



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.

El Salvador



Population: 6.13 millions (#109 out of countries)

By David Stewart and Matt Martinich

Geography

Area: 21,041 square km. Positioned on the Pacific Coast, El Salvador is the smallest and only country in Central America that does not touch the Atlantic Ocean. Honduras and Guatemala border the country inland. Hills and mountains occupy most of the country with dormant and active volcanoes. Several large lakes dot the Salvadoran landscape by forming in the craters of extinct volcanoes. Periodic earthquakes and volcanic activity have threatened the country along with hurricanes. Tropical climate allows for wide spread agriculture, especially in coastal areas. Mountainous areas experience more temperate climate with distinct wet and dry seasons. El Salvador is administratively divided into 14 departments.

Population: 7,185,218 (July 2009)

Annual Growth Rate: 1.656% (2009)

Fertility Rate: 3 children born per woman (2009)

Life Expectancy: male 68.72, female 76.11 (2009)

Peoples

Mestizo: 90%

White: 9%

Amerindian: 1%

Due to Spanish rule, intermarriage between the Amerindian population has resulted with 90% of Salvadorans today identifying themselves as Mestizo. Most whites have not intermarried with native populations while few Amerindians have not mixed with whites or Mestizos.

Languages: Spanish (99%), Kekchí (0.2%), Other (0.8%). Nearly the entire population (7.1 million) speaks Spanish with few speakers of Kekchí.

Literacy: 80.2% (2003)

History

The Pipil people resided in El Salvador when the Spanish conquered the area. El Salvador received its name from Spanish conquistadors, meaning "the Savior" in Spanish. Independence from Spain was granted, along with most of Central America, under the Central American Federation in 1821. El Salvador began its own independent nation in 1839. Coffee grew in importance as a cash crop during the 19th and 20th centuries. A destructive civil war took place between 1980 and 1992 resulting in the death of 75,000 Salvadorans as leftist rebel groups strove to overthrow the government, establishing their strongholds in the peripheries of the country in the departments of Morazan and Chalatenango. The United States has maintained strong ties with the Salvadoran government and provided assistance during the civil war. Since the end of the civil war, the government has sought to improve living conditions for its people and reform the economy.

Culture

The Roman Catholic Church plays a significant role in everyday life. Many of the national holidays are Catholic holidays and Catholic leaders greatly influence politics and social attitudes. Violent crime is a serious problem, as El Salvador has one of the highest homicide rates in the world.

Economy

GDP per capita: \$6,200 (2008 estimate)

Human Development Index: 0.747

Corruption Index: 3.9

Since the 1800s El Salvador has heavily depended on cash crops, especially Coffee, in developing the overall economy. In 2009 El Salvador had the third largest economy in Central America after Costa Rica and Panama. Agriculture and food production is the dominant industry. Services are the largest sector of the economy, both in employment and in the percentage of the total GDP. Economic growth has continued in recent years, yet has declined recently due to the global financial crisis in the late 2000s. El Salvador struggles to diversify its economy while addressing the demanding needs of urbanization. The United States is El Salvador's largest import/export partner, and has used the United States dollar as its currency since 2001. The Central America-Dominican Republic Free Trade Agreement has helped increase El Salvador's exports.

Faiths

Christian: 80.9%

Other: 2.3%

None: 16.8%

Christians

Denominations Members Congregations

Catholic 4,102,759

Protestant 1,523,266

Seventh Day Adventists 193,478 633

Latter-Day Saints 102,043 161

Jehovah's Witnesses 34,049 599

Religion

The percentage of Catholics has declined as Protestant denominations have grown rapidly in the past 50 years. Secularism has increased in recent years.

Religious Freedom

Persecution Index:

Religious freedom is protected by the constitution and upheld by the government.

Major Cities

Urban: 61%

San Salvador, Soyapango, Santa Ana, San Miguel, Mejicanos, Apopa, Delgado, Nueva San Salvador, Ilopango, Colón.

All cities in El Salvador with over 20,000 inhabitants have at least one congregation of the Church. The largest cities without a Church presence have 16,000 or fewer inhabitants. The metropolitan San Salvador area, which includes many small towns on the peripheries of the city, numbers 1.56 million inhabitants, or 25% of the population of El Salvador. 26% of the population lived in the 10 largest cities as of 2008.

Membership Growth

LDS Membership: 102,043 (2008)

A conference was held in 1951 years later in San Salvador with 63 in attendance. The first convert baptisms took place the same year. By 1965 there were 4,200 members living in El Salvador. In 1976 there were there were 4,745 members. By 1986 membership increased to 15,100.

