



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.



Kazakhstan

Population: 17.95 millions (#62 out of countries)

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Geography

Area: 2,724,900 square km. Occupying a vast area of Central Asia, Kazakhstan borders Russia, China, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan and is the ninth largest country in the world. Kazakhstan experiences a continental climate characterized by cold winters, hot summers, and arid to semi-arid conditions. The vast majority of the landscape is flat steppe. High, rugged mountains stretch along much of the southeastern border. The Tian Shan Mountains along the Kyrgyz border reach heights of over 20,000 feet (7,000 meters), and the Altai Mountains are found in extreme eastern Kazakhstan. The Caspian Sea, the largest inland sea in the world, forms the southeastern boundary. Lake Balkhash, which has both fresh and salt water regions, sits in east central Kazakhstan and the salty Aral Sea, which occupies only 10% of its original size, straddles the Uzbek border. Important rivers include the Syr Darya, Ural, and Irtysh. Desert covers many areas on the southwest. Earthquakes and mudslides in the south are natural hazards. Environmental issues include radioactive and toxic contaminants in the soil from the Soviet era, the diversion of rivers for irrigation from the shrinking Aral Sea, chemical pesticides and salts from the Aral Sea driven in large dust storms, water pollution in the Caspian Sea, and inefficient agricultural practices such as the overuse of fertilizers and pesticides. Russia leases the city of Baikonur for its space program. Kazakhstan is administratively divided into fourteen provinces and four cities.

Peoples

Kazakh: 63.1%

Russian: 23.7%

Uzbek: 2.9%

Ukrainian: 2.1%

Uyghur: 1.4%

Tatar: 1.3%

German: 1.1%

Other: 4.4%

Kazakhs, Uzbeks, Tatars, and Uyghurs are Turkic ethnic groups, whereas Russians and Ukrainians are Slavic ethnic groups. Kazakhs populate all regions and constitute the majority of the population everywhere except in most areas of northern Kazakhstan. Russians are concentrated in northern Kazakhstan where they are the largest ethnic group as well as in patches stretching from Almaty to Russia along the Chinese border. Ukrainians live in pockets along the Russian border and northern Kazakhstan from the Zhayya (Ural) River to northeast Kazakhstan, whereas Germans live in pockets in northern Kazakhstan. Uzbeks live in the southernmost areas, and Uyghurs reside in areas between Almaty and China. Kazakhstan's population slightly contracted in size during the 1990s due to the emigration of Russians.

Population: 18,744,548 (July 2018)

Annual Growth Rate: 0.98% (2018)

Fertility Rate: 2.22 children born per woman (2018)

Life Expectancy: 66.2 male, 76.3 female (2018)

Languages: Kazakh (64.4%), Russian (12.6%), other or unspecified (23%). Additional minority languages with sizable numbers of speakers include Uzbek, Tatar, and Uyghur. Kazakh and Russian are the official languages. Russian is often used in business and communication between ethnicities. Russian is spoken as a first or second language by 95% of the population. Only Kazakh (12.1 million) and Russian (2.4 million) have over one million native speakers.

Literacy: 99.8% (2015)

History

Kazakhstan finds its roots in Turkic and Mongol tribes in the thirteenth century. A Kazakh national identity began to take shape over the following centuries as the Kazakh language became more distinguished. Warfare and conflict with neighboring nations and peoples occurred in the seventeenth century. In the eighteenth century, Russia gained control of Kazakhstan, which in 1936 became a Soviet Republic. During the 1930s, a massive famine resulted in large population decreases. Immigrants began arriving and settling regions of Kazakhstan, particularly in the 1950s and 1960s when the USSR sought to rapidly increase agricultural output through the "Virgin Lands" program. The program increased agricultural productivity somewhat but with drastic environmental consequences that continue today. Independence from the Soviet Union occurred in 1991 and resulted in many Russians leaving the country as Kazakh nationalism reemerged. Almaty was the original capital until Astana became the capital in 1998. Kazakhstan has enjoyed greater stability and economic prosperity than other former Soviet Republics in Central Asia since independence. Significant progress with modernizing the country and improving the quality of living occurred in the 2010s. Today, Kazakhstan stands as an important economic and political actor in the region. In 2018, Kazak President Nursultan Nazarbayev announced an official change in the Kazakh language script from the Cyrillic alphabet to the Latin alphabet.

