area. Alcohol is frequently consumed. The various ethnic groups have historically segregated themselves, but more recently have begun to break down societal barriers.

Economy

GDP per capita: \$31,100 (2015) [53.3% of U.S.]

Human Development Index: N/A (0.901 for France [2017])

Corruption Index: N/A (72 for France [2018])

Nickel mining and tourism stabilize the economy and facilitate growth. New Caledonia boasts 11% of the world's known nickel deposits and depends on extraction of this resource toward ensuring future economic growth. Other natural resources include chrome, iron, manganese, cobalt, silver, gold, lead, and copper. Services employ 74.9% of the labor force and generate 72.1% of the GDP, whereas industry employs 22.4% of the labor force and generates 26.4% of the GDP. Nickel mining and smelting is the primary industry. Agriculture employs 2.7% of the labor force and generates 1.4% of the GDP. Vegetables, beef, deer, and fish are common agricultural products. Primary trade partners include China, France, Australia, Japan, South Korea, and Singapore.

Corruption does not appear to be a major issue but has become a greater threat as a result of political instability, tribalism among the indigenous population, and New Caledonia's mineral wealth.

Faiths

Christian: 85%

Muslim: 2.5%

Other: 12.5%

Christians

Denominations – Members – Congregations

Catholic – 130,000

Evangelicals – 17,649

Latter-day Saints – 2,440 – 9

Jehovah's Witnesses – 2,489 – 32

Seventh Day Adventists – 959 – 10

Religion

Catholics are the largest religious group and account for approximately half of the population. Protestants constitute approximately one-third of the population. Most non-Christians are nonreligious. Kanaks and other Oceanic peoples are primarily Catholic or Protestant, but retain many indigenous religious beliefs, such as the Kanak belief that the world of the dead is underwater.^[2] Europeans tend to be secular and have low rates of church attendance and religious interest. There are few Muslims, who consist of Arabs brought by the French from North Africa during the colonial period, and Indonesians.

Religious Freedom

The French constitution protects religious freedom, which is upheld by the government. There have been no reports of limited religious freedom or societal abuse of this right.

Largest Cities

Urban: 83.3% (2014)

Nouméa, Dumbéa, Le Mont-Doré, **Païta**, **Koné**, Bourail, **Poindimié**, **Koumac**, **Houaïlou**, **Canala**.

Cities listed in **bold** have no congregations of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Four of the ten largest cities have a Church congregation. Seventy-eight percent (78%) of the national population resides in the ten largest cities. Nouméa and its suburbs constitute 67% of the national population.

Church History

The first Latter-day Saints known to live in New Caledonia were military personnel stationed on the island during World War II. Tahitian members who arrived to work in the nickel industry after the war.^[3] The Church created the Nouméa Branch in 1961, and Tahitians appeared to account for the bulk of church membership at the time. Missionary work was first supervised by the French Polynesian Mission. Full-time missionaries did not arrive until 1968 once visas were secured. That same year Elder Thomas S. Monson dedicated the islands for missionary work.^[4] The Fiji Suva Mission began administering the islands in 1975 and national outreach began to expand.^[5] Seminary began in the 1970s and institute began in the 1980s. President Hinckley visited New Caledonia in 2000.^[6] In 2012, New Caledonia was assigned to the newly created Vanuatu Port Vila Mission and a stake was organized. A member of the New Caledonian football team joined the Church in 2017.^[7]

Four full-time missionaries assigned to New Caledonia were injured in a serious car accident in early 2019.^[8]

Membership Growth

Church Membership: 2,440 (2018)

Slow membership growth occurred from 1960 to 1985. Church membership totaled 418 in 1983. Beginning in the late 1980s, the Church began to baptize greater numbers of Melanesians, which strongly affected national church growth trends over the following two decades. There were twenty to thirty convert baptisms a year in the 1970s and most years in the 1980s, which increased to eighty to ninety in the 1990s.^[9] Membership reached 600 in 1987, 1,000 in 1993, and 1,300 in 1997. By year-end 2000, there were 1,525 members.

Slow membership growth occurred in the 2000s and 2010s as annual growth rates ranged from a low of 0.4% in 2009 to a high of 6.4% in 2011. Annual membership growth rates generally varied from 1 to 3% during this period, and church membership typically grew by around 40-100 members a year. There were 1,631 members in 2002, 1,742 in 2005, 1,828 in 2007, 2,073 in 2011, 2,320 in 2015, and 2,415 in 2017.

In 2018, one in 116 was a Latter-day Saint, or 0.86% of the population.

