



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.

French Polynesia



Population: 0.28 millions (#185 out of countries)

By David Stewart and Matt Martinich

Geography

Area: 4,167 square km. Comprising five archipelagos and a total of 118 islands and atolls, French Polynesia occupies a large portion of the South Pacific Ocean between Australia and South America. Four of the five archipelagos are volcanic and have mountainous, rugged terrain. The sole coral-based Tuamotu Archipelago has flat, low-laying terrain and is the largest chain of atolls worldwide. Tropical climate occurs year round which is moderated by the surrounding ocean. Cyclones are a natural hazard. Since 2004 French Polynesia has been an overseas collectivity of France.

Population: 291,000 (July 2010)

Annual Growth Rate: 1.355% (2010)

Fertility Rate: 1.355% (2010)

Life Expectancy: 74.44 male, 79.5 female (2010)

Peoples

Polynesian: 78%

Chinese: 12%

Local French: 6%

Metropolitan French: 4%

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Languages: French (61.1%), Polynesian languages (31.4%), Asian languages [primarily Hakka Chinese] (1.2%), other (0.3%), unspecified (6%). French and Tahitian are the official languages. Polynesian languages are closely related.

Polynesian languages spoken by more than 5,000 speakers include Tahitian, Tuamotuan, Austral, and Marquesan dialects.

Literacy: 98% (1977)

History

Polynesian peoples populated and ruled the islands until the nineteenth century when the French gained control of the islands. France performed nuclear testing on Mururoa Atoll from the 1960s to the 1990s. French Polynesia experiences a high degree of autonomy from metropolitan France and debate on whether to pursue independence from France is ongoing.

Culture

Christianity is the dominant cultural influence on society and in recent years materialism and secularism have been on the rise. Ethnic tensions occur between Polynesians and non-Polynesians primary due to differing political ideologies and socio-economic status. Some Polynesians desire independence from France and a revival of native culture. Many businesses are operated by French and Chinese Tahitians whereas Polynesians are often employed in skilled and unskilled labor. Fish, pork, breadfruit, taro, and sweet potato are traditional foods.

Economy

GDP per capita: \$18,000 (2004) [47.6% of US]

Human Development Index: N/A

Corruption Index: N/A

Subsistence agriculture sustained the economy until 1962 when France stationed military personnel on the islands which led to greater modernization of the economy. Most are now employed by the military or work for the tourist industry. Timber, fish, hydropower, and cobalt are natural resources.

Faiths

Christian: 91%
other: 3%
no religion: 6%

Christians**Denominations Members Congregations**

Catholic	87,300	
Latter-Day Saints	21,341	82
Community of Christ	6,882	
Seventh-Day Adventists	4,210	36
Jehovah's Witnesses	2,248	27

Religion

Protestant Christians comprise 54% of the population whereas Catholic constitute 30% of the population. 10% of French Polynesians adhere other religious groups and 6% do not follow a religion.

Religious Freedom**Persecution Index:**

The French constitution protects religious freedom which is upheld by the local government in Mayotte. There are no restrictions regarding proselytism or the placement of foreign missionaries.

Largest Towns**Urban: 52%**

Faaa, Papeete, Punaauia, Pirae, Mahina, Paea, Papara, Arue, Afaahiti, Nunue.

All ten largest towns have an LDS congregations. 59% of the national population resides in the ten largest towns.

LDS History

Organized in 1844, the Society Islands Mission was the third LDS mission organized following the British (1837) and Eastern States (1839) Missions. The first Latter-day Saint couples called to serve as full-time missionaries speaking a foreign language in a foreign culture were called to serve in French Polynesia. Initial proselytism efforts commenced in Tubuai and the Tuamotu Archipelago. The first LDS branch opened on Tubuai and eventually led to the conversion of half the island's 200 inhabitants. Misunderstandings with the French Protectorate government regarding the financial support of foreign missionaries arose in the late 1840s and were resolved in 1851 with the Church agreeing that missionaries had to be self-supporting and pay for items received from local members. In 1852, the Church closed the mission due to changing government policies and was not able to reopen the mission until 1893. Despite the proselytism efforts of Catholic and RLDS missionaries, several LDS congregations continued to operate independently and isolated from international church leadership in the Tuamotu Archipelago,^[1] such as on Takaroa.^[2] However many Latter-day Saints joined the RLDS Church between 1885 and 1892^[3] and today the Community of Christ (RLDS) is among the largest Christian denominations in the islands.

