

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.



Finland

Population: 5.27 millions (#119 out of countries)

By David Stewart and Matt Martinich

Geography

Area: 338,145 square km. Constituting easternmost Scandinavia, Finland borders Russia, Sweden, Norway, and the Baltic Sea. Tens of thousands of lakes dot the landscape, which consists of low elevation plains and small hills. Due to its northern location, Finland experiences subarctic conditions in the north, whereas southern and central areas are subject to cold temperate climate due to the surrounding sea warmed by the North Atlantic Current. Forest covers most areas. Environmental issues include pollution and habitat loss. Finland is divided into nineteen administrative regions.

Peoples

Finn: 93.4%

Swede: 5.6%

Russian: 0.5%

Estonian: 0.3%

Roma: 0.1%

Sami: 0.1%

Population: 5,537,364 (July 2018)

Annual Growth Rate: 0.33% (2018)

Fertility Rate: 1.75 children born per woman (2018)

Life Expectancy: 78.1 male, 84.2 female (2018)

Languages: Finnish (87.9%), Swedish (5.2%), Russian (1.4%), other (5.5%). Finnish and Swedish are official languages. Other

commonly spoken languages include Russian, Estonian, Roma, and Sami. The most commonly spoken languages among recent immigrants include Arabic, Somali, Northern Kurdish, Chinese languages, and Iranian Persian. Only Finnish has over one million speakers (4.6 million).

Literacy: 100% (2011)

History

Prehistoric tribes settled Finland several millennia BC. Sweden ruled Finland between the twelfth and nineteenth centuries. Starting in 1809, Finland was an autonomous grand duchy under Russia. In 1917, Finland achieved independence. During World War II, Finland maintained its independence despite Soviet ambitions to annex Finland, yet lost some territory along the Russian border. Following World War II, Finland experienced rapid economic growth as GDP reached Western Europe levels after only a few decades. Finland joined the European Union in 1995 and was the first Scandinavian nation to adopt the Euro currency. Today, Finland ranks among the most developed and prosperous nations in Europe.

Culture

A progressive nation with a small population, Finland is well known for architecture, furniture, sculpting, and other visual arts. There have been many novelists and poets since the nineteenth century. Opera and music account for an important aspect of local culture and influence many other European nations. Finland has also been heavily involved in sports and the Olympic Games. Scenic landscapes provide abundant recreational activity that attracts tourism.[1] Berries, whole grains, vegetables, and mushrooms heavily influence cuisine. Cigarette consumption rates rank average among Western European nations and less than the United States, whereas alcohol consumption rates are high.

Economy

GDP per capita: $44,500 (2017) [74.4% of U.S.]

Human Development Index: 0.920 (2017)

Corruption Index: 85 (2018)

One of the most modern and industrialized nations in the world, Finland has a highly competitive economy that specializes in wood products, metals, electronics, telecommunications, and engineering. The economy fell into recession in the early 2010s. Long-term economic challenges include the aging population and boosting demand for exports. Agricultural activity is limited by the climate and employs less than 5% of the workforce. Barley, wheat, sugar beets, and potatoes are major crops. Services and industry constitute 69.1% and 28.2% of the GDP, respectively. Primary industries include metals, electronics, shipbuilding, machinery, wood products, and food products. Major trade partners include Germany, Sweden, Russia, and the Netherlands. Finland experiences one of the lowest rates of corruption worldwide.

Faiths

Christian: 81.6%

Muslim: 1.2%

Other: 0.1%

None: 17.1%

Christians

Denominations – Members – Congregations

Lutheran Church of Finland – 3,986,902

Evangelicals – 648,682

Finnish Orthodox – 60,911

Jehovah's Witnesses – 18,324 – 290

Roman Catholic – 10,000

Latter-day Saints – 4,901 – 31

Seventh Day Adventists – 4,768 – 71

Religion

Most Finns adhere to the Evangelical Lutheran Church. No non-Lutheran group constitutes over 2% of the population. The largest minority groups include Orthodox Christians, Pentecostal Christians, and Muslims. Nearly half a million have left the Lutheran Church over the past several decades. Finland has become increasingly secular, yet many regard religion as important and value their membership in the Lutheran Church despite not attending religious services regularly. A 2008 poll found that 73% of fifteen- to twenty-nine-year olds did not identify with a religious group. Most regard religion as a private matter.[2]