Membership growth continued to increase rapidly to 38,000 in 1990 and to 64,000 in 1995. In 2000 membership stood at 86,758. Membership increased to 94,296 in 2005. Growth began to occur more rapidly in the latter part of the decade with membership increasing to over 102,000. Membership growth rates fell to less than two percent a year between 2001 and the end of 2006. In 2007 and 2008, membership growth rates rebounded to 2.76% and 3.52% respectively; the highest in a decade.

The percentage of members of the Church in the population of El Salvador has continued to increase in recent years. In 2003 there was one member per 71 El Salvadorans. By the end of 2008 there was one Church member per 69 people, making El Salvador one of the nations in Latin America with the highest percentage of Church members.

Congregational Growth

Wards: 71 Branches: 76

President Arwell L. Pierce from the Mexican Mission was the first Church leader to begin exploring missionary opportunities in 1948. The first missionaries assigned to serve in the country came in 1949.^[1] El Salvador was included in the Central America Mission when it was created in 1952 from the Mexican Mission. The Guatemala-El Salvador Mission was created in 1965 along with the first district in San Salvador.

The first stake in El Salvador was created in San Salvador in 1973. The El Salvador San Salvador Mission was created in 1976. In 1989 El Salvador became self sustaining in its local missionary force^[2]. The following year a second mission was created, named the El Salvador San Salvador East Mission.

The second and third stakes in El Salvador were created in San Salvador in 1979. For the first time stakes were created outside of San Salvador in Santa Ana in 1979 and 1980. A sixth stake was created in San Miguel in 1981. Between 1990 and the end of 1996 El Salvador had an additional 10 stakes organized: Six in small cities and towns to the southwest of Santa Ana and four in the San Salvador area. Only one of the 10 new stakes was created from a district: The Juayua El Salvador Stake. The remaining nine new stakes were created from stake divisions. Two districts were organized in the mid-1990s in San

Vicente and Usulután.

In 2000 there were 153 congregations. There were 152 congregations in 2005. Starting in 2006, the Church began to experience greater congregation growth as congregations increased from 152 to 155. The number of wards in El Salvador increased from 97 at the end of 2005 to 105 at the end of 2007. By late 2009 wards had increased to 114 and the total number of congregations reached 161. For the first time in 13 years a new stake was created in El Salvador in 2009 in Santa Ana, bringing the total number of stakes to 17. In 2011, one new stake was organized in Sonzacate.

El Salvador has many mission branches which function in smaller cities and towns in rural areas. Two mission branches meet north of San Miguel in San Francisco Gotera and Santa Rosa de Lima. To the north of San Salvador four mission branches function in Aguilares, Chalatenango, and Nueva Concepción. Two more mission branches operate between San Salvador and Sonsonate in Armenia. Some of the stakes in El Salvador include branches or wards in more isolated areas of the country, particularly along the border with Guatemala. Jurisdiction for the country of Belize was transferred from the Honduras San Pedro Sula Mission to the El Salvador San Salvador West Mission in March 2006.

Activity and Retention

El Salvador has one of the highest inactivity rates in Latin America. The average number of Church members per congregation was 567 in 2000 and 634 in 2009. Membership has grown more rapidly than the creation of new wards and branches, indicating that many new converts are not retained or the Church allows congregations to grow larger than in times past. Membership increased by 7,500 between 2000 and 2005, yet the number of congregations decreased by one. No increase in new congregations during this five year period was not due to branches maturing into wards considering the number of wards in El Salvador increased by one from 96 to 97. Active membership in El Salvador is likely no higher than 30,000.

Language Materials

Languages with LDS Scripture: Spanish, Kekchí

All LDS scriptures are available in Spanish and Kekchí. The Church has translated nearly all of its materials into Spanish. The Spanish LDS version of the Bible was introduced in the fall of 2009. Kekchí has limited Priesthood, missionary, and Sunday School resources.

Humanitarian and Development Work

El Salvador has received humanitarian work from the Church from time to time. The Church provided aid and service to the country when a powerful earthquake occurred in 2001, contributing over 1.1 million pounds of relief supplies^[3]. The Church has provided many disabled Salvadorans greater mobility through wheelchair donations^[4]. In 2005 severe flooding by Hurricane Stan resulted in the Church using some meetinghouses as evacuation centers. At the time several meetinghouses were also damaged from flooding^[5].

Opportunities, Challenges and Prospects

Religious Freedom

The Church has taken advantage of the freedom of religion in proselytism. There are no restrictions which impede missionary work.

Cultural Issues

Most have a Christian background due to the Catholic Church's influence on society. This has allowed for greater receptivity of the Church's teachings. The rise of Protestantism has possibly hid much of the Church's presence from most Salvadorans since the LDS Church grew rapidly at the same time as other Christian denominations. Weekly Church attendance and holding a Church calling appear against cultural norms for worship, which has contributed to high activity and low retention.