The Church did not ultimately resolve difficulties with the French government until the 1960s. The Church attempted to open the Marquesas Archipelago to missionary work in 1961 and again in the 1980s but efforts were unsuccessful. In 1989, the mission sent a senior missionary couple of Marquesian ancestry to the islands which resulted in the establishment of a permanent presence and the first LDS branch in the islands in 1991.^[4] Seminary and institute began in 1982. Elder Russell M. Nelson met with government leaders in 1994 while participating in the 150th anniversary of the establishment of the Church in French Polynesia^[5] and also dedicated French Polynesia for missionary work.^[6] That same year the postal service issued a special stamp featuring the Papeete Tahiti Temple to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the Church's establishment.^[7] President Hinckley visited in 1997 and met with the president.^[8] In 1998, French Polynesia was assigned to the Pacific Islands Area.^[9] In 2000, 400 members sung in an LDS choir for the sixteenth anniversary commemorating the autonomy of French Polynesia.^[10] In 2011, the Tahiti Papeete Mission administered French Polynesia and the Cook Islands.

Membership Growth**LDS Membership:** 21,341 (2009)

The first Latter-day Saint converts were baptized in Tuamotu in May 1845. By the following September there were 620 members. By 1846 there were 866 members in French Polynesia.^[11] French Polynesian LDS membership was estimated to range between 1,500 and 2,000 during the latter half of the nineteenth century.^[12] There were 425 self-identified Tahitian Latter-day Saints in early 1893 after four decades of no official church presence.^[13]

In 1994, approximately one-third of the population of Tubuai was LDS.^[14] In 2005, there were 593 members in the Tubuai Australes District.^[15] In 2005, 380 of the 1,000 residents of Takaroa Island, Tuamotu were LDS.^[16] In 1983, there were 6,442 members. Membership stood at 13,000 in 1993 and 16,616 by year-end 2000. During the 2000s, the Church experienced slow membership growth. Rapid membership growth occurred only during 2001 as membership increased by 20.6% in one year. Membership numbered 20,383 in 2002, 21,116 in 2004, and 21,567 in 2006. 2007 was the only year to experience a decrease in membership during the 2000s as there were 19,711 members; a 8.6% decline, most of which likely occurred from updating records of lost members. Membership growth occurred in 2008 and 2009 as membership increased to 20,282 and 20,805. Annual membership growth rates generally average around two percent. In 1987, one in 21 was LDS. In 2009, one in 14 was LDS.

Congregational Growth

Wards: 53 Branches: 29

By 1846, there were ten branches.^[17] By 1987, there were 43 congregations, including 25 wards. The number of congregations increased to 56 in 1993 and 75 in 2000, including 46 wards. During the 2000s, slow congregational growth occurred as congregations numbered 78 in 2001, 79 in 2003, 80 in 2005, and 82 in 2007.

The first stake was organized in 1972 in Papeete. Additional stakes were organized in Arue (1982), Paea (1990), Raromatai (1993), Papeari (1995), Faaa (1997), and Punaauia (2011). There were four stakes and three districts in 1994.^[18] In early 2011, there were three districts based in Takaroa Tuamotu (1927) [seven branches], Tubuai Australes (1965) [five branches], and Makem Tuamotu (1994) [eight branches]. In early 2011, there were two mission branches in the Marquesas Archipelago in Taiohae and Hiva Oa. The Tahiti Papeete Mission Branch also operates for members meeting in groups in remote locations.

