



# 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.



Iceland

Population: 0.32 millions (#183 out of countries)

By David Stewart and Matt Martinich

## Geography

**Area:** 103,000 square km. Just south of the Arctic Circle, Iceland is a large island between the North Atlantic Ocean and the Greenland Sea between Europe and Greenland. Formed by volcanism on the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, the terrain consists of rugged coasts, plateaus, and sporadic mountains. Coastal landforms include fjords and bays. Most land is covered by tundra. Ice fields and glaciers occupy many areas, especially the south and center. The North Atlantic current moderates climatic conditions, resulting in mild winters and cool summers. Earthquakes, volcanoes, and extreme weather are natural hazards. Environmental issues include water pollution and waste water treatment. Iceland is divided into seventy-four administrative municipalities.

## Peoples

Icelandic: 81%

Other: 19%

Icelanders are a mix of Norse and Celtic settlers who first populated the island over a millennia ago. Other ethnic groups are recently immigrated peoples who primarily consist of Poles, Lithuanians, Germans, and Danes.

**Population:** 343,518 (July 2018)

**Annual Growth Rate:** 1.08% (2018)

**Fertility Rate:** 1.99 children born per woman (2018)

**Life Expectancy:** 80.9 male, 85.5 female (2018)

**Languages:** Icelandic (87%), other (13%). Icelandic is the official language. English, Danish, and German are widely spoken second languages. Minority immigrant groups speak their respective languages.

**Literacy:** 100% (2011)

## History

Icelanders maintain extensive genealogies that trace their ancestry back to Norse and Celtic peoples who settled Iceland in the ninth and tenth centuries. In 930, the colonists established the Althing, the world's oldest continuously functioning legislative assembly. Paganism was the dominant religion until the king of Norway requested that Iceland convert to Christianity in 1000 AD. Iceland maintained its independence until coming under the administration of Norway and later Denmark in the thirteenth century. In the sixteenth century, Lutheranism became the state religion. Volcanoes and weather phenomena have periodically afflicted the population. In 1875, Askja volcano erupted, leading to famine and economic collapse from fallout. Twenty percent (20%) of the Icelandic population emigrated as a result. In 1874, Iceland began to regain autonomy from Denmark. Sovereignty under Denmark occurred in 1918, and total independence was achieved in 1944. Fishing and greater integration with Europe resulted in economic growth and development in the latter half of the twentieth century. In 1994, Iceland joined the European Economic Area and began diversifying the economy away from reliance on fishing. The global financial crisis severely affected Iceland due to its large financial sector, but the population enjoys one of the highest standards of living worldwide. In 2010, debris from a volcanic eruption in Iceland disrupted air traffic in Europe for several weeks.

## Culture

Due to isolation from Scandinavia, Iceland has preserved many aspects of Norse culture and language. Icelandic sagas are well read internationally and contain medieval poetry, history, and myth. Icelanders Snorri Sturluson wrote the Prose Edda, which has preserved many aspects of Norse mythology. In modern times, Iceland has produced many authors. Most Western sports are common in Iceland. Cuisine primarily consists of mutton, seafood, potatoes, and vegetables. Alcohol consumption rates are characteristic of Western Europe.

## Economy

**GDP per capita:** \$52,200 (2017) [87.3% of U.S.]

**Human Development Index:** 0.935 (2017)

**Corruption Index:** 76 (2018)

Traditionally reliant on fish and sheep, Iceland has transformed into one of the most advanced nations worldwide through free-market capitalism. Tourism, fishing, and mining are important industries. The tourism industry has grown rapidly since 2010 and the number of tourists who annually visit Iceland reaching more than four times the size of the national population. The mining industry exploits aluminum and ferrosilicon. Emerging industries include geothermal and hydroelectric power, software, and biotechnology. In 2008, bank collapses in Iceland contributed to the deterioration of the economy. The global financial crisis heavily impacted Iceland as unemployment rose to 9.4% and the GDP fell 6.5% in 2009 from 2008 levels. Services employ 73% of the workforce and generate 74.6% of the GDP. Industry accounts for approximately one-fifth of the workforce and GDP. Although constituting less than 10% of the GDP and workforce, agriculture remains an important sector and produces potatoes, vegetables, meat, and fish. Primary trade partners include the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, and Germany.

Corruption ranks among the lowest in the world.

