

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.



Nepal

Population: 30.99 millions (#42 out of countries)

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Geography

Area: 147,181 square km. Sandwiched between China and India, Nepal consists of flat plains rising to the tallest mountains in the world in the Himalayas. Mountainous regions have cool summers and severe winters, whereas plains regions have subtropical, hot monsoon summers and warm winters. The Ghangara, Gandak, and Kosi Rivers flow through Nepal into India. Thunderstorms, flooding, landslides, and drought are natural hazards. Environmental issues include deforestation and water pollution. Nepal is divided into seven provinces.

Peoples

Chhettri: 16.6%

Brahman-Hill: 12.2%

Magar: 7.1%

Tharu: 6.6

Tamang: 5.8%

Newar: 5.0%

Kami: 4.8%

Muslim: 4.4%

Yadav: 4.0%

Rai: 2.3%

Gurung: 2.0%

Damai/Dholii: 1.8%

Thakuri: 1.6%

Limbu: 1.5%

Sarki: 1.4%

Teli: 1.4%

Chamar/Harijan/Ram: 1.3%

Koiri/Kushwaha: 1.2%

Other: 19.0%

The earliest inhabitants were from the Tharu and Newar groups. Most ethnic groups settled Nepal from India, Assam, northern Burma, Tibet, and Kashmir. Chhettri and Brahman-Hill arrived from northern India. Refugees from Bhutan and Tibet number 6,626 and 13,509, respectively.

Population: 29,717,587 (July 2018)

Annual Growth Rate: 1.09% (2018)

Fertility Rate: 2.07 children born per woman (2018)

Life Expectancy: 70.6 male, 72.0 female (2018)

Languages: Nepali (44.6%), Maithali (11.7%), Bhojpuri (6.0%), Tharu (5.8%), Tamang (5.1%), Newar (3.2%), Bajjika (3.0%), Magar (3.0%), Doteli (3.0%), Urdu (2.6%), Avadhi (1.9%), Limbu (1.3%), Gurung (1.2%), Baitedeli (1.0%), other (6.4%), unspecified (0.2%). Nepali is the official language. English is commonly used in government and business. One hundred twenty-three living languages are spoken. Languages with over one million speakers include Nepali (13.3 million), Maithili (3.5 million), Bhojpuri (1.8 million), Tharu dialects (1.7 million), and Tamang dialects (1.5 million).

Literacy: 63.9% (2015)

History

Nepal consisted of several small kingdoms in 1000 BC that were absorbed into Indian kingdoms around the birth of Christ. Nepal was heavily influenced by neighboring India, yet became three separate kingdoms in the late fifteenth century. The kingdoms were united in 1768 by Prithvi Narayan Shah. Expansion into neighboring territories occurred in the early nineteenth century. The British attacked Nepal and gained several peripheral territories such as Sikkim as well as achieving heavy influence on Nepal between the war and the end of the colonial era. A hereditary monarchy ruled between the mid-nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Greater democratization took place following the appointment of a cabinet for the king in 1951 and multi-party elections in 1990. In 1996, Maoists extremists began fighting for total control of government, resulting in a decade of civil war. The Maoist insurgency took control in the late 2000s and in 2008 formed a coalition government following elections. Several significant changes to government occurred in the 2010s such as the Constituent Assembly becoming the parliament and first elections in 20 years. The Nepal Communist Party is the ruling party in Parliament as of 2019.

Culture

Hinduism heavily influences society. Saturday is the day of worship. Nepalese drink tea and milk after waking in the morning.

The caste system influences many aspects of everyday life. Access to Hindu temples has been limited in the past to lower castes, but government legislation prohibits discrimination based on caste. Lower castes and the Dalits (untouchables) continue to experience discrimination. Cigarette consumption rates are low, whereas alcohol consumption rates are moderate compared to the world average.

Economy

GDP per capita: $2,700 (2017) [4.5% of U.S.]