Census data and government figures indicate significant changes in regards to the religious demographics of the population between 2000 and 2015. The number of adherents to non-Christian religions significant increased, including Islam (1,201 to 13,289), Buddhism (26 to 956), and Hinduism (37 to 324). Seventh-Day Adventists reported significant decline (4,316 to 3,458). Pentecostals increased from twenty to 8,762. Roman Catholics also reported significant increases from 7,227 to 13,069. The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland reported steady decline from 4.4 million members to 4.0 million members. Individuals who do not affiliate with a religious group has increased from approximately 660,000 to 1.34 million.[3]

Religious Freedom

The constitution protects religious freedom, which is upheld by the government. There are two established state churches: the Evangelical Lutheran Church and Orthodox Church. Those who claim membership in these denominations must pay an additional tax of 1%–2% to finance them. The law allows for individuals to change their religious affiliation and does not permit religious discrimination. To register with the government, a religious group must have at least twenty members, have a set of rules, and must publicly practice its beliefs. Dozens of reports of religious discrimination have been received annually for several consecutive years. The victims in these incidents are predominantly Muslims and Jews.[4] Proselytism from nontraditional religious groups can be poorly received, as religion is seen by many as a private matter.[5]

Largest Cities

Urban: 85.4% (2018)

Helsinki, Espoo, Tampere, Vantaa, Oulu, Turku, Jyväskylä, Lahti, Kuopio, Pori.

All ten of the largest cities have a congregation of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Forty percent (40%) of the national population resides in the ten largest cities.

Church History

Missionary work began in the 1870s, and the first convert baptism occurred in 1876. Religious affairs were highly controlled and regulated by the government, resulting in little progress establishing the Church. Many of the early Finnish converts immigrated to Utah.[6] Missionary work in the 1800s was primarily limited to Swedish-speaking Finns. During the first decade of formal missionary work, twenty-five converts were baptized. Finland became part of the Swedish Mission in 1905.[7] Elder Ezra Taft Benson rededicated Finland for missionary work in 1946, and the Finnish Mission was organized in 1947.[8] When the Finnish Mission opened, only one branch met in the country, in Larsmo, and there were only a few members. International Church leadership was impressed with the degree of self-sustainability accomplished by local members and Swedish missionaries. [9] Seminary began in 1962, and institute classes were started in 1975. The first stake was created in 1977.

Finland played a unique role in expanding missionary work in the former Soviet Union. In 1990, the Finland Helsinki East Mission was created to assist in the opening of the former Soviet Union to missionary work.[10] In 2000, President Gordon B. Hinckley announced a temple for Helsinki that would serve Finland and parts of northern Russia. That same year, Finland was transferred from the Europe North Area to the Europe Central Area.[11] Finland has since been assigned to the Europe Area.

An American Latter-day Saint from Arizona was awarded Finland's medal-of-honor for two decades of work for Finland with the Consul of Finland in Arizona and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.[12] Seven thousand attended a special conference with President Hinckley in 2006.[13]

Elder Dale G. Renlund was called as an apostle in 2015. Elder Renlund's father was from a Swedish-speaking town of Larsmo in western Finland, and emigrated from Sweden to Utah in 1950.[14] Elder Renlund's grandparents were baptized in Larsmo in 1912 and became members of the first branch in Finland.[15]

Membership Growth

Church Membership: 4,901 (2017)

Most members in the country lived in the Jakobstad in July 1946.[16] In 1947, there were 129 members.[17] Church membership increased to 204 in 1950, 1,297 in 1960, 2,554 in 1965, and 2,935 in 1970. Church membership stood at 3,500 in 1974.[18] Membership totaled 4,214 in 1979, 3,786 in 1981, and 4,200 in 1989. In 1990, 125 people joined the Church and membership reached 4,200.[19]

There were 4,455 members in 2000, increasing to 4,500 in 2005, 4,629 in 2010, and 4,961 in 2015. Annual membership growth rates have generally ranged from 0-1% for most years over the past two decade, with the highest growth rate occurring in 2013 (2.6%). The recent increase in membership growth rates is partially attributed to non-Finnish immigrants joining the Church in larger numbers. Finland census data indicate no noticeable change in the number of self-affiliated Latter-day Saints in the country between 2000 and 2015. Census data indicate that Latter-day Saints numbered 3,307 in 2000, 3,301 in 2005, 3,225 in 2010, and 3,259 in 2015.[20]

In 2017, one in 1,126 people was nominally a Latter-day Saint.

