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.

Fiji

Population: 0.9 millions (#162 out of countries)

By David Stewart and Matt Martinich

Geography

Area: 18,274 square km. Fiji consists of 332 islands in the South Pacific Ocean between Hawaii and New Zealand. Tropical marine climate occurs year round with little fluctuation in temperature. Mountains cover most terrain. Cyclones are frequent natural hazards. Environmental issues include pollution, deforestation, and soil erosion. Fiji is administratively divided into forteen provinces and one dependency. A third of Fiji's islands are populated.

Peoples

iTaukei: 56.8%

Indo-Fijian: 37.5%

Rotuman: 1.2%

Other: 4.5%

Itaukei, known as Fijians prior to 2010, are the native Melanesians of the main island groups of Fiji. Itaukei have some Polynesian influences. The British relocated Indian workers in the late nineteenth century to labor on sugar plantations. Other ethnic groups primarily include Europeans, other Pacific Islanders, and Chinese. Rotumans are native to the island of Rotuma.

Population: 926,276 (July 2018)

Annual Growth Rate: 0.56% (2018)

Fertility Rate: 2.37 children born per woman (2018)

Life Expectancy: 70.5 male, 76.0 female (2018)

Languages: Fijian (46%), Indian languages [mainly Fijian Hindi] (42%), Lauan (2%), Rotuman (1%), other/unspecified (9%). English and Fijian are the official languages.

Literacy: 94% (2017)

History

Fiji has likely been populated for several thousand years. Tribes living throughout the island chain frequently fought one another and did not come under European rule until the late nineteenth century. Fiji became a British colony in 1874, and independence occurred in 1970. Prior to independence, the British brought many Indian contract laborers to cultivate sugar plantations. Two military coups occurred in 1987 due to many Fijians' perception of Indians dominating government affairs. By 1990, native Fijians took control of the government, and many Indians left the country. In 2000, another military coup occurred, which resulted in ongoing political turmoil. Commodore Voreqe Bainimarama overthrew the democratically elected president in 2006 and has come under scrutiny for refusing to hold elections. Bainimarama was elected as prime minister in 2014 through credible elections, and reelected in free and fair elections in 2018.

Culture

Modern Fijian culture represents a blend of indigenous, European, Indian, and Chinese societies. Traditional Fijian culture continues to endure in several areas, especially in rural locations. Indo-Fijians often segregate themselves and continue their traditional customs and practices, such as performing arranged marriages. Common foods include seafood, vegetables, and cassava. Each village has a chief who determines many aspects of local laws. Cigarette and alcohol consumption rates rank lower than the world average.

Economy

GDP per capita: $9,800 (2017) [16.4% of U.S.]

Human Development Index: 0.741 (2017)

Corruption Index: N/A

Fiji possesses greater natural resources than many other island nations of the South Pacific, including large amounts of timber, valuable mineral deposits, and fish. However, government mismanagement, fluctuations in the price and demand of sugar, and political turmoil have reduced foreign investment and hurt economic growth. Tourism and remittances from Fijians working abroad are important sectors of the economy. Agriculture employs 44.2% of the labor force but produces only 13.5% of the GDP. Primary crops include sugarcane, copra, ginger, and tropical fruits. Services employ 41.6% of the workforce and produce 69.1% of the GDP. Major industries include tourism, sugar, and clothing. Primary trade partners include Australia, New Zealand, the United States, and Singapore.

Transparency International has not rated Fiji in regards to perceived corruption for many years. Many different agencies have been examining and evaluating corruption levels in Fiji to help reduce its occurrence. However, the political atmosphere has been less than conducive for government involvement in rectifying corruption.

Faiths

Christian: 64.4%

Hindu: 27.9%

Muslim: 6.3%

Sikh: 0.3%

Other/unspecified: 0.3%

None: 0.8%

Christians

Denominations – Members – Congregations

Methodist – 320,491

Roman Catholic – 80,000

Assembly of God – 52,798

Seventh-Day Adventists – 25,458 – 260

Latter-day Saints – 21,277 – 50

Anglican – 7,410

Jehovah's Witnesses – 3,250 – 82

Religion

Nearly all Itaukei are Christian, whereas Indo-Fijians primarily adhere to Hinduism and Islam. The Methodist Church is the largest Christian denomination. Only 6% of Indo-Fijians are Christian, whereas 60% of Chinese Fijians follow Christianity. Many Christian denominations have had an active missionary presence for many years and conduct humanitarian and development work.[1]