Human Development Index: 0.574 (2017)

Corruption Index: 31 (2018)

Nepal is one of the least economically developed countries in Asia. There is a significant lack of skilled labor. One-quarter of the population lives below the poverty line. Sixty-nine percent (69%) of the workforce labors in agriculture mainly cultivating pulses, rice, corn and wheat. Tourism is a growing industry. Over half of imports and exports occur with India. Primary exports include clothing, carpets, jute-based products, and grain. Due to civil unrest, a landlocked position, and frequent natural disasters, economic development is limited. Potential sources of wealth include hydroelectric power and increased tourism. Corruption is pervasive, but there have been some improvements in perceived corruption in the past decade. Those found engaged in corruption typically receive little or no punishment.

Faiths

Hindu: 81.3%

Buddhist: 9.0%

Muslim: 4.4%

Kirant: 3.1%

Christian: 1.4%

Other: 0.5%

Unspecified: 0.3%

Christians

Denominations – Members – Congregations

Evangelicals – 850,801

Catholic – 10,000

Seventh Day Adventists – 9,328 – 108

Jehovah’s Witnesses – 2,629 – 41

Latter-day Saints – ~200 – 1

Religion

Originally the only official Hindu state in the world, Nepal is strongly influenced by the caste system. Following the rise of Maoists to power, Nepal was declared a secular state. Hinduism has the strongest influence on Nepali religion, followed by

Buddhism. Kirant is a shamanistic religion practiced by the Kirat people. The percentage of Christians in the population widely varies based upon the source of this estimate, but it may be as high as 10%.[1]

Religious Freedom

Persecution Index: 32nd (2019)

The constitution protects religious freedom but forbids proselytism. It is illegal to convert an individual from one religion to another albeit individuals are able to change their religious affiliation if desired. Christian missionaries keep a low profile in the country due to several instances of arrests due to proselytism. No laws favor the Hindu majority albeit Hindu nationalism is seen as a threat to religious minorities. Although illegal, intimidation and prejudice towards lower castes frequently occur. Personal conversion to a different religion is allowed by law but often results in ostracism by family and the community for Hindus converting to Islam or Christianity. Violent attacks on Christians by Hindu extremist groups periodically occur.[2]

Largest Cities

Urban: 19.7% (2018)

Kathmandu, **Pokhara, Lalitpur, Biratnagar, Bharatpur, Birganj, Butwal, Dharan, Mahendranagar, Dhangadhi.**

Cities in **bold** do not have congregations of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

One of the ten largest cities has a Church congregation. Nine percent (9%) of the national population lives in the ten largest cities.

Church History

In February 1993, Elder Carmack and Elder Tai from the Asia Area Presidency made an investigatory trip to meet local members and expatriates in Kathmandu. Senior couple missionaries began serving on humanitarian assignment as early as 2001, and assisted with branch leadership development. Nepal became part of the India New Delhi Mission in late 2007. There were two humanitarian senior couples serving in Nepal in the late 2000s. Senior missionary couples on humanitarian assignment consistently served in Kathmandu in the 2010s. In 2010, translation of the Book of Mormon into Nepali began.[3] Many ethnic Nepali from Bhutan who entered the United States as refugees joined the Church in the 2010s, prompting the organization of the first and only Nepali-speaking branch of the Church outside of Nepal in Salt Lake City, Utah. Apostle Elder D. Todd Christofferson visited the Kathmandu Branch and delivered print copies of the newly published Nepali translation of the Book of Mormon in 2017. The president of Nepal was also delivered a copy of the new translation by Elder Christofferson.[4] The Church was not officially recognized as of mid-2019.

Membership Growth

Church Membership: ~200 (2018)

Following the first visit by Church representatives, there were seventeen members in Kathmandu in mid-1993. Members included Nepalese and foreigners.[5] In 2003, the first youth conference had twenty-one in attendance, seven of which were members.[6] By this time, the branch averaged twelve baptisms a year.[7] Fifteen were baptized in 2008. There were 133 members in 2010. There were seven convert baptisms in 2016.[8] Nepalese have joined the Church in many other nations, particularly India, the United States, Cyprus, and Australia but typically do not return to their homeland.

Congregational Growth

Branches: 1 Semi-Official Groups: 1 (2019)

The Kathmandu branch was organized by Elder Carmack and Elder Tai in 2001. No additional units have been organized since that time. Members lived in additional cities such as Chitwan, Itahari, and Pokhara as of 2018. However, no member groups officially operate in these locations. One of these cities has upwards of twenty people who attend informal meetings. In mid-2019, the India New Delhi Mission president authorized sacrament meetings to occur twice a month in Itahari.