National Outreach

Due to El Salvador's small geographic size and high population density, the Church has established itself in most of the country, creating congregations accessible to nearly the entire population. This has allowed the Church tremendous opportunity to

preach the Gospel to most.

Every department of El Salvador has at least one congregation. The largest city without a reported congregation was Olocuitla, located southeast of San Salvador, with 15,900 inhabitants in 2007. Most small cities and towns have branches established, some with only 10,000 people. Among rural communities in the country, the Church appears to have most successfully established itself in western El Salvador. The Juayua El Salvador Stake, the last stake to be created from a district, was based in Juayua, a city of less than 14,000 people. Rural areas which appear to have the Church the least established are to the south and east of San Salvador, considering four of the six towns with over 10,000 inhabitants without a Church presence were in this area. These rural areas which lack a Church presence are part of the El Salvador San Salvador West Mission. Many areas in eastern El Salvador in the departments near San Miguel also lack a Church presence in many rural communities. The Church has the opportunity to open these rural areas to missionary work, which will likely occur as already baptized members move to these locations and desire to establish the Church.

The Church has a greater challenge in establishing itself in greater numbers in eastern El Salvador than in central or western El Salvador. The four easternmost provinces of La Union, Morazan, San Miguel, and Usulután had a combined population of about 1.5 million in 2007, or 25% of El Salvador's population, yet the Church only had one stake, one district and a couple mission branches in this area. The sole stake in eastern El Salvador, the San Miguel El Salvador Stake, was organized in 1981 and was the sixth stake in the country. Even though San Miguel is the third largest city in El Salvador after the San Salvador metropolitan area and Santa Ana, growth has been so slow that no additional stakes have been created since. If the ratio of stakes and districts in eastern El Salvador were the same in the rest of the country, we would expect no more than four stakes, four districts and a half dozen or so mission branches for all of El Salvador. If the ratio of stakes to the population were the same in eastern El Salvador as it was in the rest of the country, an additional four stakes would exist in eastern El Salvador. It is unclear why the Church has not grown as rapidly in eastern El Salvador, but may be due to the civil war, distance from the capital or greater success in other areas drawing away more mission resources such as missionaries and visits from members of the mission presidency.

The Church is most firmly established in western El Salvador, where eight stakes and a couple mission branches may be found in the departments of Ahuachapán, Santa Ana and Sonsonate that have a combined population of 1.5 million. The population of these three departments is equal to that of the four departments of easternmost El Salvador. If the ratio of stakes to the population were the same in all of El Salvador as it was in these three westernmost departments, there would be 32 stakes in El Salvador. The strength of the Church in western El Salvador is manifest with the recent creation of the Paraíso El Salvador Stake in 2009 in Santa Ana. Greater growth in congregations has been experienced in western El Salvador than central or eastern El Salvador since 2000, likely the result of the stronger local leadership and membership integrating new converts into the Church.

Member Activity and Convert Retention

Difficulties in retaining converts and creating new congregations appear as the greatest challenge the Church faces in El Salvador. The Church may be the most established out of all of Central America in El Salvador in terms of its presence in most rural and urban areas. Inactivity and retention problems worsened as a result of so many converts joining the Church in so short a period of time combined with inadequate teaching of Gospel principles before and after baptism. The first five years after 2000 were likely spent in teaching and strengthening active and inactive members considering membership growth rates were some of the lowest in the Western Hemisphere and no new congregations were created. It does not appear that the lower growth rates in the first half of the 2000s was due to El Salvadorans taking less interest in the Gospel but rather a shift in focus from finding and baptizing to retaining and reactivation. The recent increase in membership is a welcome sight after years of membership growth rates below two percent. However increased congregational growth has not increased in tandem with the recent increase in membership growth, perhaps indicating continuing issues with convert retention.

Inactivity problems likely contributed to the delayed announcement for a temple in El Salvador until after there were 100,000 members.

The CIA World Factbook estimate for Mormons in El Salvador was reported at only 0.7% of the population even though numerically Church members made up almost 1.41% of the population when the estimate was given in 2003. This discrepancy points to retention problems during the periods of most rapid membership growth.

Ethnic Issues and Integration

The homogeneity of El Salvador's population has limited ethnic issues. Challenges may occur between whites and Mestizos based on socio-economic class. The native peoples of El Salvador have seen little attention from the Church, likely due to their remote locations.