Congregational Growth

Wards: 6 Branches: 3 (May 2019)

In the 1976, the Church split the Nouméa Branch into two congregations and organized the Nouméa New Caledonia District.^[10] In 1978, a branch was created in Tontouta. By 1996, there were five branches, four of which were in the Nouméa area. Two of the branches specifically met the needs of Polynesian members.^[11] The first congregations were organized in the Loyalty Islands during the late 1990s. By 2000, there were nine branches (Bourail, Dumbéa, Lifou, Mare, Mont Dore, Nouméa 1st, Nouméa 2nd, Riviere Salee, and Tontouta). A member group briefly operated in Poindimie in the early or mid 2000s. Missionaries also briefly served in Bouloupari around this time. In 2003, the Dumbéa Branch was discontinued. In 2012, the Nouméa New Caledonia District became a stake. A ward was reestablished in Dumbéa in 2016. In the mid-2010s, member groups operated in at least two cities: Kone and Poro.

Activity and Retention

Approximately 1,000 Latter-day Saints attended a special meeting with President Hinckley in 2000.^[12] Eight hundred members attended the special conference to organize the first stake in 2012.^[13] 138 were enrolled in seminary or institute during the 2008–2009 school year. The average number of members per congregation has increased in the past two decades from 169 in 2000 to 236 in 2009 and 271 in 2018. Most wards have between 100 and 150 active members, whereas most branches or member groups appear to have less than 50 active members. Historically, branches and member groups outside of the Nouméa area have had less than twenty active members each. Returned missionary reports suggest convert retention rates for one year after baptism have increased from 25-50% two decades ago to as high as 75% in the mid-2010s. Nationwide active membership is estimated at 1,000, or 41% of total church membership.

Language Materials

Languages with Latter-day Saint Scripture: French, Tahitian, Vietnamese.

All Church scriptures and most church materials are available in French, Tahitian, and Vietnamese. The Liahona magazine has twelve issues a year in French, whereas Tahitian and Vietnamese each have four issues a year.

Meetinghouses

The first Church-built chapel was completed in the 1970s in Nouméa.^[14] In 2019, there were seven meetinghouses in New Caledonia. Congregations meet in Church-built meetinghouses, renovated buildings, or rented spaces.

Humanitarian and Development Work

The Church has conducted four humanitarian and development projects in New Caledonia since 1985, including two emergency response initiatives and two community projects.^[15]

Opportunities, Challenges, and Prospects

Religious Freedom

There are no restrictions for Latter-day Saints to worship, assemble, and proselyte. Foreign full-time missionaries regularly serve in the country, and there appear to be no major complications obtaining visas.

Cultural Issues

Melanesians face significant cultural challenges investigating and joining the Church due to deep ethno-religious ties and the cultural practice that major personal decisions must be approved by an individual's parents and tribal chiefs. Leaving the religious group practiced by one's tribe oftentimes results in leaving one's community altogether. Past political conflict and tension have segregated many ethnic groups. Local church leaders urge members to not discuss political subjects at church to prevent divisions and unite the diverse ethnic backgrounds present in many congregations.^[16] Secularism among Europeans has resulted low receptivity to the Church and its missionaries, resulting in little recent growth with this population. Overall, many Melanesian and Polynesian cultural attitudes and practices complement Church teachings, such as a strong emphasis on family and regular church attendance.

National Outreach

Sixty-nine percent (69%) of the national population resides in cities or on small islands with a ward, branch, or member group. Mission outreach centers may reach as many as 85% of the inhabitants, as Nouméa and its suburbs constitute 67% of the national population, the two Loyalty islands with an congregation (Maré and Lifou) comprise 6% of the population, and Le Mont-Doré and Bourail together account for 9% of the population. Additional congregations and mission outreach centers are needed in the Nouméa area due to its large population and many communities without a nearby meetinghouse. Prospective additional mission outreach centers in Nouméa communities or nearby towns include Païta, Commune du Mont-Dore, Boulari, and La Coulée. Full-time missionaries likely work frequently in these areas, but no congregations have been created. Higher receptivity of the population to the Church in Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands limits resources allocated to New Caledonia by the Vanuatu Port Vila Mission.