Activity and Retention

In 2003, there were fifty active members in the Kathmandu Branch. Members, particularly youth, took responsibility in sharing

the Church's teachings and inviting friends and family to meetings. At the end of 2009 there were approximately one hundred active members. Thirteen were enrolled in seminary and institute during the 2008–2009 school year. There were 140 who attended a special devotional with Elder D. Todd Christofferson in 2017, including most of the members reported on Church records.[9] However, reports from visitors to the branch in the late 2010s indicated that church attendance generally ranged from 30-40.

Nationwide active membership is likely around fifty, or 25% of total church membership.

Language Materials

Languages with Latter-day Saint Scripture: Nepali, English.

The Book of Mormon is translated into Nepali. However, no other scriptures have been translated into Nepali or other indigenous languages. The Church has translated recent General Conference addresses, the Living Christ Testimony, The Family: A Proclamation to the World, the Articles of Faith, Gospel Fundamentals, and the Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith in Nepali.

Meetinghouses

The Kathmandu Branch meets in a renovated building. The sacrament service in Itahari likely meets in a member's home.

Health and Safety

Violence towards religious minority groups is a safety concern for missionaries and members. HIV/AIDS infects 0.2% of the population.

Humanitarian and Development Work

The Church has completed an impressive 227 humanitarian and development projects in Nepal since 1985.[10] The Church provided DPT immunizations in 1991.[11] Wheelchair donations have occurred since 2004.[12] In 2008, the Church donated 750 wheelchairs and partnered with other aid organizations in providing seven hundred 110 pound bags of rice for the Goldhap Bhutanese Refugee Camp and Sunsari District flood victims.[13] Clean water projects were conducted in 2006[14] and 2008.[15] Other projects have included Benson Food initiatives, maternal and newborn care, and vision care.[16]

Opportunities, Challenges, and Prospects

Religious Freedom

Current restrictions on proselytism severely limit missionary efforts. No direct proselytism is allowed; church growth occurs primarily through word of mouth through family and friends of local members and among those who express spontaneous interest. Christians report harassment from police and Hindu extremist groups.

Cultural Issues

In accordance with Hindu culture, Latter-day Saint meetings are held on Saturday. Converts from Hindu backgrounds often face ostracism from their families and communities. The widely practiced custom of drinking tea every morning presents a challenge for prospective converts. Hindu celebrations may also present challenges for members in balancing the Church's beliefs with their cultural customs. Few are familiar with Christianity, requiring prospective missionary approaches in Nepal to be tailored to those with a Hindu or Buddhist background in order to maximize understanding of Church teachings. Poverty and illiteracy are challenges for many.

National Outreach

Outreach remains very limited by geography and government. In 2003, members attending the Kathmandu branch came from a twenty-mile radius around Kathmandu.[17] Although most members reside in and around Kathmandu, the population is almost totally unreached and unaware of the Church's presence and teachings. It is difficult to find the Church's meetinghouse in Kathmandu due to the Church's sensitive status in the country. The India New Delhi Mission has not engaged in proselytism in

Nepal and appears to only respond to prospective members who live in Kathmandu. Efforts to meet face-to-face with members who live in additional cities have yet to occur. Mission leaders have contacted isolated members electronically. Also, the mission president visited Itahari in mid-2019 and authorized isolated members to hold sacrament meeting twice a month. Nevertheless, the India New Delhi Mission has one of the largest populations of any mission in the Church with 1.37 billion inhabitants.

Approximately 90% of Nepalis live outside of Kathmandu. Nepal's large rural population presents future challenges for outreach. The greatest opportunities for reaching the large numbers of people are in Kathmandu and in large cities near the Indian border, although the nation is very rural and only 9% live in the ten largest cities. Small cities and towns high in the Himalayas at times are difficult to access and have limited communication and transportation. Many ethnic groups do not have a single Latter-day Saint.