Activity and Retention

In 1994, 2,140 attended a special conference in Papeete commemorating the 150th anniversary of the establishment of the LDS Church in French Polynesia.^[19] That same year 60% of members in the two Takaroa branches were active.^[20] 7,000 attended a special meeting with President Hinckley in 1997.^[21] Over 3,000 attended a special conference in Tahiti highlighting standards in the Church's booklet For the Strength of Youth.^[22] Following the renovation of the Papeete Tahiti Temple 36,861 attended the temple open house and approximately 10,000 attended the dedicatory services.^[23] There were 740 seminary and 524 institute students during the 2004-2005 school year,^[24] which increased to 899 seminary and 727 institute students during the 2008-2009 school year. The average number of members per congregation increased from 200 to 254 between 2000 and 2009. Most branches appear to have between 50 and 100 active members whereas most wards appear to have between 100 and 200 active membership. Nationwide active membership is estimated at 11,000, or 50% of total membership.

Language Materials

Languages with LDS Scripture: Tahitian, French

All LDS scriptures and most church materials are available in Tahitian and French. The Liahona magazine has four Tahitian issues and four French issues a year.

Meetinghouses

The Church began an aggressive meetinghouse construction program during the latter-half of the twentieth century.^[25] The first meetinghouse build by the Church in the Marquesas Islands was dedicated in 1997.^[26] In early 2011, there were over 50 LDS meetinghouses in French Polynesia. Most congregations meet in church-built meetinghouses.

Health and Safety

Cyclones and travel by boat have presented safety concerns. In 1903, approximately 100 Latter-day Saints perished in a cyclone. In 1963, 15 members died when their boat shipwrecked on a reef in Maupiti. 180 members lost their homes in Maupiti following a cyclone in 1997.^[27] Access to healthcare on smaller islands is limited.

Humanitarian and Development Work

No recent LDS humanitarian or development work has occurred in French Polynesia. The Church operated a primary school from 1963 to 1982.^[28]

Opportunities, Challenges and Prospects

Religious Freedom

The Church enjoys full religious freedom and maintains positive relations with the government. The president has in the past attended several large LDS meetings and spoken highly of the Church and its teachings. Foreign full-time missionaries serve regularly.

Cultural Issues

High religious activity and church attendance are ingrained in Polynesian culture and have facilitated higher member activity rates for Latter-day Saints. Increasing secularism is a concern that has likely contributed to slower membership growth rates in recent years but activity rates of Latter-day Saints do not appear to have been significantly affected. The high degree of religious pluralism among Christians has reduced challenges for local members to assimilate into society and has favored LDS mission outreach efforts. There are few traditional societal practices and customs that interfere with LDS teachings. The non-Polynesian population comprises 20% of the population and presents greater challenges for proselytism due to their small numbers, differing cultural practices and attitudes, and lower church attendance and interest in religion.

National Outreach

French Polynesia receives excellent levels of mission outreach as 80 to 90 percent of the population resides in towns or on small islands with an LDS congregation. All five archipelagos receive LDS mission outreach and have multiple LDS congregations. 17 of the 19 towns with over 3,000 inhabitants have an LDS congregation. The two lesser reached towns of Afareaitu (Moorea) and Toahotu (Tahiti) are within two kilometers of an LDS congregation. Several islands with fewer than 1,000 inhabitants have LDS mission outreach centers, mainly in the Tuamotu Archipelago. In 1995, the island of Taenga in the Tuamotu Archipelago had fewer than 60 inhabitants, but the Church maintained a branch that served the 40 Latter-day Saints on the island.^[29] The Church has maintained mission outreach centers on most islands in the Tuamotu Archipelago with over 100 inhabitants. Prospects for establishing additional mission outreach centers appears most favorable on Tahiti in lesser-reached villages on the southern and eastern sides of the island, such as Faauanu, Nutae, Otuofai, Papao, Teahupoo, and Toahotu.

The Church maintained a website for French Polynesia for much of the 2000s but as of early 2011, the website was no longer functioning. French LDS materials are widely available online on church websites. Internet proselytism involving local members has yet to occur and would be most favorable on Tahiti due to its large population and widespread internet usage.

Member Activity and Convert Retention

Advances in membership growth, member activity, and retention occurred during the latter half of the twentieth century as a result of more frequent visits by mission, area, and international LDS leaders, increased numbers of local members serving missions, improved language training and proselytism approaches for missionaries, a wide-reaching meetinghouse construction program, the translation of additional LDS materials into Tahitian, the construction of the Papeete Tahiti Temple, the operation of a church primary school for two decades, better trained local leadership, and improved inter-island communication.^[30] Member activity rates are good as indicated by an average of 254 members per congregation. Convert retention rates may have declined slightly over the past decade as membership growth has outpaced congregational growth.