Congregational Growth

Wards: 15 Branches: 16 (April 2019)

A branch opened in Turku (Abo) in 1946.[21] Additional branches opened in Helsinki (1947) and Jyväskylä (1947). The Church opened its first branches in several additional cities in the 1950s, including Kuopio, Joensuu, Lahti, and Lappeenranta. The Church organized its first branches in most cities during the 1960s, including Rauma, Oulu, Kemi, Tampere, Hyvinkää, Vaasa, Kokkola, Savonlinna, and Rovaniemi. The rate at which the Church organized branches in previously unreached cities decreased in the 1970s. In the 1970s, the first branches were organized in Hämeenlinna, Mikkeli, Jakobstad, and Kerava. Five branches functioned in Helsinki by 1974, and five districts operated throughout the country.[22] The first stake was created in Helsinki in 1977 followed by a second stake in Tampere in 1983. In the 1980s, the first branches were created in Kajaani, Kouvola, and Espoo. Only two additional cities have had branches organized for the first time since 1999: Seinäjoki (2000) and Lohja (2019).

By 1990, there were thirty congregations, including eleven wards and nineteen branches in two stakes, and three districts.[23] In 1999, there were stakes in Helsinki (seven wards and three branches) and Tampere (six wards and two branches) and districts in Kuopio (five branches), Oulu (four branches), and Pietersaari (three branches). In 2000, there were thirteen wards and eighteen branches for a total of thirty-one congregations. By 2006, there were fifteen wards and fifteen branches. In the mid-2000s, the Kuopio Finland District was discontinued. In 2010, there were eight wards and two branches in the Helsinki stake, seven wards and two branches in the Tampere stake, four branches in the Oulu district, and four branches in the Pietarssari district. In 2019, the number of congregations increased to thirty-one with the creation of the Lohja Branch in the Helsinki Finland Stake.

Activity and Retention

Strong member activity rates among youth were reported in the early 1990s. The Tampere Finland Stake had over 50% of its mission-aged young adults serving missions, and 70% of the youth were actively attending church.[24] Around 600 members attended the groundbreaking for the Helsinki Finland Temple in 2003.[25] During the 2008–2009 school year, 464 participated in seminary or institute. Between 2000 and 2009, the average number of members per congregation increased from 144 to 153. The average ward or branch had 163 members in 2017.

In the mid-1990s, returned missionaries reported that sacrament meeting attendance varied as high as more than 100 in wards in the Helsinki area to as few as twelve in Kotka. In the early 2010s, estimated church attendance by congregation was as follows: Marjaniemi (120-200), Oulu (90), Jyväskylä (80), Vaasa (60-75), Kouvola (45), Kemi (40), and Joensuu (30). In the mid-2010s, estimated church attendance by congregation was as follows: Oulu (150), Helsinki 3rd (125), Joensuu (125), Turku 2nd (125), Jyväskylä (100), Lahti (80), Kuopio (70), Turku 1st (70), Mikkeli (40), Vaasa (30), Joensuu (25), and Kotka (12). In early 2019, estimated church attendance by congregation was as follows: Espoo 2nd (175) and Tampere 1st (90).

Member activity rates appear to have slightly decreased in the past decade. In 2000, 74% of Church-reported membership self-affiliated as Latter-day Saint on the census, whereas in 2015 only 66% of Church-reported membership self-affiliated as Latter-day Saint on the census. Local members in the mid to late 2010s reported that member activity rates for their individual wards or branches were generally around 50%, whereas convert retention rates for one year after baptism varied by congregation from 30-70%. Returned missionaries who served in Finland during the 2010s reported convert retention rates one year after baptism that ranged from 30-85%. Active members appear to number approximately 2,300, or 45-50% of total church membership.

Language Materials

Languages with Latter-day Saint Scripture: Finnish, Swedish, Russian, Estonian.

All Latter-day Saint scriptures and a wide selection of church materials are translated into Finnish, Swedish, Russian, and Estonian. The Liahona magazine has twelve issues in Finish, Swedish, and Russian and two issues in Estonian a year.

Meetinghouses

In 1974, there were twelve Church-built chapels in Finland.[26] In 2010, most congregations met in Church-built meetinghouses.

Humanitarian and Development Work

The Church has conducted few humanitarian projects in Finland due to high standards of living. Only five humanitarian projects have been reported for the Church in Finland since 1985 and all of these projects were refugee response.[27] Members have found opportunities for service. The Tampere Ward Relief Society created over fifty quilts that were donated to maternity hospitals in Russia.[28] An American youth delivered 1,300 pounds of English-language books to the small Russian border town of Uukuniemi, which previously had no foreign language books.[29]

Opportunities, Challenges, and Prospects

Religious Freedom

The Church faces no legal restrictions on proselytism. Foreign full-time missionaries serve regularly in Finland. Latter-day Saints appear to be generally respected socially but avoided.