## Faiths

Christian: 90%

Other/None: 10%

## Christians

### Denominations – Members – Congregations

Evangelical Lutheran Church of Iceland – 230,844

Roman Catholic – 13,397

Evangelicals – 12,641

Free Lutheran Church (Reykjavik) – 9,619

Free Lutheran Church (Hafnarfjörður) – 6,870

Seventh Day Adventists – 478 – 7

Jehovah's Witnesses – 387 – 7

Latter-day Saints – 284 – 2

## Religion

Most Icelanders are Lutheran, although regular church-goers are in the minority. Baptisms, confirmations, and other rituals remain important to most Lutherans. Greater diversification in religious affiliation has occurred over the years as a result of immigration. Catholics are the second largest religious group, yet 80% are non-Icelandic.<sup>[1]</sup> There are approximately 1,000-1,500 Muslims who have immigrated to Iceland.<sup>[2]</sup>

## Religious Freedom

The constitution protects religious freedom, which is upheld by the government. The government promotes the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Iceland, which receives some special privileges over other religious groups. The Lutheran Church is the state religion. Freedom of practicing any religion exists unless a religious group is deemed harmful to morality or threatening to public order. The government finances the Lutheran Church. All citizens are required to pay a religious tax to any officially recognized religious group to which they adhere. Parents determine the religious affiliation of their children until age sixteen. Religion is studied in public schools with an emphasis on applying Christian principles and developing an awareness of other religious traditions. There are few instances of societal abuses of religious freedom, primarily targeting Muslims. However, these instances are thought to be motivated not by intolerance but rather a lack of exposure to minority religious groups and immigrant peoples.<sup>[3]</sup>

## Largest Cities

### Urban: 93.8% (2018)

Reykjavík, **Keflavík og Njarðvík**, Akureyri, Selfoss, **Akranes**, **Vestmannaeyjar**, **Grindavík**, **Ísafjörður**, **Hveragerði**, **Sauðárkrúkur**.

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

Three of the ten largest cities have a Church congregation. Eighty-two percent (82%) of the national population resides in the ten largest cities, with 62% in the greater Reykjavík area. Akureyri is the only city outside the Reykjavík area with over 10,000 inhabitants.

## Church History

The first Icelanders joined the Church in Denmark in 1851, returned to Iceland, and began preaching on Westmann Island, located off the southern coast. Additional missionaries arrived in 1853 and established a branch with six members at Vestmannaeyjar.<sup>[4]</sup> Most the members immigrated to the United States shortly thereafter. The Church renewed missionary interests in the late nineteenth century and established an Icelandic Mission. Most converts immigrated to Utah, and formal missionary work ended in 1914.<sup>[5]</sup> Missionaries baptized small numbers of converts in the early 1900s although many of these members soon immigrated to Utah.<sup>[6]</sup> A total of 381 Icelanders immigrated to Utah between 1855 and 1914.<sup>[7]</sup> Today, Spanish Fork, Utah has one of the greatest concentrations of people of Icelandic descent outside of Iceland as a result the immigration of Latter-day Saint converts in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

A Church presence was reestablished through the efforts of foreign Latter-day Saint military personnel stationed in Iceland in the 1970s. Church members of Icelandic descent in Utah continue to foster ties with Iceland and were instrumental in restarting missionary work in 1975.<sup>[8]</sup> In 1976, the Reykjavík Branch was organized. Elder Joseph B. Wirthlin dedicated Iceland for missionary work in 1977.<sup>[9]</sup> The Book of Mormon was translated into Icelandic in 1980.<sup>[10]</sup> Seminary and institute began in the 1970s and early 1980s. Missionaries began serving outside of Reykjavík in cities such as Akureyri. In 1997, the president of Iceland visited Utah to attend festivities commemorating Icelandic Latter-day Saint settlers.<sup>[11]</sup> In 1991, Iceland pertained to the Europe North Area and in 2010 was part of the Europe Area. Iceland belongs to the Denmark Copenhagen Mission. A museum exhibit in Vestmannaeyjar that commemorated early Latter-day Saint converts on the island was completed in 2011.<sup>[12]</sup>

## Membership Growth

### Church Membership: 284 (2017)

In 1900, there were thirty members and only two priesthood holders.<sup>[13]</sup> In 1976, there were ten members.<sup>[14]</sup> In 1993, membership was approximately 300.<sup>[15]</sup> By year-end 2000, there were 244 members, increasing to 289 the following year. Membership fluctuated between growth and decline through much of the 2000s and the 2010s to 275 in 2003, 225 in 2005, and 250 in 2007, 246 in 2010, 275 in 2014, and 284 in 2017. The closure of the Keflavik Military Base was partially responsible for membership decline as Latter-day Saint United States military personnel left the island by 2006. Between 2000 and 2009, the government reported that the number of Latter-day Saints increased from 178 to 182.<sup>[16]</sup> However, the government reported only 161 Latter-day Saints in 2018 (53% female and 20% children under age 18) – a decline from 185 in 2014.<sup>[17]</sup> There were eight convert baptisms in 2009. As of September 2010, there had been three convert baptisms for the year.