Culture

Kazakhs are traditionally pastoralists and have relied heavily on their livestock for survival. Meat is widely consumed, and fermented mare's milk is a national beverage. Alcohol and tobacco cigarette consumption rates are higher than world averages. The Kazakh New Year is a major celebration. The government moved the capital from Almaty to Astana to facilitate greater cooperation between Kazakhs and Russians and to better administer the large country from a more centralized location.

Economy

GDP per capita: \$26,300 (2017) [44% of U.S.]

Human Development Index: 0.800 (2017)

Corruption Index: 31 (2017)

Partially due to infrastructure developed by the Soviets, Kazakhstan has the most developed economy out of the former Soviet Republics in Central Asia. Wealth is evenly distributed. Abundant mineral deposits and oil reserves drive much of the strength and development of the economy. Oil pipelines have begun to flow over the past decade, carrying oil to surrounding nations with ocean access for worldwide distribution. China in particular has taken keen interest in Kazakhstan's oil potential. Large amounts of productive farmland form an integral part of the economy. Services account for 61.2% of the GDP. Industry produces 34.1% of the GDP. Primary agriculture products include grain, potatoes, vegetables, melons, and livestock, whereas primary industries include oil and mineral extraction. Most export commodities come from oil or mineral extraction. Primary trade

partners include Russia, China, and Italy.

Kazakhstan experiences high levels of corruption that have persisted over the past two decades with only minor improvements in recent years. Law enforcement has been accused of corruption by demanding bribes for crossing borders. Bribery and corrupt practices have worsened in the oil industry as additional drilling and exploration has occurred. Corrupt practices are claimed to be most prevalent in administration.[\[1\]](#) Corruption is regarded as the primary constraint that impedes doing business in Kazakhstan.[\[2\]](#)

Faiths

Muslim: 70.2%

Christian: 26.2%

Atheist: 2.8%

Unspecified: 0.6%

Other: 0.2%

Christians

Denominations – Members – Congregations

Russian Orthodox – 3,340,000

Catholic – 380,000

Jehovah's Witnesses – 17,639 – 260

Seventh Day Adventists – 2,508 – 66

Latter-day Saints – 197 – 2

Religion

Nomadic lifestyles and a communist legacy have been responsible for low levels of religious conviction among Kazakhstanis. Many are culturally Muslim or Christian but do not view their identified faiths as important in everyday life. Religious demography differs greatly based upon location and ethnicity. Kazakhs, Uzbeks, Uyghurs, and Tatars are historically Muslim. Eastern Orthodox Christians typically include ethnic Russians, Ukrainians, and other Eastern Europeans. Most Catholics are ethnic minorities from Germany and Eastern Europe. The highest concentration of practicing Muslims is along the Uzbek border.[\[3\]](#) Protestants groups form 2% of the population and include many Germans and Koreans.

Religious Freedom

Persecution Index: 28th

The constitution protects religious freedom, but government legislation limits some aspects of this right. Some minority, nontraditional religious groups face government interference from worshipping, although most of these are not registered. Religious organizations must have at least fifty founding members in order to register a congregation in a locality. Once registration is obtained, a religious group may only operate within the locality where the congregation or community is registered. Regional registration requires a religious group to have at least two local organizations, each within different oblasts, and each locally registered group must have at least 250 members. National registration requires a religious group to have at least 300 members in each administrative division of the country, with 5,000 total members nationally. Formal registration of missionaries is required, including a submission of what materials will be used in proselytism. The government in recent years has become more focused on monitoring and controlling religious activities. Societal abuses of religious freedom are primarily directed toward Jehovah's Witnesses, although many are wary of nontraditional religious groups that proselyte.[\[4\]](#)

Largest Cities

Urban: 57.4% (2018)

Almaty, Astana, **Shymkent, Karagandy, Aqtöbe, Taraz, Pavlodar, Ust'-Kamenogorsk, Semey, Kostanay, Gurjev, Kyzylorda, Ural'sk, Petropavlovsk, Aktau, Temirtay, Turkestan, Kokshetau, Taldykorgan, Ekibastuz, Rudnyy.**

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

Two of the twenty-one cities with over 100,000 inhabitants has a Church congregation. Forty-six percent (46%) of the national population lives in the twenty-one largest cities.