Religious Freedom

The constitution provides for freedom of religion and separates religion and state. Laws do not tolerate the abuse of religious freedom. Religious groups are required to register with the government. Religion in recent years has become increasingly more political albeit it is difficult to determine whether this is because of ethnic tensions between Itaukei and Indo-Fijians due to the close relationship between religion and ethnicity. Some non-Christians report societal abuse of religion such as temple desecrations.[2]

Largest Cities

Urban: 56.2% (2018)

Suva, Lautoka, Nadi, Nausori, Labasa, Lami, Ba, Sigatoka, Savusavu, Rakiraki.

All ten of the most populous cities and towns have a congregation of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Fifty-four percent (54%) of the population lives in the ten most populous cities.

Church History

In the early 1950s, non-Fijian Latter-day Saint families from other Pacific Islands relocated to Suva and began to hold worship services. The Church organized its first branch in Suva in 1954 after the arrival of the first missionaries. Initial growth was slow, partially due to restrictions on the number of missionary visas granted to the Church. The visa quota for missionaries was raised from two to six in the late 1950s. The first Church-built meetinghouse was built to serve as a future stake center 1958; 300 attended the dedicatory services. The first Fijian served a full-time mission in 1959. The Church created a second district in 1969 and organized the Fiji Mission two years later. In 1972, missionary work expanded into several new areas.[3] Seminary and institute began in the early 1970s. The Church established a primary school in Suva that had over 300 students in 1992.[4] In early June 2000, missionaries were temporarily withdrawn from Suva and surrounding areas due to civil unrest.[5] Later that month, non-Fijian missionaries were temporarily reassigned to New Zealand.[6] The Fiji Suva Mission divided in 2012 to create the Vanuatu Port Vila Mission. In 2019, the Fiji Suva Mission serviced Fiji, Tuvalu, and Wallis and Futuna. Church President Russell M. Nelson visited Suva, Fiji in May 2019 and met with Church members.[7]

Membership Growth

Church Membership: 21,277 (2018)

Fiji had 1,500 members in 1973,[8] increasing to 3,700 in 1985. By late 1991, there were approximately 7,000 members.[9]

Membership reached 12,163 in 2000, 13,563 in 2003, 14,866 in 2007, and 15,897 in 2010. Most years experienced membership growth rates between 2-3% in the 2000s. The Church reported accelerated membership growth in the 2010s as membership reached 17,730 in 2013, 19,737 in 2016, and 21,277 in 2018. Annual membership growth rates generally ranged from 3-5% during the 2010s.

According to the 1996 Census, 3% of Indo-Fijian Christians identified themselves as Latter-day Saints, whereas 0.5% of indigenous Fijian Christians claimed membership in the Church.[10] In 2018, one in forty-four Fijians was nominally a Latter-day Saint, or 2.3% of the population.

Congregational Growth

Wards: 27 Branches: 24 Groups: ~10+ (June 2019)

The first stake was created in 1983. In 1993, there was one stake and two districts. At the time, there were twenty-one congregations, six wards, and fifteen branches.[11] Three additional stakes were organized in Nausori (1995), Lautoka (1996), and Suva (1997), bringing the total of stakes to four. Two districts functioned in Labasa and Taveuni by 1997. The Labasa Fiji District was discontinued in 2008.

By year-end 2000, there were forty-two congregations, consisting of twenty-three wards and nineteen branches. In 2007, there were twenty-five wards and nineteen branches. In June 2010, seven branches functioned directly under the Fiji Suva Mission, six on Vanua Levu and one on Rotuma. Two groups functioned in Kadavu, which opened to missionary work in early 2010. One group functioned under the Taveuni Fiji District. The number of congregations increased to forty-six in 2010, forty-eight in 2012, fifty in 2013. Two branches closed in the mid-2010s, resulting in the number of congregations decreasing to forty-eight in 2015. Three new branches were organized in the mid and late 2010s, increasing the number of congregations to fifty-one. Many member groups opened during the 2010s such as in Bua, Dratuba, Kavala, Lomaivuna, Moturiki, Naduna, Naitasiri, Nasivikoso, Navakawau, Navurevure, Savurua, Tabia, Tacilevu, Vutia, and Waimaula. However, by 2019 it was unclear whether all of these member groups continued to operate. Two additional districts were organized in 2017 in Korovou and Labasa. The Fiji Suva Mission Branch services members who live on most of the smaller islands. In 2019, the Church operated two Fijian-speaking congregations outside of Fiji – both of which were located in California: the Sacramento 4th Ward and the San Francisco 2nd Branch.