Cultural Issues

Rapid modernization and secularization has turned religious matters into private affairs. Member-missionary work among associates and part-member families appear to be the most practical means of overcoming barriers to proselyte the general population overtime. Most Finns retain respect for religion and belief in God, which provides a foundation of faith that missionaries and member can build upon. However, the number of individuals unaffiliated with a religious group doubled between 2000 and 2015. The recent arrival of diverse immigrant groups poses a challenge for the Church to present its teachings in a manner that are understood by those without a background in Western Christianity. Finnish members with large families have faced challenges meeting the economic needs of their children due to high cost of living.[30]

National Outreach

With the exception of the Aland Islands, all twenty administrative regions have at least one ward or branch. Many administrative regions contain only one or two congregations, resulting in large although sparsely populated areas of the country without nearby mission outreach. All eighteen of the most populous cities have at least one ward or branch. Fifty-seven percent (57%) of the national population resides in a city with a mission outreach center. Approximately thirty cities between 20,000 and 55,000 inhabitants remain without Church congregations or mission outreach centers.

Over the past six decades, some members have moved to cities and towns without a nearby ward or branch. Locating less active members in unreached areas and holding cottage meetings with interested individuals may eventually lead to the establishment of additional congregations in underserved areas.

In 1997, Finland ranked eleventh for countries with the most visitors to Church websites.[31] By 2003, the Church had

established an Internet site for Finland at http://www.mormonit.fi.[32] The website contains a map listing meetinghouse locations, explanations on Church doctrine, and contact information for full-time missionaries. The Church also maintains a Finnish version of Mormon.org for individuals interested in learning more about the Church online at https://www.mormon.org/fin . Use of the websites can provide information about the Church to individuals who do not live near a ward or branch.

Member Activity and Convert Retention

Finland appears to have one of the higher member activity rates for Europe, as indicated by the high percentage of members enrolled in seminary or institute, the operation of two stakes and two districts in a nation with fewer than 5,000 members, two-thirds of Church-reported membership self-affiliating as Latter-day Saints on the census in 2015, and approximately half of members on Church records regularly attending church. Norway and Denmark, which have similar numbers of Latter-day Saints, have only two stakes each, and have each historically had over a hundred fewer members enrolled in seminary or institute. The majority of active members appear to have been members of the Church for several decades. Success has been mixed at retaining converts in recent years, notwithstanding diligent fellowshipping efforts from local members. Non-Finns have demonstrated higher receptivity but have also experienced greater difficulties with integration and long-term church activity due to language barriers and cultural differences.

Ethnic Issues and Integration

The increasing number of non-Finn immigrant converts creates challenges integrating into established Finnish-speaking congregations. Many Finns speak English or a second language proficiently, which can assist the accommodation of immigrant converts. Few problems have been encountered integrating indigenous non-Finnish ethnic minority groups into predominantly Finnish congregations. Nevertheless, the organization of an English-speaking congregation in Helsinki may be effective to establish a stronger Church presence among non-Finns.

Language Issues

There is an ample supply of church materials in Finnish despite the small number of members. The Finnish language is among the most difficult languages for foreign missionaries to master, presenting challenges for foreign missionaries to find and teach effectively. However, local members assist full-time missionaries with teaching, contributing to greater local self-sufficiency.

There are no language materials in Romani or Sami and very few members who speak these languages. Church materials are unlikely to be translated into Sami, as there are fewer than 30,000 native speakers of Sami throughout the whole of Scandinavia, and most educated Samis also speak Finnish or Norwegian. Even the translation of The Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith could assist in outreach to this lesser-reached ethnic group. There are millions of Romani speakers throughout Europe who are in great need of missionary outreach materials, but this population may not have language materials for many more years.

Missionary Service

In 1974, sixteen Finns were serving full-time missions.[33] In 1990, there were 120 missionaries serving in Finland.[34] In late 2009, there were fifty-five missionaries serving in Finland divided into two zones. The full-time missionary force has become increasingly more efficient in the past couple of decades, as fewer missionaries served in late 2009 but baptized more converts than most years when there were more than twice as many missionaries. Increases in convert baptisms may be due to greater involvement of local members in teaching and finding investigators as well as increased receptivity of non-Finnish immigrants. Nevertheless, the Church in Finland appears reliant on foreign full-time missionaries to adequately staff the Finland Helsinki Mission.

