



# 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.



## Curacao

Population: 0.15 millions (#194 out of countries)

By David Stewart and Matt Martinich

### Geography

**Area:** 444 square km. Curaçao is a small island in the southern Caribbean Sea north of Venezuela that is a constituent country of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. The terrain consists of low-laying plains and hills. Tropical semi-arid conditions occur with little seasonal variation in temperature. Hurricanes rarely impact the island and are the primary natural hazard.

### Peoples

Curaçaoan: 75.4%

Dutch: 6.0%

Dominican: 3.6%

Colombian: 3.0%

Bonairean, Sint Eustatian, or Saban: 1.5%

Haitian: 1.2%

Surinamese: 1.2%

Venezuelan: 1.1%

Aruban: 1.1%

Other: 5.0%

Unspecified: 0.9%

**Population:** 150,241 (July 2018)

**Annual Growth Rate:** 0.39% (2018)

**Fertility Rate:** 2.03 children born per woman (2018)

**Life Expectancy:** 76.3 male, 81.1 female (2018)

**Languages:** Papiamentu (84.0%), Dutch (8.3%), Spanish (4.5%), English (3.2%). Dutch is the official language. Papiamentu is the only Iberian-based Creole spoken worldwide. Many speak all major languages fluently.

**Literacy:** 99% (2017)

## History

The Arawak Amerindians were the first known inhabitants. The Spanish sighted and claimed Curaçao in 1499. In 1634, the Dutch took control of the island and used it as a base of operations for the slave trade and military operations against the Spanish.<sup>[1]</sup> The abolition of slavery in 1863 hurt the local economy, which did not recover until an oil refinery was established in the early twentieth century. In 1954, Curaçao headquartered the newly-formed Netherlands Antilles government. The Netherlands Antilles originally included the Dutch Caribbean possessions of Curacao, Bonaire, Sint Eustatius, Saba, and Saint Martin. In 2010, the Netherlands Antilles was dissolved, and Curaçao became a constituent country of the Netherlands as a result of referenda held in 2005 and 2009 in which Curaçaoan citizens voted to become a self-governing country part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands.

## Culture

Curaçao exhibits many cultural features adopted from African, European, and Caribbean cultures regarding architecture, cuisine, and language. African customs and traditions are more pronounced than on many other islands due to the role of Curaçao as a base of operations for the Dutch slave trade. Most of the population is Catholic. Christianity is a dominant influence on society as many attend church. Carnival is a major celebration in February that includes parades and parties. Cigarette and alcohol consumption rates appear comparable to the worldwide average rates of use. Divorce rates are higher than world averages.

## Economy

**GDP per capita:** \$15,000 (2004)

**Human Development Index:** 0.931 (for the Netherlands) (2017)

**Corruption Index:** 82 (for the Netherlands) (2018)

The economy relies upon a single petroleum refinery, tourism, and offshore banking to function. Curaçao benefits from an excellent harbor to accommodate large ships, such as oil tankers. Venezuela leases the oil refinery. Nearly all consumer goods are imported as soil and climatic conditions are poor for agriculture. Overall Curaçao has a well-developed infrastructure and excellent Internet connectivity. Natural resources include calcium phosphates, aloe, fruit, peanuts, and vegetables. Services employ 82% of the labor force and generate 84% of the GDP. Industry accounts for virtually the entire remainder of the labor force and GDP. Primary industries include tourism, petroleum refining and transshipment, and light manufacturing. One percent (1%) of the GDP and workforce is attributed to agriculture. Aloe, sorghum, peanuts, vegetables, and fruit are the major crops. Venezuela and the United States are the primary trade partners. Corruption rates are perceived to be at lower rates than most nations in the Caribbean. Drug trafficking is a concern.

## Faiths

Christian: 89.5%

Other: 3.8%

None: 6.0%

Unspecified: 0.7%

## Christians

### Denominations – Members – Congregations

Catholic – 109,375

Pentecostal – 9,916

Seventh Day Adventists – 7,765 – 30

Jehovah's Witnesses – 2,057 – 26

Latter-day Saints – 538 – 1

## Religion

Most the population is Catholic (72.8%). Protestants account for approximately 10% of the population. Jews account for nearly 1%. Approximately 6% of the population does not identify with a religious group.