Church History

The first Latter-day Saints in Kazakhstan lived in Almaty in the mid and late 1990s for business, and were instrumental in establishing a congregation in Almaty and introducing many native Kazakhs to the gospel. Prior to 1999, there were no native Kazakhstani members. The first baptism occurred in November 1999.^[5] Kazakhstan was included in the Europe East Area in 2000. The Church received official recognition from the Kazakhstani government in December 2000.^[6] The first branch was organized in July 2001 in Almaty. At the time no foreign missionaries served in Kazakhstan.^[7] Elder Russell M. Nelson visited Kazakhstan in September 2003 and dedicated the country.^[8] Foreign, proselytizing missionaries first arrived in 2004 but were restricted to Almaty. Jurisdiction for missionary work in Kazakhstan transferred from the Russia Novosibirsk Mission to the Russia Moscow Mission and then to the Russia Moscow West Mission. Kazakhstan was later reassigned to the Russia Novosibirsk Mission. Elder Paul Pieper represented the Church at a world religions conference held in Kazakhstan in the late 2000s. Missionaries were first assigned to Astana in March 2011.

A new law passed in 2011 required the Church to reregister with the government. During this process, the Church refrained from proselytism activity and the performance of convert baptisms until registration was obtained. By mid-2012, missionaries and local leaders were able to find 50 individuals who consented to submitting their names as part of the registration application for both Almaty and Astana. In Astana, many of those who submitted their names were not official members of the Church but instead were friends or investigators who supported the Church. Kazakhstan was assigned to the Central Eurasian Mission when the new mission was organized in 2015. In 2018, Kazakhstan was transferred back to the Russia Novosibirsk Mission.

Membership Growth

LDS Membership: 197 (2017)

In early 2001, Almaty had 25 members. By the end of the year, there were 46 members nationwide. Membership increased to 80 in 2003, 102, in 2005, 125 in 2007, 216 in 2012, and 281 in 2014. However, membership decreased to 212 in 2016 and 197 in 2017. This sudden decrease in membership appeared primarily attributed to the organization of a mission branch to service areas of Kazakhstan outside of Almaty and Astana. Membership for this mission branch was transferred to Turkey where mission headquarters were located. Furthermore, several foreign members may have also moved out of the country during this time period. In 2018, nearly all members lived in Almaty.

In 2017, one in 94,176 was a Latter-day Saint.

Congregational Growth

Branches: 2 (2018)

The Astana Group became a branch in 2014. Both branches reported directly to the Russia Yekaterinburg Mission in late 2018.

Activity and Retention

Seventy attended a cultural night held shortly following the Church's recognition in 2001.^[9] Forty-four attended the organization of the Almaty Branch in 2001.^[10] Elder Nelson visited in September 2003 with ninety in attendance. Some members in attendance traveled up to thirteen hours from distant cities.^[11] In early 2010, missionaries reported that approximately fifty members were active in Almaty, but some estimates place the number of active and semi-active members as high as eighty. The Church in Kazakhstan had one of the highest percentages of members enrolled in seminary or institute in the early 2010s (18%). Returned missionaries reported approximately fifty active members in Almaty and thirty active members in Astana in 2014.

Missionaries noted that only two or three converts joined the Church in Kazakhstan during an 18-month period in the mid-2010s. However, there were approximately eleven convert baptisms nationwide during the two-year period from 2016-2017. In 2018, there were approximately ten active members in the Astana Branch. Convert retention appears highest for formerly Muslim converts who join the Church per reports from recently returned missionaries.

Active membership nationwide is likely between sixty and seventy, or 30-35%.

Finding

Street contacting and the member referrals of interested friends and associates have represented the main finding methods for missionaries in Almaty. Missionaries in 2010 reported that many investigators were found through teaching English and piano lessons.

