

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.



Marshall Islands

Population: 0.07 millions (#209 out of countries)

By David Stewart and Matt Martinich

Geography

Area: 181 square km. Located in the northern Micronesia in Oceania, the Marshall Islands consist of two island chains and five separate islands. The two island chains, the Ratak and Ralik Chains, contain 29 atolls and many small islets. Most of these islands and atolls sit at sea level and are made up of coral limestone and sand. The climate is tropical and wet, although water shortages have occurred in the past on the islands. Due to the Marshall Islands' location in the Pacific Ocean, typhoons are not as frequent as in other areas of Oceania. Sea level rise is an environmental concern. The country is divided into twenty-four municipalities.

Peoples

Marshallese: 92.1%

Mixed Marshallese: 5.9%

Other: 2%

The Marshall Islands have little ethnic diversity, with 92.1% identified as Marshallese and an additional 5.9% classified as of mixed Marshallese heritage. Other ethnicities make up the remaining 2% of the population and are likely concentrated in Majuro and Ebeye.

Population: 75,684 (July 2018)

Annual Growth Rate: 1.5% (2018)

Fertility Rate: 2.98 children born per woman (2018)

Life Expectancy: 71.4 male, 76.0 female (2018)

Languages: Marshallese (98.2%), Other (1.8%). Both Marshallese and English are spoken as official languages for the islands, the latter being a commonly spoken second language.

Literacy Rate: 98.3% (2011)

History

The Marshallese people were believed to have first settled the islands thousands of years ago. Europeans explored the islands but did not claim the islands or establish a presence on them until the late nineteenth century. The Marshall Islands received their name from a British captain named Captain John Charles Marshall. Spain, and later Germany, occupied the islands, which were eventually taken by the Japanese legally after World War I. The United States captured the islands in World War II and added them to its overseas possessions. Following the war, nuclear tests were done in the islands, most notably on Bikini Atoll. Nuclear tests resulted in the evacuation of several of the islands due to radioactive fallout. Several of these islands remain uninhabited today. Greater autonomy was given to the islands, and independence occurred from the United States in 1986.

Culture

Marshallese culture shares many similarities with other nations in Micronesia. Historically, they traveled between the various islands in the area on canoes, which they were highly skilled in making. Like many Oceanic peoples, the Marshallese society is matrilineal.

Economy

GDP per capita: $3,600 (2017) [6.02% of U.S.]

Human Development Index: 0.708 (2017)

Corruption Index: N/A

The fragile economy in the Marshall Islands depends heavily on the United States for survival. Due to the small population of the islands, which have limited natural resources, little economic growth has occurred. Services account for 85.7% of the country's GDP. The nation sees its greatest prospects for additional economic growth through tourism. Agriculture is important, with coconut, tomatoes, melons, taro, and breadfruit being the greatest cash crops. Fishing, especially for tuna, is important for the agricultural sector of the economy. These foods are exported along with craft items. Industry makes up 9.9% of the economy. Human trafficking is a concern.

Faiths

Christian: 97.5%

Other: 2.5%

Christians

Denomination – Members – Congregations

Catholic – less than 10,000

Latter-day Saints – 7,089 – 13

Seventh Day Adventists – 882 – 10

Jehovah's Witnesses – 226 – 4

Religion

According to the 1999 census, nearly all Marshallese (97.5%) belong to a Christian denomination. Protestants account for 54.8% of the population, and the Assemblies of God make up 25.8% of Marshallese. Other smaller Christian churches include Catholics (8.4%), Bukot nan Jesus (2.8%), Mormon (2.1%), and other Christians denominations (3.6%). One percent (1%) of the population adheres to other religious, and 1.5% do not have a religion.[1]

Religious Freedom

Religious freedom is existent on the islands as a result of the country originally belonging to the United States. However, there have been some challenges regarding societal intolerance of Muslim immigrants.[2]

Major Cities

Urban: 77% (2018)

Rita, Ebeye, Laura, Ajeltake, **Enewetak.**

Villages listed in **bold** do not have an official congregation of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

The five largest cities and villages are listed in descending order by population. All population centers with over 1,000 inhabitants have a congregation of the Church. The five most populous cities and villages make up 56% of the total population of the country. Majuro, the nation's capital, is home to nearly 28,000 people on the atoll.