### Religious Freedom

The constitution of the Netherlands protects religious freedom and grants the government authority to restrict religious practices if they become a risk to public order, traffic safety, or public health. The government upholds religious freedom guaranteed by the constitution and diligently works to foster an environment of religious tolerance. Public speech that incites hatred toward a religious group is a crime and has been an area of conflict due to freedom of speech rights. Religious groups are not required to register with the government to operate, but certain rights and privileges such as tax exemption status are only bestowed upon registered religious groups.[\[2\]](#) There have been no recent reports of societal abuse of religious freedom in Curaçao.

### Largest Cities

**Urban: 89.1% (2018)**

Willemstad, **Tera Cora (Tera Korá)**, **Labadera**, **Barber**, **Soto**, **Westpunt**, **Sint Willibrordus**, **Lagun**.

Cities listed in **bold** have no LDS congregations.

One of the eight largest cities has a Church congregation. Ninety-six percent (96%) of the island's inhabitants reside in the five largest cities. Approximately ninety percent (90%) of the population lives in Willemstad.

### Church History

Ingeborg Zielinski was the first known Latter-day Saint convert from Curaçao. She joined the Church in the Netherlands in 1970 and returned to Curacao in 1971. In 1972, Zielinski was crowned Miss Curacao and held hourly radio programs in which she shared some beliefs and practices of the Church but with a nondenominational approach. The Venezuela Caracas Mission opened Curacao to missionary work in 1978, but missionaries were withdrawn the same year. Church meetings began to be held in Papiamento in 1982 when full-time missionaries were reassigned to the island; greater church growth soon followed.[\[3\]](#) Select passages of the Book of Mormon were translated in Papiamento in 1987.[\[4\]](#) Jurisdiction over Curaçao changed from one of the Venezuelan missions to the West Indies Mission sometime in the 1990s. Later, Curaçao was reassigned to the Puerto Rico San Juan Mission. Seminary and institute were introduced in 2007 and 2008, respectively. Curaçao was assigned to the Puerto Rico San Juan West Mission in 2007[\[5\]](#) and in 2010 was transferred to the Dominican Republic Santo Domingo East Mission. In 2015, Curaçao was reassigned to the realigned Trinidad Port Spain Mission. In February 2019, Elder Ulisses Soares rededicated Curaçao for missionary work and met with local members and full-time missionaries.[\[6\]](#)

### Membership Growth

**Church Membership: 538 (2017)**

There were fewer than one hundred Latter-day Saints in 1993. There were 300 members in 1997, and by 2000 membership reached 363. Membership totaled 342 in 2002, 424 in 2004, 464 in 2006, and 525 in 2008. Stagnant membership growth occurred in the 2010s. Church membership totaled 560 in 2010, 548 in 2013, and 541 in 2015.

In 2017, one in 279 was a Latter-day Saint.

## **Congregational Growth**

### **Wards: 0 Branches: 1 (2018)**

Congregations have divided and combined several times on Curaçao. The first branch—the Curaçao Branch—was organized in 1979.<sup>[7]</sup> The branch was split into two branches in 1987, and the branches were consolidated six months later.<sup>[8]</sup> The branch divided into two congregations again by 1997, and both branches were rejoined by 2000. In 2004, the branch divided into two congregations again and was unified into a single unit in 2009. A district serviced branches in Curaçao and Bonaire between 2004 and 2009. In early 2011, the Curaçao Branch was a mission branch not assigned to a stake or district. In 2015, the Curaçao Branch was reassigned to the Aruba-based ABC Islands District.

## **Activity and Retention**

In 2007, there were approximately forty active members in each branch. That same year, there was a period of a couple months when one hundred attended sacrament meeting in each branch, including dozens of investigators. Twenty-four were enrolled in seminary and institute during the 2008–2009 school year. Total active membership is estimated at approximately one hundred, or 20% of nominal church membership.

## **Language Materials**

**Languages with Latter-day Saint Scripture:** Papiamento, Dutch, Spanish, English.

Select passages of the Book of Mormon are translated into Papiamento. Other Papiamento materials are limited to the Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith, a few member and leader support manuals, and General Conference addresses. All Latter-day Saint scriptures and most church materials are available in Dutch and Spanish. The Liahona magazine has monthly issues in Dutch and Spanish.