In 2017, one in 1,196 was a Latter-day Saint on Church records.

## Congregational Growth

### Branches: 3 (2018)

In 1993, there were three branches in the Reykjavik Iceland District.<sup>[18]</sup> In 1999, there were two branches: The Reykjavik Branch and the Keflavik Iceland Military Branch.<sup>[19]</sup> The military branch was discontinued in 2006, leaving just one congregation meeting in Reykjavik and the dissolution of the district. In 2007, the Selfoss Branch was created. A third branch was organized in Akureyri in 2018. In 2019, all three branches reported to the Denmark Copenhagen Mission.

## Activity and Retention

Thirty gathered for the dedicatory prayer in 1977. Up to sixty have attended family home evenings held at members' homes in the past that became a successful means of gaining new converts.<sup>[20]</sup> Seventy-five attended the groundbreaking of the first meetinghouse in 1999.<sup>[21]</sup> Two hundred twenty attended a fireside with President Hinckley in 2002.<sup>[22]</sup> During the 2008–2009 school year, fifteen were enrolled in seminary or institute. In 2011, eighty-six members from the Rekjavik and Selfoss Branches attended a new museum exhibit in Vestmannaeyjar that commemorated the Icelandic Mormon heritage.<sup>[23]</sup> In mid-2010, attendance at the Reykjavik Branch ranged between fifty-five and seventy-five (including missionaries and foreign visitors) and twenty and thirty at the Selfoss branch. In early 2019, there were approximately fifty who attended the Reykjavik Branch. At the time, 47% of members on the branch records regularly attended Church. Returned missionaries reported approximately twenty members who attended the Selfoss Branch in the early 2010s. Church attendance in the Akureyri Branch appeared no greater than twenty as of early 2019.

There appears to be approximately one hundred active members, or 35% of total membership. As many as 57% of Icelandic members identify themselves as Latter-day Saints at present according to government sources – nearly 20% less than one decade earlier, suggesting a decrease in member activity rates.

## Language Materials

**Languages with Latter-day Saint Scripture:** Icelandic, Danish, German, English.

All Latter-day Saint scriptures are translated into Icelandic, Danish, and German. The Church updated its triple combination edition in Icelandic in 2016.<sup>[24]</sup> Most Church materials are translated into Danish and German. Several unit, temple, Priesthood, Relief Society, Sunday School, Young Women, Primary, missionary, family history, and Church Education System (CES) materials in Icelandic are available.

## Meetinghouses

Meetings were first held in rented facilities until the Church purchased a building for church meetings in 1981.<sup>[25]</sup> The first Church-built meetinghouse was dedicated in 2000.<sup>[26]</sup> The Selfoss Branch appears to have its own Church-built meetinghouse. The Akureyri Branch meets in a rented facility.

## Humanitarian and Development Work

The Church has not conducted large humanitarian or development projects in Iceland due to the level of economic prosperity and high standards of living. Humanitarian service is limited to missionaries fulfilling weekly service hours and local

congregations organizing service projects.

## **Opportunities, Challenges, and Prospects**

### **Religious Freedom**

The Church faces no legal restrictions regarding proselytism and assembly. Over the past several decades, the Church has established a positive relationship with the government, as manifest by repeated visits between missionaries and the president as well as the Icelandic government's interest in the annual commemoration of Latter-day Saint Icelandic settlers in Spanish Fork, Utah.

### **Cultural Issues**

The Lutheran Church remains the most visible religious entity. Many Lutherans have little interest in religion on a daily basis and view foreign, nontraditional religious groups with suspicion. Older adults maintain strong ties to traditional religious groups. Young adults generally profess atheism or agnosticism. Missionaries report that many individuals are willing to listen, but few progress in commitments, in part due to social pressures and a sense that being "too religious"—attending church services on more than religious holidays or special events—is not "cool." Approximately two-thirds of births in Iceland are to unwed mothers, which carries no social stigma. These attitudes, combined with increasing secularism over the past decade have limited membership growth rates.

### **National Outreach**

Church congregations operate in three cities, providing mission outreach to 70% of the national population. Twenty-one percent (21%) of the national population lives in cities and towns without a Church congregation that are inhabited by 1,000 or more people. Low receptivity, limited mission outreach resources, and few members render such areas unlikely to open for missionary work in the foreseeable future.

Reykjavik is paramount to mission outreach, as the majority of the Icelandic population resides in the city and its suburbs. Few mission outreach centers are required to provide adequate proselytism support to Reykjavik. Establishing additional congregations may facilitate greater membership growth, but such a move will not be warranted unless active membership in the Reykjavik Branch grows too large to be administered by one congregation. Holding periodic cottage meetings in smaller towns where a couple of active members reside may assist in the expansion of national outreach, such as in Keflavík og Njarðvík and Akranes.