Church History

The first Church presence in the Marshall Islands was established in Majuro. Elders William Wardel and Steven Cooper arrived in early 1977 and baptized the first convert who had first learned about the Church in Hawaii. In 2006, the Church created Marshall Islands Majuro Mission from the Fiji Suva and Micronesia Guam Missions. The new mission included the Marshall Islands, Kiribati, and Nauru. The mission name later changed to the Marshall Islands/Kiribati Mission with headquarters remaining in Majuro. The first stake was organized in 2009.

Membership Growth

Church Membership: 7,089 (2018)

By the end of the year, twenty-seven converts were baptized, with membership increasing to 177 by the end of 1979. Membership reached 1,100 members in 1990.[3] By 2000 there were 3,524 members.

Membership steadily increased most years during the 2000s and 2010s. Church membership totaled 4,296 in 2005, 5,093 in 2010, 6,187 in 2013, 7,446 in 2016, and 7,089 in 2018. Annual membership growth rates are highly variable, but generally range from 2-7%. The decline in membership in the late 2010s was due to the misclassification of two branches in Kiribati during previous years, and the reassignment of membership for these branches to Kiribati beginning in 2017. In 2018, 9.4% of the population was a member of the Church on church records.

Congregational Growth

Wards: 12 Branches: 1 Groups: 5? (May 2019)

The first branch, the Laura Branch, was created in 1978 with a second branch named the Rita Branch created shortly thereafter. A district with five branches was created in 1986. In 1987, there were five branches in the Majuro District.

Due to a military base on Kwajalein, a branch was created in 1978 for U.S. military and citizens living on the island. Missionary work did not open on the more populous, neighboring island of Ebeye until 1989. A district in Kwajalein was organized in 1991, which also included Ebeye.

Branches were established in more remote areas of the Marshall Islands in the late 1980s in Arno and Mili.[4] However, these branches were closed by the early 2000s. By 2000, there were eleven branches throughout the islands. The Majuro District had seven branches and the Kwajalein District had four branches.

Senior missionaries reported that as early as 2004, the Micronesia Guam Mission was striving to help Marshallese Church members in the Majuro District learn how to function as a stake.[5] Senior missionaries strengthened the branches and district, but stakehood was not reached until June 2009 when the Majuro Marshall Islands Stake was created. The new stake included the following six wards and one branch: The Delap, Jenrok, Laura, Long Island Majuro, Rita and Uliga Wards and the Ajeltake Branch. With the creation of the new stake, the Marshall Islands became the nation with the smallest population with a stake of the Church. A second stake was organized in Kwajalein in 2016 with all five branches in the former district maturing into wards.

In 2019, the Church organized a mission branch that serviced outlying northern atolls not part of a stake, including Bikini, Enewetak, Rongelap, and Utrik. With the exception of Arno Atoll (which is assigned to the Delap Ward of the Majuro Marshall Islands Stake), all other atolls pertain to the Kwajalein Marshall Islands Stake. During the 2010s, the Church opened at least five member groups on additional atolls, including Ailinglaplap, Ebon, Jaluit, Ujae, and Wotje. However, as of 2019 it was unclear whether all of these member groups continued to operate.

Marshallese Church members also live outside of the Marshall Islands, meeting in wards and branches designated as Marshallese speaking in the United States. Four Marshallese branches were functioning in late 2009 in Arkansas, Hawaii, Oklahoma, and Washington. The branches in Hawaii and Oklahoma were created prior to 2006, and the branches in Washington and Arkansas were created in 2007 and 2008, respectively. By May 2019, there were two Marshallese-speaking wards (one in West Valley City, Utah and one in Spokane, Washington) and five Marshallese-speaking branches (one in Springdale, Arkansas; one in Waipahu, Hawaii; one in Enid, Oklahoma; one in Cleburne, Texas; one in Auburn, Washington) in the United States.