Language Issues

Besides English, no other language has as numerous a supply of Church materials than Spanish. The Church is highly unlikely to translate any Church materials in any of the local, Amerindian languages of El Salvador due to most of these languages

being nearly extinct or having very few speakers

Leadership

Despite problems with member activity and convert retention, El Salvador has provided the Church with many leaders and missionaries. Fewer North American missionaries serve in El Salvador due to the self-sufficiency of the Salvadoran missionary force. Rapid growth in membership between the mid 1980s and 2000 resulted in the number of stakes increasing from six to 16. The strength of local leadership and Priesthood holders is apparent due to stakes covering most of the country. This is partially due to the country's small geographic size, but still impressive considering neighboring Guatemala and Honduras have many more districts which are not strong enough to become stakes. El Salvador may prove to be a greater contributor to the growth of the Church in Central America considering membership is maturing in the Gospel and ready to accommodate further, more rapid growth.

Several members from El Salvador have served in leadership positions for the Church outside of El Salvador. Area Authority Seventies have been called from among Salvadoran membership, such as Elder Carlos Rivas in 2006. In 2008 the newly sustained first counselor in the Relief Society general presidency was Sister Silvia Allred, a native to El Salvador. In recent years the Church has maintained positive relations with the Salvadoran government, evidenced by a meeting between the President of the Central American Area and the President of El Salvador in 2006^[6].

The Church appears stronger in urban areas than in rural areas considering missionaries serving in isolated mission branches report that sometimes they serve as counselors to their branch presidents in 2009. This indicates that some branches in El Salvador struggle with filling Priesthood holder positions with local membership for congregations to function.

Temple

In the early and mid 2000s El Salvador became the country with the second highest Church membership without a temple. Neighboring Honduras had its first temple announced for Tegucigalpa in 2006, leaving El Salvador as the country with the most members without a temple until the San Salvador El Salvador Temple was announced in November 2007. Groundbreaking for the temple was held in September 2008. Once completed, the new temple in San Salvador will serve members living in El Salvador.

Health and Safety

El Salvador's high homicide rate may have contributed to the calling of fewer North American missionaries to serve in the country. Missionaries may have limitations in times and places for proselytism where threats of violence may be highest.

Comparative Growth

No other country in Latin America has had the Gospel carried to so many of its inhabitants, with the possible exception of Chile and Uruguay. Although some neighboring Central American countries have a higher percentage of members of the Church than El Salvador, these nations contain large, sparsely populated areas in which there are no congregations or official Church presence.

Christian churches with strong missionary and church building programs have a presence in El Salvador and experience rapid growth. The recent rise of Protestantism in El Salvador is additional evidence to the receptivity of Salvadorans to Christianity, climbing from less than five percent in the 1950s to over a quarter of the population.

Future Prospects

A seasoned Salvadoran membership in the Gospel appears ready to accommodate additional converts in greater numbers. Membership growth has begun to accelerate, possibly leading El Salvador into another period of rapid Church growth that would be better able to increase convert retention and member activity.

Additional districts in El Salvador may be created due to several clustered groups of mission branches distant from existing stakes or districts. A district may be organized from several mission branches in the Chalatenango area. Two mission branches meet in the city of Armenia, located between Sonsonate and San Salvador, which may become its own district if more branches are organized in the area. Armenia may become part of a future stake or district centered in El Limon if congregations are taken from other stakes in the area. A district may also be created to the north of San Miguel from two branches in the area if an additional branch or two are organized and active, worth Priesthood holders exist in large enough number to support a district presidency in addition to branch and elder's quorum presidencies.

Missionary reports on the strength of the two districts in San Vicente and Usulután are limited. It is unclear whether these two

districts are close to becoming stakes. Both districts consist of only a couple branches in the cities in which the districts are headquartered and several branches in neighboring cities and towns. The limiting factor for these districts in becoming stakes likely stems from high inactivity, few branches in each district and the large geographic area these two districts cover in central El Salvador. These areas also have smaller populations than other areas in El Salvador. None of the stakes in El Salvador as of the fall of 2009 appeared close to dividing. Several branches have become wards recently, but few stakes have enough congregations to divide to create new stakes. As membership growth and activity increases in El Salvador it is possible a second temple could be announced for Santa Ana where many members of the Church live. This appears unlikely for the near future considering the first temple in San Salvador is still under construction and that Santa Ana is no more than 50 miles away from San Salvador. However considering the stakes in El Salvador are clustered in either San Salvador or western El Salvador suggests that a second temple may be possible if member activity and revelation dictate that this is the case.

[1] <http://newsroom.lds.org/ldsnewsroom/eng/contact-us/el-salvador>

[2] Deseret News 2003 Church Almanac, p. 327 "El Salvador"

[3] <http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/39388/Members-rebuilding-lives-homes.html>

[4] <http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/40788/Wheelchairs-given-to-Central-American-nations.html>

[5] <http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/48014/Latin-America-victimized-by-hurricane.html>

[6] <http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/48598/Salvadoran-president-meets-with-Church-delegation.html>