## **Meetinghouses**

An LDS chapel was dedicated in 1988.<sup>[9]</sup>

## **Humanitarian and Development Work**

There have been no major humanitarian or development projects sponsored by the Church. Service activities are limited to projects organized by full-time missionaries and local members.

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

### **Religious Freedom**

The Church benefits from full religious freedom to proselyte, worship, and assemble. Foreign full-time missionaries have served regularly on tourist visas, which last up to ninety days.

### **Cultural Issues**

Most have a background in Christianity and have developed or are aware of common religious practices. Many are traditionally Catholic, creating challenges for mission outreach in overcoming cultural barriers. Carnival celebrations interfere with missionary activity through the societal promotion of casual sexual relations and heavy alcohol use.

## **National Outreach**

Full-time missionaries have performed mission outreach in virtually all major population centers. Notwithstanding that the sole congregation operating in early 2019 offered immediate outreach only to a portion of Willemstad, up to 88% of Curaçao's inhabitants reside in a city with a mission outreach center.

After the presence of church members in Curaçao for half a century and continuous missionary work for nearly forty years, the repetitive failure of attempts to open additional congregations and the lack of adequate leadership and member activity to maintain more than a single branch warrants serious concern. Organizing a few dependent branches or groups would likely extend efficient outreach to the entire island, but limited local leadership resources and few active members render any such efforts unfeasible at present. Holding cottage meetings with full-time and branch missionaries in various locations far from the meetinghouse may provide an impetus for expanding national outreach.

There are no developed Internet resources specifically dedicated to Curaçao or Papiamentu speakers, although the Church has posted most of its Papiamentu translations online at <https://www.lds.org/study?lang=pap>. The establishment of a website in Papiamentu for Curaçao members to utilize in their finding and member-missionary efforts may increase receptivity and national outreach.

## **Member Activity and Convert Retention**

Steady growth in nominal membership during the 2000s becomes less impressive, considering that the number of congregations remained unchanged between 2000 and 2010. Quick-baptism tactics of converts with minimal preparation and without firm gospel habits in order to attain arbitrary baptismal quotas appear to be a major contributor to the current low level of member activity in Curaçao. Assigning large numbers of full-time missionaries to service Curaçao's small population likely exacerbated convert attrition as the responsibility of local members to perform missionary activity and to develop local leadership was diminished. Reducing the number of full-time missionaries to just one or two missionary companionships is a move in the right direction that may increase member involvement in missionary activity, such as finding and fellowshipping. Increasing seminary and institute attendance in the late 2000s is a positive sign of youth member activity rates remaining constant or slightly improving. However, full-time missionaries who served on Curaçao in the 2010s primarily noted that they focused on reactivation efforts and strengthening local leadership.

## **Ethnic Issues and Integration**

The diverse society of Curaçao has generated a cosmopolitan atmosphere in which differing ethnic groups have intermingled and peacefully coexist. Any ethnic integration challenges encountered will likely be language based.

## **Language Issues**

In early 2011, there were very few church manuals, gospel study books, and proselytism literature translated into Papiamentu. The Doctrine and Covenants and Pearl of Great Price have yet to be translated. A lack of materials in Papiamentu challenges efforts for local members to develop greater gospel study habits and gain stronger testimonies about the Church and its teachings. Many members likely utilize materials available in other languages for gospel study and church instruction, albeit church services are held in Papiamentu.

## **Missionary Service**

There were up to five missionary companionships assigned to Curaçao in late 2009. Following the reassignment of Curaçao from the Puerto Rico San Juan West Mission to the Dominican Republic Santo Domingo East Mission, there was only one full-time missionary companionship serving on Curaçao. In late 2018, there appeared to be six missionary companionships assigned to the island. Missionaries usually report that they do not have a shortage of investigators to teach, but few attend church meetings or join the Church. At least one member from Curaçao served a mission in the late 2010s. However, very few local members have served full-time missions.