Activity and Retention

Large meetings, open houses, and conferences have been well attended. In 1997, almost 5,000 attended a special meeting held with President Hinckley.[12] Over 16,000 attended the open house for the Suva Fiji Temple in 2000, and 112 attended the single dedicatory session.[13] The general membership of the Church was not invited to the dedication due to civil unrest. In 2001, 900 members gathered to meet President Hinckley with less than twelve hours' notice. [14] Almost 3,000 attended the fiftieth anniversary of the Church in Fiji in 2004.[15] Eight hundred sixteen were enrolled in seminary or institute during the 2008–2009 school year. More than 500 youth attended a four-day youth conference in Suva in 2013.[16] Over 4,000 Church members attended a special meeting with President Nelson in May 2019.[17] The average number of members per congregation has increased from 250 in 1987 to 324 in 1997, 338 in 2007, and 426 in 2018, suggesting decreasing member activity rates in the past thirty years.

The 1996 census reported that 3,475 identified as Latter-day Saints, including 2,253 native Fijians, 633 Indians, and 589 claiming a different ethnicity.[18] At the time, there were around 11,000 members listed on Church records, indicating that 32% of total Church membership at the time identified themselves as Latter-day Saints for the census. Church attendance widely varies by location, as larger congregations exceed one hundred active members and smaller congregations have fewer than twenty. In 2019, there were fifty active members in the Motusa Rotuma Branch. Most estimates from returned missionaries indicate approximately half of new converts remain active one year after baptism.

Active membership is estimated at approximately 4,000, or 19% of total membership.

Language Materials

Languages with Latter-day Saint Scripture: Fijian, Hindi, English, Kiribati, Chinese.

All Church scriptures are available in Fijian, Kiribati, and Chinese. Only the Book of Mormon has been translated into standard Hindi. A large number of young women, temple, leadership, priesthood, Relief Society, Sunday School, teaching, Primary, missionary, videos, and family history materials are available in Fijian, Kiribati, and Chinese. Fijian translations of the Church Handbook of Instructions and several popular church books are also available. Several unit, priesthood, Relief Society, primary, and missionary resources are translated into the Fijian dialect of Hindi, whereas standard Hindi has a larger number of materials available. General Conference has been translated into Fijian Hindi since 2007. The Church has only translated the Articles of Faith and The Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith into Rotuman. General conference and leadership trainings are also available in Fijian, Kiribati, and Chinese. Fijian has four issues of the Liahona magazineannually, Kiribati has six editions of the

Liahona annually, and Chinese has monthly issues of the Liahona.

Meetinghouses

In 1999, the Church maintained eighteen chapels and two schools.[19] There were approximately forty meetinghouses for wards and branches by 2019. Most congregations meet in Church-built meetinghouses, whereas smaller branches may meet in rented spaces. Member groups usually meet in makeshift shelters, outdoors, or rented spaces.

Humanitarian and Development Work

The Church has conducted at least 171 humanitarian and development projects in Fiji since 1985 to provide clean water, emergency response, maternal and newborn care, refugee response, vision care, wheelchair donations, and other types of community projects.[20] In 2002, the Church donated medical supplies to a hospital on Rotuma.[21] Intense flooding in 2004 led the Church to temporarily house flood victims in Suva.[22]

Opportunities, Challenges, and Prospects

Religious Freedom

Missionaries proselyte openly and experience no government restrictions. The Church has maintained positive relations with the Fijian government despite successive coups over the years. Village law and the need for permission from village chiefs to perform missionary work in many outlying areas can present challenges. Full-time missionaries in some villages report coordinated efforts by other religious groups to ignore and poorly treat full-time missionaries.