Leadership

All wards and branches appear to be led by native members. Finnish members supply enough leadership to staff stakes and to serve as international church leaders in the past. The Church appears to have adequate priesthood leadership in the larger wards in the Helsinki area but has challenges filling all leadership positions in the small remote branches due primarily to the lack of members. In 1990, Kari Juhani Aslak Haikkola from Turku was called as a regional representative.[35] In 2002, two of the three members of the stake presidency were Church employees.[36] In 2017, Ilkka Olavi Aura was called as the Finland Helsinki Mission president.[37] There were no Church employees among members of the reorganized Tampere Finland Stake presidency in 2011.[38] None of the members of the Helsinki Finland Stake presidency were Church employees when the presidency was reorganized in 2018.[39] Local Finnish members or Finland-born members have served as the temple president for the Helsinki Finland Temple since 2009. Other Finnish members who were born in Finland but immigrated to other countries have served in significant leadership positions. For example, Jouni Eric Soininen was called to serve as the temple president for the Adelaide Australia Temple in 2014.[40]

Temple

Latter-day Saints in Finland have historically had high rates of temple attendance. Before the completion of the Stockholm Sweden Temple in 1985, members travelled to the Bern Switzerland Temple for several decades.[41] Members attended faithfully at the time in organized temple trips, performing over 2,100 endowments in 1973.[42]

The Helsinki temple was announced in 2000, and construction started in 2003. President Hinckley noted the day prior to the dedication of the Helsinki Finland Temple in 2006 that he hoped that the interest generated by the new temple would result in greater numbers of convert baptisms.[43] Prior to the temple dedication, a cultural night was held that 7,000 members from the new temple district attended.[44] Over 57,000 attended the temple open house, and 10,750 participated in the dedication in Finland. Many more viewed the proceedings throughout the temple district via satellite broadcast.[45] The Finland Helsinki Temple District includes Finland, the Russia St. Petersburg Mission, and Estonia.

Endowment sessions and other temple ordinances used to only occur by appointment and had to be scheduled beforehand. However, in 2019 walk-ins and appointments were permitted for endowment sessions, initiatories, and sealings. The temple in 2019 scheduled four endowment sessions per day on Tuesdays through Fridays, and two endowment sessions on Saturdays. Baptisms in the temple must occur by appointment. Initiatories and sealings occur every day the temple is open.

Comparative Growth

Finland is one of the few industrialized European nations with a long-term Church presence that has seen a slight increase in convert baptisms in recent years, although annual growth rates remain well below 1%. Most nations with a long-term Church presence in Northern Europe have experienced no increase or decreases in convert baptisms. President Hinckley remarked on the slow growth of the Church in Finland in 2006, as over the past fifty-nine years membership had grown to less than 5,000 of Finland's five million inhabitants.[46] Activity rates are moderate to high for the region. Finland has historically had one of the highest percentages of members who participate in seminary or institute in Europe at over 10%. The Helsinki Finland Temple open house experienced one of the largest attendances of any temple open house in proportion to the national Latter-day Saint population, with nearly thirteen attending for every one member. Finland is one of the countries with the smallest Latter-day Saint population to have a temple. The size of Church membership in Finland is similar to Denmark and Norway, but unlike Finland, these nations have seen either no increase or a decrease in Latter-day Saints over the past three decades. The percentage of members in the Finnish population is almost identical to the percentage of members in Sweden and Norway.

Nontraditional Christian denominations struggle to gain converts. Seventh-Day Adventists have experienced membership decline for many years. Jehovah's Witnesses reported a net decrease of more than 600 members and twelve congregations between 2010 and 2018. Pentecostals have reported rapid growth since 2000 per census data although much of this growth appears to be among immigrants. Other Christian groups have been unable to develop successful outreach to the secular Lutheran majority or among the nonreligious youth and young adults.

Future Prospects

Moderately high member activity levels, high rates of seminary and institute attendance, well-developed local leadership, and established church infrastructure provide local strength and self-sufficiency. Mission outreach centers are established in all the major cities, allowing for continued outreach to more than half of the population. Additional cities may have branches organized, specifically ones nearby Helsinki. The reduction in the full-time missionary force over a decade ago has increased the efficiency of missionary activities and encouraged greater member involvement. However, secularism, low receptivity, and the small number Latter-day Saint youth indicate that prospects for greater long-term growth are limited. The Church in Finland is likely to continue to experience annual growth rates between 0-2% for the medium-term future, although the impact of strong membership in Finland will continue to be felt throughout the region for decades to come.

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