Almost the entire European population receives mission outreach, but many Kanaks are unreached in towns and villages in the northern half of the main island and on small islands elsewhere. A limited number of full-time missionaries assigned to New Caledonia, along with hesitancy of mission and area leaders to assign full-time missionaries to more remote unreached regions, have limited national outreach potential among areas populated by more receptive populations. Moreover, efforts to establish branches in additional cities and towns have been persistently frustrated due to small target populations, limited local leadership, and member families who eventually move away from these communities. Urban centers with several thousand inhabitants that could serve as mission outreach centers in unreached areas include Canala, Kouaoua, Poindimié, Koumac, Nepoui, and La Foa. Nevertheless, missionary efforts headed by stake and local Church leaders have the greatest potential to make greater inroads among the Kanak population. Mission outreach among immigrants from Wallis and Futuna may facilitate an official Church establishment in these unreached islands that are a dependency of France, populated by 16,000. There is no Church Internet site for New Caledonia. The creation and use of a website that provides culturally-tailored approaches to local needs and circumstances may help increase missionary productivity and expand national outreach.

Member Activity and Convert Retention

Latter-day Saints in New Caledonia appear to have achieved convert retention and member activity rates higher than or comparable to most other nations in Oceania. Whether this is due to higher religious activity rates among the indigenous Kanak population or mission policies regarding convert baptisms and reactivation efforts is unclear. Distance from mission headquarters has reduced the number of full-time missionaries assigned, but has forced local members to be more self-reliant in their church responsibilities.

Ethnic Issues and Integration

Church leaders have consistently addressed ethnic integration challenges by avoiding political discussions at church and fostering interethnic fellowshiping and gospel teaching. Few ethnic integration issues appear to have been manifest at church recently. There appear to be few, if any, members among Southeast Asian immigrant groups.

Language Issues

There are no Church materials in New Caledonian Melanesian languages due to the small number of speakers of each of these languages. Fluency in French is high among the indigenous population, reducing the need for Church materials in local indigenous languages. There are no realistic prospects for translations of Church materials into these languages at present.

Missionary Service

Twenty-seven full-time missionaries were assigned to New Caledonia in mid-2010. The size of the missionary force in New Caledonia has appeared to range from 20-30 for most years. Few local members have served full-time missions, and New Caledonia appears highly dependent on foreign missionaries to staff the island missionary force. Mission and area leaders have hesitated assigning full-time missionaries to congregations in the Loyalty Islands due to distance from mission headquarters in Vanuatu.

Leadership

The Church has greatly benefited from several strong local leaders who have provided valuable service and mentoring in their respective callings. Ricardo Gaya served as district president for sixteen years between 1981 and 1996^[17] and served as the Madagascar Antananarivo Mission president from 2006 to 2009.^[18] Limited numbers of qualified, active priesthood holders have likely prevented the creation of additional congregations. However, the creation of the first stake with close to the bare minimum of nominal membership required indicates strength in active priesthood leadership. Moreover, no Church employees were among members of the stake presidency when the stake was organized in 2012,^[19] suggesting no significant challenges with reliance on Church employees to staff essential leadership positions. In mid-2019, all branches in outlying areas of the stake had local members who served as branch president, indicating that even these small congregations have some established local leadership.

Temple

New Caledonia is assigned to the Suva Fiji Temple district. Temple trips appear to occur regularly for members in the district. Long distance from the Suva Fiji Temple, the crossing of political boundaries, and transportation costs require members to adequately prepare for temple excursions weeks or months in advance. Many members attend the temple in other Pacific nations. New Caledonian members are known for their faithful temple attendance as many travel to New Zealand or Tahiti each year to attend the temple for three or four weeks at a time.^[20] French Polynesia is the only other nation in the region that has French-speaking membership, which requires New Caledonian members to be self-sufficient in staffing their temple needs. The Church may announce a small temple for New Caledonia or Vanuatu given recent rapid Church growth in Vanuatu and distance to the nearest temple. However, prospects for a temple in New Caledonia appear more likely once there are multiple stakes established.

Comparative Growth

New Caledonia has the fourth lowest percentage of Latter-day Saints in the South Pacific behind the Solomon Islands, Papua New Guinea, and Australia and the second largest population in the South Pacific without a mission. Membership and congregational growth rates have lagged behind most of Oceania. No other nation in Oceania has had full-time missionaries assigned for as long as New Caledonia and experienced as little church growth. Most nations in the region with as long as a Church presence as New Caledonia today report dramatically larger church memberships and more rapid past growth. For example, the first missionaries arrived to Kiribati in 1975, and today Kiribati boasts eight times as many members and more than three times as many congregations as New Caledonia but less than half the total population. Church growth trends are comparable to Guam, where, like New Caledonia, the indigenous population does not constitute a majority. New Caledonia and Fiji were the first Melanesian nations to have a Church presence, but Fiji has experienced greater growth as the Church in Fiji reported over 21,000 members, fifty wards and branches, four stakes, three districts, one mission, and one temple as of 2019.