## **Leadership**

A local member appeared to be serving as the branch president in early 2011 and early 2019. Limited local leadership and poor member activity appear to be the primary cause for consolidating branches during the past several decades. Larger numbers of self-sufficient leadership may be developed through the retention of more male members and mission leaders providing adequate training with minimal full-time missionary involvement. Reactivation may also offer some potential, but efforts to recover lost members have borne little fruit to date.

## **Temple**

Curaçao is assigned to the Caracas Venezuela Temple although members likely more frequently attend the Santo Domingo Dominican Republic Temple. Temple trips may occur on an irregular basis due to few active members, distance to the temple, and economic constraints.

## Comparative Growth

Curaçao experienced some of the most rapid membership growth in the Caribbean among islands with fewer than 200,000 inhabitants during the 2000s. However, such growth was more nominal than real, as member activity and convert retention rates rank among the lowest in the region. The Church in Curaçao has reported some of the slowest membership growth in the Caribbean during the 2010s among countries with at least 500 members. Church membership in Curaçao exceeds the church membership of any other Caribbean island with only one congregation – a strong indicator of significant member inactivity problems. The percentage of nominal Latter-day Saints in the general population is representative of most Caribbean nations.

Missionary-oriented Christian groups have achieved some of the greatest success in the Caribbean in Curaçao, far outpacing Latter-day Saints. Most outreach-focused groups have had a presence for several decades, operate many congregations, and today experienced moderate rates of church growth. Curaçao has one of the highest percentages of active Jehovah's Witnesses in the world. Witnesses and Seventh-Day Adventists have a strong presence on the island and each group operates approximately 25-30 congregations to minister to the population of 150,000. Witnesses reported an increase of approximately 200 active members between 2010 and 2018. The number of Seventh-Day Adventists has increased by more than one thousand in the past decade. Pentecostals also report a strong presence and rank among the largest non-Catholic Christian denominations.

## Future Prospects

After approximately four decades of proselytism in Curaçao, the Church has to date been unable to sustain more than a single congregation on the island due to high convert attrition and limited local leadership. On the whole, the Church in Curaçao has experienced little real growth or increase in active membership despite as many as six full-time missionary companionships assigned to the island at a time. In 2001, President Hinckley predicted that one day there would be thousands of members in Aruba and Curacao.<sup>[10]</sup> Inconsistent mission policies regarding convert baptisms, overstaffing of full-time missionaries to service a moderately receptive, small population, and the perpetual failure to develop greater numbers of active priesthood leaders have frustrated church growth potential. Implementing a member-missionary approach to proselytism, increasing the number of materials translated into Papiamentu, strengthening the mentoring role of mission leaders, and weaning local members and leadership from reliance on full-time missionaries for administrative and ecclesiastical duties may improve the long-term growth outlook.

[1] "Netherlands Antilles," Previous Editions of Netherlands Antilles Background Note, 17 March 2010. <http://www.state.gov/outofdate/bgn/netherlandsantilles/154259.htm>

[2] "Netherlands." International Religious Freedom Report for 2017. 25 February 2019. <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2017&dliid=280942#wrapper>

[3] "Netherlands-Antilles," Country Profile, 8 October 2010. <http://beta-newsroom.lds.org/country/netherlands-antilles>

[4] Warnick, Lee. "Book of Mormon in 80th language," LDS Church News, 9 January 1988. <http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/18233/Book-of-Mormon-in-80th-language.html>

[5] "New missions bring total to 347 New missions," LDS Church News, 10 February 2007. <http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/50112/New-missions-bring-total-to-347-New-missions.html>

[6] "Latter-day Saints leader visits Curaçao," Curaçao Chronicle. 21 February 2019. <https://www.curacaochronicle.com/post/local/latter-day-saints-leader-visits-curacao/>

[7] "Netherlands-Antilles," Country Profile, 8 October 2010. <http://beta-newsroom.lds.org/country/netherlands-antilles>

[8] "Netherlands Antilles," Deseret News 1995–96 Church Almanac, p. 264.

[9] "Netherlands- Antilles," Country Profile, 8 October 2010. <http://beta-newsroom.lds.org/country/netherlands-antilles>

[10] Swensen, Jason. "Prophet teaches, motivates Caribbean islanders," LDS Church News, 24 March 2001. <http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/39534/Prophet-teaches-motivates-Caribbean-islanders.html>