The Church has maintained an Internet site for Iceland at <http://www.kirkjajesukrists.is/>. The website is kept up to date with local and international Church News, information about church beliefs and practices, meetinghouse locations, and contact information in Icelandic. Use of the website in member-missionary and full-time missionary efforts can assist in finding receptive individuals and breaking down negative attitudes and misunderstandings regarding the Church.

### **Member Activity and Convert Retention**

Iceland experiences moderate member activity rates. This has likely come as a result of isolation from mission headquarters and historically few missionaries, allowing for greater self-sufficiency and growth to occur. Converts who join the Church today appear dedicated and have modest retention rates. However, very few converts join the Church, and most of current membership was baptized in the 1980s or 1990s. A lack of recent converts may contribute to low numbers of convert baptisms, as active membership maintains fewer non-Latter-day Saint relations through entrenchment in established congregations. Iceland has one of the highest percentages of self-identifying Latter-day Saints in the world, but one-third or more of these members likely do not attend church regularly. Few active Latter-day Saint youth challenge efforts to attract a younger population to help ensure long-term growth. In 2019, Icelandic members noted few families with young children.

### **Ethnic Issues and Integration**

Many recent immigrants maintain strong affinity to their traditional religions and are more religiously active than native Icelanders, resulting in low levels of receptivity to mission outreach efforts. Furthermore, their few numbers and diversity overwhelm the missionary presence in Iceland, which concentrates on the Icelandic majority. If mission efforts become successful among recent immigrants, a non-Icelandic-speaking group may be established. However, most members in the Reykjavik Branch speak English and assist in the assimilation of non-Icelander members who primarily come from the Philippines and Africa.

## Language Issues

Icelandic is widely spoken, and the Church has a wide selection of ecclesiastical and missionary materials translated. Language issues will most likely only be encountered with immigrant groups. Due to the large number of foreign language speakers among native Icelanders, temple worship and association with members in other nations is facilitated.

## Missionary Service

Between 1851 and 1914, twenty-two Icelanders served as full-time missionaries in Iceland. Since formal missionary activity was reintroduced in 1975, 167 young missionaries and twenty-four senior couples have served in Iceland as of the late 2000s. Several native Icelanders have served missions in the recent past. In 2010, two young elder missionaries and one senior couple were assigned to the island. The number of full-time missionaries assigned to Iceland dramatically increased in the 2010s to as many as four missionary companionships in the Reykjavik Branch as well as missionary companionships assigned to outlying branches. Unfortunately, the increase in the number of full-time missionaries assigned to Iceland has resulted in no sustained correlation with an increase in church membership or convert baptisms per government-reported data on Latter-day Saints in the country.

## Leadership

In 2010, both the Reykjavik and Selfoss Branches had local branch presidents. In 2019, all three branches had local members who served as branch presidents. Local priesthood leadership remains limited due to few active members. In the past decade, Iceland appears to have developed greater leadership maturity and self-sufficiency, as most non-Icelandic Latter-day Saints left the country in the mid-2000s, yet a second branch was created in Selfoss. As of 2010, the mission president from Denmark was visiting Icelandic congregations approximately once a month. The three branches may be organized into their own district one day as long as there is sufficient leadership to staff both branch and district callings.

## Temple

Iceland belongs to the Preston England Temple district. Icelandic members travel to the temple regularly. Most Icelanders have detailed family history records, facilitating temple work for deceased ancestors.<sup>[27]</sup>

## Comparative Growth

Iceland has one of the strongest Latter-day Saint populations among European nations with fewer than one million people and approximately the same percentage of Latter-day Saint members in the population as most Nordic countries. Member activity rates in Iceland are comparable to other Nordic countries.

Out of thirty-five religious groups, Latter-day Saints ranked as the fifth slowest growing in Iceland during the 2000s.<sup>[28]</sup> The number of Seventh-Day Adventists has remained virtually unchanged over the 2000s, and the number of congregations has remained constant. Jehovah's Witnesses gain few new converts and report no noticeable increase in active membership.

## Future Prospects

Prospects for future growth in Iceland appear mediocre due to the lack of receptivity to the Church over the past several decades, a small population, increasing secularism, and the lack of families with young children. Greater numbers of youth converts and strong involvement of local members in missionary activity will be required to expand national outreach and the size of active membership. Secularism and nominalism in the Lutheran Church are cultural obstacles that missionaries and local Church leadership face in teaching and extending commitments to investigators.

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