Language Materials

Languages with Latter-day Saint Scripture: Russian, German, Ukrainian, Korean.

All Latter-day Saint scriptures are available in Russian, German, Ukrainian, and Korean. Large amount of Church materials are translated in these languages. The Liahona magazine has twelve issues in Russian, German, Ukrainian, and Korean a year. Kazakh materials are in the Cyrillic script and limited to the Sacrament Prayers, a basic unit guidebook, the Articles of Faith, and hymns and children's songs.

Meetinghouses

The Almaty Branch meets in a small church-owned meetinghouse. The Astana Branch meets in a rented facility.

Humanitarian and Development Work

The Church in Kazakhstan has participated in 281 humanitarian and development projects since 1985. Many of these projects have occurred in hospitals and orphanages. In 2003, aid was distributed to those affected by the May 2003 earthquake.[\[12\]](#) In the late 2000s, the Church conducted neonatal resuscitation training and donated hospital equipment.

Opportunities, Challenges, and Prospects

Religious Freedom

The Church is legally registered with the city governments of Almaty and Astana, but is not registered in the fourteen provinces or the cities of Bayqongyr and Shymkent. Given changes to the law, there are no realistic prospects for the Church to expand into additional cities or the provinces as fifty founding members are required to obtain registration. Full-time missionaries may openly proselyte in Almaty and Astana once approval is granted to missionaries on an individual basis. Sometimes this approval can take weeks to obtain, limiting proselytism activities for newly arrived missionaries to Kazakhstan. Local members provide invaluable service and assistance in maintaining legal standards and obtaining required documents for missionaries, humanitarian projects, and church registration. Recent revisions in the Kazakh religious law interrupted proselyting activity in 2012 as the Church had to re-register congregations in Almaty and Astana.

Cultural Issues

Irreligiosity and secularism challenge church growth as most have little or no interest in learning about religion as a result of decades of communist rule. With few members and a tiny foreign missionary force, diligent and efficient missionary programs are required to gain converts. Suppressed religious freedom during the Soviet era provides opportunity for growth because many do not actively participate in their identified religions. Tolerance for non-Muslim religious groups appears higher among Muslims in Kazakhstan than in many other Central Asian nations due to the large Orthodox minority and the suppressed religious expression of Islam for much of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, many ethnic Kazakhs demonstrate strengthening ethno-religious ties to Islam, whereas many Russians maintain strong ethno-religious ties to Orthodox Christianity. As a result, missionaries often report low receptivity among the Kazakhstani population.

National Outreach

Mission outreach only occurs in the cities of Almaty and Astana, which together account for 16% of the national population. Eight-four percent (84%) of Kazakhstanis reside in provinces or cities with no Church outreach centers. Although the population currently reached by the Church remains small, abundant opportunities for missionary work and Church growth exist in Almaty and Astana as they are the most populous cities and major centers for business and industry in Central Asia. Most living in Almaty and Astana are unaware of the Church's presence and know little of the Church's beliefs, teachings, and practices. Large areas of Almaty remain unreached and provide an easily accessible, highly populated field for expanded outreach with the assistance of local members and missionaries. The establishment of additional congregations such as member groups or small branches may help better saturate Almaty with Church outreach and reduce travel times for members and those interested in learning more about the Church.

Visits by mission leaders occur regularly despite Kazakhstan's remoteness from current and previous mission headquarters in Russia and Turkey. This has been partly due to foreign missionaries serving in Russia leaving periodically to renew their visas. The low productivity of the mission in Russia has reduced missionary numbers, creating greater challenges in expanding proselytism with full-time missionaries in Kazakhstan as missionary resources become stretched.

Some members live in remote, large cities without congregations. These members may one day facilitate expanded mission outreach in those cities. Many missionaries and Church leaders agree that the Church's progress in Kazakhstan will be integral in developing outreach in other Central Asian nations without a current Church presence.