Missionary-focused Christian groups who have arrived more recently have experienced steady growth but maintain a limited presence in New Caledonia. Seventh-Day Adventists have reported an increase of 50% for membership in the past decade. Jehovah's Witnesses claim as many members as Latter-day Saints but maintain over three times as many congregations. The number of active Jehovah's Witnesses has increased by 500 in the 2010s. These groups face the same challenges as Latter-day Saints, namely, strong ethno-religious ties among Kanaks, the need to tailor proselytism to the secular Europeans, and challenges expanding national outreach into remote regions.

Future Prospects

Slow membership and congregational growth in New Caledonia since the 2000s and difficulties with sustainable expansion of the Church into additional areas generate a mediocre outlook for church growth in the coming years. Additional cities may have branches or wards organized, particularly in the Nouméa area where the Church is the strongest and where most New Caledonians reside. However, the outlook for expansion into other areas of the islands appears unfavorable given persistent struggles with leadership development and tribalism in rural communities. The opening of additional cities to proselytism through efforts initiated by stake leadership, greater numbers of local members serving full-time missions, and stronger member-missionary approaches are needed to reverse slow church growth trends.

[1] "New Caledonia," Wikipedia.org, retrieved 12 November 2010. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Caledonia

[2] "New Caledonia," Countries and Their Cultures," retrieved 13 November 2010. <http://www.everyculture.com/Ma-Ni/New-Caledonia.html>

[3] Larsen, Jeffrey; Larsen, Karen. "New Caledonia celebrates Church growth." LDS Church News. 2 June 2012. <https://www.thechurchnews.com/archive/2012-06-02/new-caledonia-celebrates-church-growth-38465>

[4] Johnson, R. Val. "Islands of Light," Ensign, Mar 2000, 31.

[5] "New Caledonia," Country Profile, retrieved 13 November 2010. <http://beta-newsroom.lds.org/country/new-caledonia>

[6] "We have been on a long journey—but it was a great occasion," LDS Church News, 1 July 2000. <http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/38065/We-have-been-on-a-long-journey—but-it-was-a-great-occasion.html>

[7] "How this South Pacific athlete's search for God led him to the Church." LDS Church News. 6 June 2018. <https://www.thechurchnews.com/members/2018-06-06/how-this-south-pacific-athletes-search-for-god-led-him-to-the-church-47301>

[8] Weaver, Sarah Jane. "Four Latter-day Saint missionaries injured in serious car accident in New Caledonia." The Church News. 17 February 2019. <https://www.thechurchnews.com/global/2019-02-17/four-latter-day-saint-missionaries-injured-in-serious-car-accident-in-new-caledonia>

[9] Johnson, R. Val. "Islands of Light," Ensign, Mar 2000, 31.

[10] Johnson, R. Val. "Islands of Light," Ensign, Mar 2000, 31.

[11] Johnson, R. Val. "Islands of Light," Ensign, Mar 2000, 31.

[12] "We have been on a long journey—but it was a great occasion," LDS Church News, 1 July 2000. <http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/38065/We-have-been-on-a-long-journey—but-it-was-a-great-occasion.html>

[13] Larsen, Jeffrey; Larsen, Karen. "New Caledonia celebrates Church growth." LDS Church News. 2 June 2012. <https://www.thechurchnews.com/archive/2012-06-02/new-caledonia-celebrates-church-growth-38465>

[14] Johnson, R. Val. "Islands of Light," Ensign, Mar 2000, 31.

[15] "Where We Work," LDS Charities. Accessed 15 May 2019. <https://www.ldscharities.org/where-we-work>

[16] Johnson, R. Val. "Islands of Light," Ensign, Mar 2000, 31.

[17] Johnson, R. Val. "Islands of Light," Ensign, Mar 2000, 31.

[18] "New mission presidents," LDS Church News, 6 May 2006. <http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/48920/New-mission-presidents.html>

[19] "New stake presidents." LDS Church News. 23 June 2012. <https://www.thechurchnews.com/archive/2012-06-23/new-stake-presidents-38514>

[20] Swensen, Jason. "Legacy of faith continues in Pacific Area, visit from Elder Nelson and Elder Andersen." LDS Church News. 11 March 2014. <https://www.thechurchnews.com/archive/2014-03-11/legacy-of-faith-continues-in-pacific-area-visit-from-elder-nelson-and-elder-andersen>