Activity and Retention

Member inactivity is a significant challenge for the Church in the Marshall Islands. Membership growth has significantly outpaced congregational growth due to convert attrition and member inactivity. Since 1999, the number of congregations has increased by three, whereas the number of members has more than doubled. The average number of members per congregation increased from 186 in 1989 to 337 in 1999, 430 in 2009, and 591 in 2018. Sixty attended the seminary program in 1991 in Majuro.[6] Returned missionaries who served in Ebeye during the early 2010s reported that branches had 60-70 who attended church each week. Sixty attended the Laura Ward in the mid-2010s. One returned missionary who served in the mid-2010s reported that most wards had approximately one hundred active members. Convert retention rates for one year after baptisms appear at approximately 50%. Total active membership appears no greater than 1,200, or 17% of Church-reported membership.

Language Materials

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

The Book of Mormon translation in Marshallese became first available in 1984 in selections and in its entirety by 2005. The Doctrine and Covenants and The Pearl of Great Price were translated in 2018. The Church has translated a large amount of ecclesiastical materials in Marshallese including General Conference, priesthood, Relief Society, Primary, Sunday School, young men, and young women’s materials.

Meetinghouses

The first Church built meetinghouses began construction in 1984 for the Laura and Rita Branches. Most of the buildings the Church uses for worship are Church-built meetinghouses. There were eight ward meetinghouses in 2019.

Humanitarian and Development Work

The Church has conducted at least sixty-two humanitarian and development projects in the Marshall Islands since 1985 that have included clean water initiatives, community projects, emergency response, and wheelchair donations.[7] In 2009, the Church collected needed items donated by business and individuals in the United States and distributed them to schools on Majuro.

Opportunities, Challenges, and Prospects

Religious Freedom

There are no limitations on religious freedom in the Marshall Islands.

Cultural Issues

Although part of the United States until 1986, the Marshall Islands struggle economically. Many immigrate to the United States to seek a higher standard of living, creating problems to establish a growing, stable community in the Church. Returned missionaries note that competition among Christian denominations for converts is high. However, no significant hostilities occur

between the Church and other religious groups. Areca (betel) nut is commonly chewed. Local church leaders have taught against areca nut use as it is addictive and a carcinogen.

National Outreach

Most Marshallese are reached by the Church. Wards currently operate on atolls inhabited by 74% of the population. Member groups and wards together may reach as many as 85% of the population. The most populous atolls of Majuro and Kwajalein have several congregations and all of the most populous areas are well-reached by wards. The Marshall Islands/Kiribati Mission is headquartered in Majuro and provides mission resources to the country despite its small population.

The Church has periodically engaged in efforts to expand national outreach into additional atolls. However, these efforts have yielded few results as no additional branches on outlying atolls have been organized since the Lae Branch was created in 1992. Remote, small populations that are difficult to reach pose significant challenges for traditional missionary approaches that employ full-time missionaries. Furthermore, member groups can easily close when active members move away. The Church publishes Marshallese translations of the scriptures and many church materials online on its official website.[8]

Member Activity and Convert Retention

Significant member inactivity and convert attrition over the past two decades is reflected in membership growth greatly outpacing congregational growth during this period. The CIA World Factbook listed Mormons accounting for 2.1% of the population according to the 1999 census. This figure is much lower than the raw membership numbers provided by the Church, which accounted for 6.5% of the population at the time. It is likely that many members' whereabouts are unknown to the Church due to immigration to the United States or moving to atolls without a Church presence. Double affiliation of inactive members with other Christian denominations appears to be a significant problem. Convert retention rates appear to have improved in recent years for one year after baptism although long-term retention of converts appears to remain problematic.

Ethnic Issues and Integration

No significant concerns with ethnic integration issues have been reported.

Language Issues

The translation of all Latter-day Saint scriptures into Marshallese presents good opportunities for gospel study, missionary work, and testimony development.