Cultural Issues

The Church has experienced difficulty developing culturally effective proselytism and outreach programs, especially in conveying to the population that the Church is a Christian denomination while simultaneously emphasizing unique doctrines and practices that make it stand out. The Church aired commercials offering a free copy of the Church's Lamb of God DVD in April 2010. Many requested the DVD, and missionaries hand delivered them to the homes of interested individuals. However, missionaries reported that the activity produced little immediate success, as most just wanted a free video on Jesus Christ instead of missionary visits. The Church has adapted missionary dress to Fijian cultural standards, as missionaries wear traditional skirts called lava-lava.

Indo-Fijian converts tend to experience the greatest opposition to joining the Church from their family and friends. This issue has been encountered in India, but poor native Fijian and Indo-Fijian relations have amplified the issue of leaving Hinduism and embracing Christianity. Nonetheless, the Church has seen significant progress in reaching out to Indo-Fijian Christians, if not among Indo-Fijian Hindus. The percentage of Latter-day Saints among Indo-Fijian Christians is six times higher than the percentage of Latter-day Saints among Itaukei Christians per the most recent figures available. Opposition from Methodists in areas of the country known as Methodist strongholds has posed challenges for others to be receptive to learn more about the Church, such as in some rural areas. Nevertheless, receptivity to the Church among many Itaukei has improved in recent years, which is also indicated by slight acceleration in membership growth rates and success with the Church's establishment of many member groups in traditional Itaukei villages during the 2010s.

Kava consumption as relating to the Word of Wisdom remains a subject of debate among some members. Church leaders have counseled members to keep free of habit-forming substances, which some consider to include recreational kava use. The strong sense of community in most villages can both help and hinder missionary work.

National Outreach

The Fiji Suva Mission has been significantly reduced in its geographical size over the past several decades, which has permitted greater mission resource allocation to Fiji. The main island of Viti Levu accounts for approximately 70% of the national population and the Church's wards and branches in Fiji. Vanua Levu accounts for 15% of the population and has congregations in most of the largest population centers. Nine-five percent (95%) of the Fijian population lives on an island with a mission outreach center. The rural interior of Viti Levu and lesser-reached areas of Vanua Levu are locations that are in need of greater mission outreach. Some of the greatest recent successes with the establishment of member groups and branches have occurred in rural communities on Viti Levu and Vanua Levu such as Nakawakawa and Nasivikoso. The population who lives on unreached islands primarily resides on the many islands scattered throughout eastern Fiji in the Eastern Division. It will be challenging to establish the Church in these areas, as many outreach centers will be required to serve a small, scattered population.

In late 2009, missionaries opened Kadavu for missionary work and have since experience considerable success as the number of members attending meetings tripled over a six month period. Additional unreached islands may also demonstrate comparable receptivity to mission outreach. Before the Church expands into unreached areas, permission must be granted by the village chiefs for the Church to operate in a given area under local village law.[23] This may have reduced mission outreach in some areas of the country.

The Fiji LDS Church College has provided education to many Fijians and has brought many into the Church. The Church school provides outreach opportunities for those living on remote islands who attend the school to bring the Church to their home villages.

Member Activity and Convert Retention

Historically poor relations between missionaries and local Church leaders have resulted in low convert retention and member activity in many areas. Missionaries reported that in 2010, the Rakiraki Branch had no branch president for over six months and lost many active members due to stake leadership not taking a more proactive stance on calling a new branch president and restarting missionary efforts. Missionaries in the late 2000s and early 2010s suggested that some stakes may revert back to district status due to few priesthood leaders, poor communication, and challenges fulfilling stake responsibilities. There has been little increase in the number of active members during the past decade despite accelerated membership growth, suggesting many recent converts no longer attend church.

Double affiliation is a significant source of member inactivity. High levels of Christian proselytism activity for over a century have created a culture of denomination hopping. The period of rapid membership growth in the 1990s was also the time of the lowest convert retention, as missionaries tended to rush converts into baptism with little pre-baptismal teaching and fellowshipping. Many of these converts returned to their previous denominations after only a brief acquaintance with the Church; reactivation work has experienced little success.

Ethnic Issues and Integration

Integration of native Fijians and Indo-Fijians into the same congregations has required love and understanding from both ethnicities. Native Fijian and Indo-Fijian members reported in 1993 that they felt more comfortable around each other in Church than in any other place in society.[24]

Language Issues

Many congregations accommodate speakers of different languages by providing translators in classes and assigning sacrament meeting talks to speakers of different languages. Sacrament talks in Fijian, Hindustani, and English are given every Sunday in many congregations.[25] Foreign missionaries learn Fijian in the Missionary Training Center and learn and use some Hindi only in the field. English is used frequently in teaching.