Member Activity and Convert Retention

Convert retention and member activity have been historically high for a nation with a small membership and limited Church presence, as manifest by the number of missionaries serving from the Kathmandu Branch and the member-missionary work accomplished by youth converts. However, more recent member activity rates are low. This has appeared primarily due to the bulk of active young adult membership relocating to India or other countries for better employment and educational opportunities. Although the Church in Nepal has historically benefited from a large number of active youth, there have been few opportunities for the Church to have returned missionaries use their skills to help build the Church in Kathmandu and other cities because of emigration. Furthermore, there are likely inactive Nepali members who have moved abroad whose whereabouts are unknown to Church leaders. Societal pressures to conform to Hinduism and the small Church community in Nepal are challenges for some members to remain active. Historically good convert retention rates have largely risen from member-missionary approaches to outreach and most converts developing weekly church attendance and a strong testimony prior to baptism. However, current member activity rates suggest that these retention rates have been low in the long-term given increases in total church membership.

Ethnic Issues and Integration

The caste system presents obstacles for membership growth and retention. Converts from varying castes and ethnic groups often have little social contact with each other outside of Church. These issues may lead to problems with assimilation. Ethnic groups who have relocated from other regions to Kathmandu may also face integration challenges.

Language Issues

The Church has yet to translate the remainder of Latter-day Saint scriptures into Nepali. No other indigenous languages have translations of Church materials or scriptures. Low literacy rates present obstacles, although opportunities exist for literacy programs as a form of service and passive mission outreach.

Missionary Service

Nepal is one of the few nations with fewer than 300 Latter-day Saints that would be self-sufficient in staffing its local missionary force if proselytism was permitted based upon historical averages. In late 2008, there were ten young men serving missions from Nepal. It is unclear whether such a large number of local members have perpetually served missions since this time. In 2017, there had been more than thirty people who have served full-time missions from the Kathmandu Branch since its organization.[18] Seminary and institute play a major role in providing missionary preparation for members desiring to serve missions.

Leadership

The Church has well developed local leadership in a country with small membership. Nepali members lead the Kathmandu Branch under the supervision of a senior missionary couple.[19] A large number of Nepali young men have served missions, many in neighboring India. As these missionaries return and stay in Nepal, they can contribute greatly to leadership and establishing the Church. Returned missionaries may prove instrumental in establishing additional congregations and assisting in Church outreach outside the capital in accordance to Nepali law. However, the potential of returned missionaries to help with leadership development has yet to be harnessed due to steady emigration, particularly to New Delhi, India.

Temple

Nepal currently pertains to the Hong Kong China Temple District but will likely be reassigned to the Bengaluru India Temple upon its completion. Temple trips from Kathmandu rarely occur due to the small, young membership, financial constraints, and distance.

Comparative Growth

Other nations in South or Southeast Asia with proselytism restrictions have seen results similar to Nepal. Bangladesh has had a branch for several decades with around the same number of active members. Church membership in Laos has met as a branch since the early 2000s, but growth has been more significant as there are two branches in Vientiane. Pakistan has seen the greatest success, growing from 130 members in three branches in 1993 to over 4,000 members and 13 branches in the late 2010s, although full-time proselyting missionaries have been key to this growth. The Church in Nepal has been an outlier in terms of the large number of members who have served a full-time missions, and the large number of returned missionaries who have left the country to pursue employment and education abroad.

Christians have struggled to gain converts due to cultural pressures and government restrictions, but most denominations have reported significant growth since the 2000s. Christian groups grow in membership as their members share their faith with friends and family regardless of concerns with Nepali legislation that bars proselytism. Seventh-Day Adventists report more than 9,000 members and over one hundred congregations. Adventist membership has doubled within the past decade. Jehovah's Witnesses report moderate growth. Witnesses operate forty-one congregations in approximately two dozen cities.

Future Prospects

As local members share their faith with family and friends and missionaries return home and stay in Nepal, greater growth will occur. A second branch in Kathmandu may be organized to reduce travel time for members or from a lack of space in the current renovated meetinghouse. However, recent reports on the number of active members in Kathmandu suggest no imminent plans or prospects for more units to be created given leadership shortages. Additional groups or small branches may be organized in larger cities as returned missionaries move to these locations, share their beliefs with those around them, and have adequate leadership experience to operate congregations. Greater outreach with humanitarian missionaries will likely not occur until greater religious freedom is granted. Translations of additional Latter-day Saint scriptures into Nepali are needed, as well as Gospel study and scriptures translated into additional languages spoken by more than one million people. Literacy programs also present good opportunities for passive missionary service.

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