Member Activity and Convert Retention

Convert retention between 2003 and 2010 appears poor to modest as church attendance in Almaty only increased slightly over this period despite membership increasing from 80 to 140 nationwide. Similar problems with convert retention and member activity have appeared to occur in the 2010s. For example, Church attendance in Astana has significantly declined in the past several years to approximately ten at present. Recently returned missionaries report many local members are unwilling to find individuals and families for missionaries to teach due to fear of talking about the Church with friends and associates. Early efforts of expatriate members in sharing the gospel quickly developed a congregation and introduced many Kazakhs to the gospel; retention rates have dropped with the exodus of key expatriate families and the shift to missionary-based proselytism. The first native converts fellowshipped with one another and taught and baptized new converts without the assistance of full-time missionaries. The introduction of full-time missionaries appears to have reduced convert retention levels, in part due to periods of focus on monthly baptismal goals and reduced contact of investigators with local members before baptism. Frequent changes in which mission oversees missionary activity in Kazakhstan has appeared to further compound these problems. Although efforts to oversee all Turkic nations with a single mission from 2015-2018 presented good vision and effort by the Church to better administer this almost entirely unreached region of the world, distance from mission headquarters in Istanbul and few missionaries assigned to the Europe East Area appeared to play a role in the reassignment of Kazakhstan to a Russia-based mission. Cooperation in proselytism efforts between full-time members, older converts, and new members will be essential for high retention of new converts to ensure long-term church growth.

Ethnic Issues and Integration

The diversity in cultures in Kazakhstan creates challenges integrating various ethnic groups into the same congregation. The Soviet legacy has helped to mute some of these differences and allow for greater cooperation between ethnicities. Missionary efforts in Almaty are directed toward both Kazakhs and Russians, and the Almaty branch has successfully integrated members of various ethnicities. Other ethnic groups are largely unreached. Future proselytism efforts in northern Kazakhstan will need to meet needs of both Russians and Kazakhs simultaneously as both live in the same region in large numbers.

Language Issues

Foreign missionaries have not developed proficient language abilities in Kazakh for gospel teaching. This has resulted in some reliance on local members for teaching, providing greater opportunity for convert fellowshipping. A previous mission president sought to have all missionaries teach primarily in Kazakh in 2012.^[13] However, these efforts have appeared to have since been abandoned, likely due to difficulties with missionaries transferring in and out of Kazakhstan and maintaining a Kazakh language program despite these missionary transfers. Missionary work is primarily conducted in Russian, which is widely spoken across Kazakhstan and learned by foreign missionaries in the Missionary Training Center and in the Russia Yekaterinburg Mission. Senior missionary couples rely on translators to accomplish much of their humanitarian work.

Additional translations of Church materials and Latter-day Saint scriptures into Kazakh are needed but appear unlikely at present. The Church has often waited many years or decades to begin translations of Latter-day Saint scriptures into languages spoken by few members even if these languages have millions of native speakers. Furthermore, the recent change announced by the Kazakhstani government to transition from the Cyrillic script to the Latin script may delay prospects for additional Church materials and scriptures translated into Kazakh. Minority Turkic groups speaking languages such as Uyghur and Uzbek will likely not have Church materials until greater membership growth occurs among them. Russian language appears to be highly functional for initial outreach for these groups because it is spoken by 95% of the population, although not all second-language speakers speak and read at a high level of proficiency.

Missionary Service

As of early 2010, about fifty full-time missionaries had served in Kazakhstan since Almaty opened to full-time missionary work. A missionary zone functions in Kazakhstan, and senior couple missionaries serve in Almaty and Astana. In October 2009, six elders and two sisters served in Almaty. Kazakhstanian members have willingly served missions despite their small numbers. In mid-2008, four missionaries were serving from the Almaty Branch. In 2017, there were forty-two missionaries official registered with the government.^[14] However, many, if not most, missionaries did not serve for the entire year of 2017 in Kazakhstan.

Leadership

The first Melchizedek Priesthood ordinations occurred in early 2001.^[15] A traveling Patriarch visited Kazakhstan in 2008 and gave eighteen Patriarchal blessings. Local members have led the Almaty Branch through most if not all of its history. The Almaty Branch president in 2012 was an ethnic Uighur.^[16] In 2018, the Almaty Branch was led by a native member. The Astana Branch has never appeared to have a native branch president. Instead, the branch has been led by senior missionaries since its organization.