Missionary Service

Fiji remains dependent on other nations to adequately staff its missionary force. In 1993, 38 of the 105 missionaries serving were local members.[26] In early 2010, about 150 missionaries served in the Fiji Suva Mission, half of whom were native to the boundaries of the mission. Fiji has around one hundred missionaries assigned at a time, as the mission also services Vanuatu and New Caledonia. In 2019, approximately half of the full-time missionaries assigned to the Fiju Suva Mission appeared to be from Fiji or nearby nations.

Leadership

Returned missionaries provide a major source of strength and manpower for local leadership. The Church has relied on Church employees to fill leadership positions albeit this has become less prevalent in recent years. When the Suva Fiji North Stake was organized in 1997, two of the three members of the stake presidency worked for the Church.[27] However, no Church employees were noted among the members of the reorganized stake presidency of the Suva Fiji North Stake in 2015.[28] Several Fijians have served in international leadership positions. In 2007, Taniela B. Wakolo was called as an Area Seventy.[29] 2014, Taniela B. Wakolo was called as the president of the Arkansas Little Rock Mission.[30] There have also been improvements with native members who serve as temple presidents for the Suva Fiji Temple. In 2015, Jackson Christopher Yee from Kadavu was called as the new Suva Fiji Temple president.[31] In 2018, Elder Taniela B. Wakolo from Lomaloma, Lau was called as a General Authority Seventy[32] and Alipate Tagidugu was called as the Suva Fiji Temple president.[33]

Temple

Announced in 1998 and completed in 2000, the Suva Fiji Temple served members in Fiji, Kosrae and Pohnpei in the Federated

States of Micronesia, western islands in Kiribati, Nauru, New Caledonia, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu. The temple was renovated and rededicated in 2016. The temple remains poorly utilized. In 2010, the temple had only two endowment sessions offered on weekdays and three sessions offered on Saturdays. In 2019, the temple scheduled only two endowment sessions a day from Tuesdays through Saturdays, and the temple appeared opened for other ordinance work on only half of the day for each of these days the temple was opened. The temple conducts sessions in English with headset transmissions available in Bislama, Fijian, French, Kiribati, and Tongan. Members not living on Viti Levu face greater challenges to attend the temple regularly due to distance and financial constraints.

Comparative Growth

The Church has experienced some of the slowest membership growth in Fiji among South Pacific nations despite Fiji having the largest population of any nation in Polynesia and Melanesia. The percentage of Church members is lower than many nations in the region, especially among those that had a Church presence established before 1960. Other nations in the Pacific where missionaries first arrived in the 1970s have a similar or greater percentage of members than Fiji. Member activity rates appear low t compared to nations in Polynesia or Melanesia. During the late 2000s, approximately 5% of Fijian members were enrolled in seminary or institute, nearly the same percentage for most of Oceania.

Many Christian denominations have experienced greater growth than The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, but most have operated for a longer period of time in Fiji. Seventh-Day Adventists report approximately 25,000 members. However, Adventists have reported a decrease of 1,000 members during the past decade. Jehovah's Witnesses report slow, steady membership and congregational growth. Christian groups with more members and higher growth rates have tended to develop greater national outreach, development work, and local leadership than Latter-day Saints.

Future Prospects

The Church has firmly established itself in many areas on the main island of Viti Levu but has yet to make greater breakthroughs with native Fijians. Stakes remain only on Viti Levu. Low receptivity and a lack of leadership in many areas will likely continue to prevent long-term growth and greater self-sufficiency and stability, especially outside of Suva. The quick baptism of converts who have not established regular church attendance or other positive gospel habits remains a major source of convert attrition and saps strength and enthusiasm from local congregations. The Church school provides needed education and is a source for youth investigators and converts who can serve missionaries and provide leadership for long-term growth. The significant expansion of missionary activity into more than one dozen villages during the past decade indicates that mission leadership is actively pursuing broader national outreach, which in the coming years may result in greater "real growth" for the Church and the establishment of stakes on additional islands such as Vanua Levu.

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