Ethnic Issues and Integration

Increasing usage of French among Polynesians reduces communication barriers with European French. Political conflict between members desiring independence from France and those who wish to remain part of France may lead to some challenges unifying some LDS congregations that have members with conflicting political ideologies. Full-time missionaries report that political issues have not appeared to have affected the health and integration of ethnically-diverse congregations at present. The percentage of Latter-day Saints appears to be lowest among Europeans and Chinese due to lower receptivity, reflecting differing cultural backgrounds and societal attitudes.

Language Issues

The Church has accommodated shifts in language usage in French Polynesia as French has become more widespread. Full-time missionaries taught in Tahitian 95% of the time in 1970 whereas in 2007 missionaries taught in French 75% of the time. In 2007, some congregations offered Sunday School classes in both Tahitian and French.^[31] In the late 2000s, foreign full-time missionaries received language training in both Tahitian and French.

Missionary Service

Like much of Polynesia, the French Polynesian full-time missionary force is self-sufficient in staffing local missionary efforts and also exports missionaries abroad. In 1994, local members accounted for 80% of the full-time missionary force.^[32] In early 2011, 40 members were serving full-time missions from the Paea Tahiti Stake. French Polynesian missionaries may become instrumental in achieving greater breakthroughs with French-speaking Pacific nations or dependencies that have been more resistive to LDS proselytism efforts, like New Caledonia due to fluency in French and familiarity with French and Pacific Islander cultures.

Leadership

Abundant, experienced local leadership has significantly increased local sustainability, expansion of national outreach, and high levels of member activity and convert retention. In 1996, Jean A. Tefan from Tahiti was called to preside over the Fiji Suva Mission^[33] and Tahitian native Tekehu M. Mununui was called to preside over the Tahiti Papeete Mission.^[34] In 1999, Louis Eugene Pascal Arhan from Papeete was called as the Papeete Tahiti Temple president.^[35] In 2000, Jean A. Tefan from Tahiti was called as an Area Authority Seventy.^[36] In 2003, Tetuanui Marama Tarati from Pao Pao was called to preside over the Tahiti Papeete Mission.^[37]

Temple

French Polynesia is assigned to the Papeete Tahiti Temple district. Prior to the completion of the temple members traveled to the Hamilton New Zealand Temple. Members throughout French Polynesia attend the temple in Papeete regularly. 3,460 temple ordinances were completed by members from Takaroa, Tumamotu during a week-and-a-half temple trip in 1991.^[38] In 2006, the temple was remodeled and expanded by 2,000 square feet.^[39]

Comparative Growth

French Polynesia ties with the Marshall Islands as the country or territory with the seventh highest percentage of Latter-day Saints in the world. No other Polynesian nation or dependency has as high of a percentage of members enrolled in seminary or institute as French Polynesia (8%), likely indicating that the islands boast one of the highest member activity rates for youth and young adults in the region. Like much of Oceania, the number of local members serving missions exceeds the number of full-time missionaries assigned to French Polynesia and local membership is highly self sufficient.

Missionary-oriented Christians have experienced slow or stagnant growth for the past several decades. Seventh Day Adventists generally baptize between 50 and 150 new converts annually, but experience slow membership and congregational growth. Jehovah's Witnesses also report slow membership growth. The LDS Church appears to have achieved some of the greatest growth among Christian groups in recent years as a result of consistent mission outreach, a well-developed local leadership, and strong participation in youth-directed outreach from seminary and institute.

Future Prospects

The outlook for future growth appears favorable due to the resilient Latter-day Saint membership, the large number of local members serving full-time missions, and the slight increases in the number of congregations. Increasing secularism may continue to slow membership growth and delay progress expanding national outreach. Several additional stakes may be organized in the coming years from currently operating stakes due to growth in the number of congregations. Organizing additional congregations in lesser-reached villages on Tahiti may accelerate growth in the coming years.

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