Temple

Kazakhstan is assigned to the Kyiv Ukraine Temple district. Temple trips occur infrequently due to the small size of membership, travel expenses, and long distances. The Church announced a temple in Russia in 2018 albeit the specific city where the temple will be constructed has yet to be determined. Kazakhstan will likely be assigned to the Russia temple once it is completed as long as the temple is not located further from Kazakhstan than Kyiv.

Comparative Growth

Kazakhstan is the only former Soviet Republic in Central Asia with an official Church presence. Most former Soviet Republics outside Central Asia have experienced greater membership and congregational growth than Kazakhstan. Russia and Ukraine each had over 10,000 members by 2006 and over 50 congregations. Growth in some other Muslim nations has been greater than Kazakhstan, such as Pakistan and some nations in the Middle East and Southeast Asia. However membership growth in Pakistan, Indonesia, and many other Muslim-majority nations has come primarily from among Christians rather than Muslims, whereas in Kazakhstan success has been achieved among both groups. The Church operates openly in Kazakhstan but not in Pakistan due to threats of violence from extremist groups. Kazakhstan offers a relatively pluralistic and favorable environment for outreach among both Muslims and Christians, in contrast to most other Muslim-majority nations.

Of the six Turkic nations (Turkey, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan), Kazakhstan and Turkey are the only nations where the Church has gained a significant foothold with strong native membership albeit stalwart members likely number less than one hundred in either country. Notwithstanding Kazakhstan's key strategic and geopolitical location as the gateway to Central Asia, its status as the most religiously pluralistic and tolerant of the Central Asian nations, and relatively wide religious freedom, the Church's entry into Kazakhstan has been belated and anemic. No missionaries were sent to Kazakhstan throughout the initial years of religious freedom in the early 1990s when other denominations experienced rapid growth. The Church gained a foothold in Almaty around the turn of the century only fortuitously through the efforts of capable expatriate members, and not through any planning or effort of the institutional missionary program. When missionaries finally entered in the middle of the decade of the 2000s, receptivity had waned considerably from that experienced in the initial years, political conditions had become less favorable, and both Muslim and Orthodox groups had implemented counter-proselytism policies. Whereas Jehovah's Witnesses maintained 195 congregations and Adventists had 51 congregations across Kazakhstan in 2009, only a single Latter-day Saint congregation operated in the nation until missionaries entered Astana in early 2011. Although visa and registration requirements limited expansion of missionary efforts during the 2000s, the lack of utilization of favorable opportunities for church growth throughout the 1990s appears to reflect a lack of priority and resources assigned to the nation by mission planners and the focus of resources on Russia and better-known nations in Eastern Europe rather than any absence of opportunity.

Many Christian denominations have experienced membership decline over the 1990s through emigration. However, these groups have gained converts among the Kazakh and other historically Muslim peoples. Seventh Day Adventists have seen decreasing numbers of congregations and converts over the past decade. Jehovah's Witnesses have experienced continued expansion of national outreach but no measurable increase in the number of active members during most of the 2010s.

Future Prospects

Historically high member involvement in missionary work, developed local leadership in Almaty, consistent allocation of mission resources to Almaty and Astana, and registration with the government in Almaty and Astana provide a positive outlook for the Church's continued operation in Kazakhstan. However, prospects for growth in the near future appear dim given no measurable increases in the number of active members in established branches. The severely limited number of members living outside of Almaty and Astana as well as membership requirements to register congregations in new areas will restrict missionary work outside of these two cities for the foreseeable future. Member involvement in missionary activity will be essential for the Church to reverse its recent trend of essentially stagnant membership growth while at the same time achieving acceptable rates of convert retention and member activity. Nevertheless, the assignment of inordinate numbers of full-time missionaries to a single

branch may hamper and erode the self-sufficiency of the Church if missionaries undertake member and local leader responsibilities. The opening of additional congregations in Almaty may help revitalize growth in the city, especially if these congregations are started from scratch and empower local members to assume leadership and missionary activities.

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