Missionary Service

Marshallese serve full-time missions regularly, but the Church relies on foreign missionaries to adequately staff its missionary force on the islands. Active outreach targeting youth may culminate in greater numbers of local members serving missions in the years to come.

Leadership

The Church operates two stakes and all congregations are wards, indicating that the Church meets the minimum number of active members and priesthood holders to operate stakes and wards. Leadership development appears fair. Multiple Church employees were among stake presidency members when the Majuro Marshall Islands Stake presidency was reorganized in 2011.[9] However, no Church employees were among members of the newly organized Kwajalein Marshall Islands Stake in 2016[10] or the reorganized Kwajalein Marshall Islands Stake presidency in 2018.[11]

Temple

The Marshall Islands are assigned to the Suva Fiji Temple. Temple trips appear to occur regularly, although members appear to travel to additional temples such as in Hawaii for temple worship. The Marshall Islands will likely be assigned to the Yigo Guam Temple once the temple is completed. A small temple in Majuro or Kiribati appears likely in the coming years due to significant growth in Kiribati.

Comparative Growth

The Church in the Marshall Islands reported the eighth highest percentage of members of any country in the world as of 2018. However, member activity rates rank among the lowest in the Pacific. Congregational growth rates in the Marshall Islands have

been comparable to other Micronesian nations, such as the Federated States of Micronesia and Guam.

Other nontraditional proselytism groups report a small presence in the Marshall Islands. Jehovah's Witnesses have reported an increase of approximately forty members in the past decade and a net increase of only one congregation. Seventh-Day Adventist membership has increased by 43% in the past decade although there are only 882 members and 10 congregations (three churches, seven companies) nationwide.

Future Prospects

The Church has established a significant presence in the Marshall Islands despite its small population, remote location, significant member inactivity problems in the Church, and many Marshallese members who relocate to the United States. Nevertheless, these difficulties will continue to pose challenges for greater growth within the foreseeable future. The Church may organize additional wards or branches on Majuro or Kwajalein once the number of active members warrants this decision. Member groups on other atolls may become branches once there is a sufficient number of active adult members to fill essential leadership positions. A small temple on Majuro or in Kiribati appears likely in the foreseeable future due to steady growth in the region and distance to the nearest planned temple in Guam.

[1] "2017 Report on International Religious Freedom: Marshall Islands." U.S. Department of State. 29 May 2018. https://www.state.gov/reports/2017-report-on-international-religious-freedom/marshall-islands/

[2] "2017 Report on International Religious Freedom: Marshall Islands." U.S. Department of State. 29 May 2018. https://www.state.gov/reports/2017-report-on-international-religious-freedom/marshall-islands/

[3] "Marshall Islands," Country Profile, 2 April 2011. http://newsroom.lds.org/country/marshall-islands

[4] Leddy, Herbert. "Gospel gaining foothold on 2 atolls in Marshalls through 'pioneer' efforts," LDS Church News, 4 March 1989. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/18560/Gospel-gaining-foothold-on-2-atolls-in-Marshalls-through-pioneer-efforts.html

[5] "Living by the scriptures," LDS Church News, 22 April 2006. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/48869/Living-by-the-scriptures.html

[6] "Island seminary teacher shares 'loving radiance,'" LDS Church News, 24 August 1991. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/20955/Island-seminary-teacher-shares-loving-radiance.html

[7] "Where We Work." LDS Charities. Accessed 18 May 2019. https://www.ldscharities.org/where-we-work

[8] https://www.lds.org/study?lang=mah

[9] "New stake presidents." LDS Church News. 12 February 2011. https://www.thechurchnews.com/archive/2011-02-12/new-stake-presidents-36657

[10] "New stake presidents." LDS Church News. 1 December 2016. https://www.thechurchnews.com/archive/2016-12-01/new-stake-presidents-45102

[11] "Here are the recently called stake presidents." The Church News. 16 November 2018. https://www.thechurchnews.com/callings/2018-11-17/recently-called-new-stake-presidents-48436