

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.



Costa Rica

Population: 4.76 millions (#124 out of countries)

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Geography

Area: 51,100 square km. Located in Central America, Costa Rica is sandwiched between Nicaragua and Panama and borders both the North Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean Sea. The climate ranges from tropical to subtropical as a dry season occurs from December to April whereas a rainy season occurs from May to November. Highland areas experience cooler temperatures. The widespread rainforest contains rich biodiversity which has attracted tourism. Plains occupy coastal areas and the interior is dominated by mountains; the largest of which are in the southeast. Natural hazards include earthquakes, hurricanes, flooding, and volcanoes. Deforestation, soil erosion, and pollution are environmental issues. Costa Rica is divided into seven administrative provinces.

Population: 4,253,877 (July 2009)

Annual Growth Rate: 1.356% (2009)

Fertility Rate: 2.14 children born per woman (2009)

Life Expectancy: 74.96 male, 80.34 female (2009)

Peoples

White: 94%

Black: 3%

Amerindian: 1%

Chinese: 1%

Other: 1%

Most Costa Ricans are white. Blacks tend to live along the Caribbean coast. As many as 500,000 Nicaraguans live in Costa

Rica.

Languages: Spanish (98%), other (2%). Spanish is the official language and the only language with over one million speakers (4.17 million). Other languages spoken have fewer than 100,000 speakers and include Limón Creole English, Amerindian languages, and Chinese.

Literacy: 94.9% (2000)

History

Amerindian tribes have populated Costa Rica for thousands of years. The Spanish explored the region in the early fifteenth century but did not establish colonies until the mid-sixteenth century. Independence from Spain occurred in 1821 along with most of Central America. Costa Rica became a sovereign nation in 1838. Unlike other Central American nations, few instances of violence and political instability have occurred and a democratic government has remained in power. In the past several decades, the standard of living and the tourist and technology industries have seen marked growth.

Culture

Costa Rican culture draws primarily upon Spanish influences. Holidays and some cultural practices originate from the Catholic Church. Some areas along the Caribbean coast have more cultural similarities with other Caribbean nations. Education is valued and literacy rates are higher than in many Latin American nations. Cuisine has its roots in Spanish, American, Caribbean, and European foods and cooking. Fruit is widely eaten. Alcohol and cigarette consumption rates are comparable to other Latin American nations and rank at or slightly below world averages.

Economy

GDP per capita: $11,300 (2009) [24.4% of US]

Human Development Index: 0.854

Corruption Index: 5.1

Costa Rica has experienced some of the greatest economic growth and stability in Central America. Land ownership is widespread. In addition to the traditional exports of bananas, coffee, sugar, and beef, technological products are now exported. The tourism industry is a major driver of the economy. 16% live below the poverty line. Services produce 68% of the GDP and employ 64% of the workforce whereas industry produces 26% of the GDP and accounts for 22% of the workforce. Primary industries include microprocessors, food processing, and medical equipment. The United States is the primary trade partner. Other important trade partners include the Netherlands, China, Mexico, and Venezuela. Costa Rica has the lowest corruption rates in Central America.

Faiths

Christian: 92%

Other: 4.8%

None: 3.2%

Christians

Denominations Members Congregations

Catholic 3,232,946

Seventh Day Adventists 61,546 181

Latter-day Saints 36,666 76

Jehovah's Witnesses 24,930 371

Religion

Although 76% of Costa Ricans identify as Catholics, only 43% claim to be practicing Catholics. Evangelical Protestants constitute 15%. A wide range of Christian denominations function including Lutherans, Seventh Day Adventists, and Jehovah's Witnesses. There are also small groups of Jews, Muslims, and followers of Eastern and new age religions. There is some friction between Catholics and other religious groups.[1]

Religious Freedom

Persecution Index:

The constitution protects religious freedom which is upheld by the government. Catholicism is the state religion. Registration is not required for religious groups to assemble and operate.[2]

Largest Cities

Urban: 63%

San Jose, Limon, Alajuela, San Francisco, Desamparados, Liberia, Puntarenas, San Vicente, Curridabat, Paraiso.

All cities over 30,000 inhabitants and most cities over 10,000 have a congregation. 17% of the national population lives in the 10 largest cities. San Jose has 340,000 inhabitants within the city boundaries and 1.6 million in the metropolitan area (39% of national population).

LDS History

Costa Rica was assigned to the Mexican mission in July 1946. The Church assigned the first full-time missionaries to Costa Rica in September and presented the president with a copy of the Book of Mormon. The mission withdrew missionaries in 1948 for a year due to a national revolution. The first church conference was held in 1950 with 70 in attendance. The first branch was organized later that year and property to build a chapel was purchased the following year. In 1952, the Central American Mission was created, which included Costa Rica. The Guatemala-El Salvador Mission administered to Costa Rica between 1965 and 1974. The Costa Rica Mission was organized in 1974. The first district conference was held in 1968 with approximately 300 in attendance.[3] Elder Boyd K. Packer dedicated Costa Rica for missionary work in August 1992.[4] Despite missionaries serving for nearly two decades, concentrated proselytizing efforts did not begin until 1965.[5] Costa Rica was assigned to the South America North Area prior to 2003 and today pertains to the Central America Area.[6] The Central America Area President visited the president of Costa Rica in 2006 and discussed the Church and its operations in the country.[7]

Membership Growth

LDS Membership: 36,666 (2008)

Membership grew slowly in Costa Rica for the first several decades following the organization of the first congregation. Between 1960 and 1970 membership increased from 214 to 1,700.[8] By 1977 there were 3,800 members. In 1990, there were 13,000 members. One of the reasons for increased membership growth in the late 1980s was due to greater involvement of local members in missionary work. The San Jose Costa Rica Stake in 1988 called 100 stake missionaries to assist in missionary activities.[9]

Membership reached 23,000 in 1996 and 31,127 by year-end 2000. Growth slowed in the 2000s, numbering 32,563 in 2002, 33,489 in 2004, and 34,777 in 2006. Membership growth rates slowed from 2.85% in 2001 to 0.7% in 2003 but rose to 2001 levels in 2008. Most years in the past decade have seen growth rates ranging from 1-2.5%. A large number of LDS members are immigrants from Nicaragua and Panama.[10] In 2008, one in 116 Costa Ricans was a nominal LDS member.

Congregational Growth

Wards: 44 Branches: 33

In 1977, the Church organized the first stake in San Jose. The following year a second stake was created in San Jose. By 1989 there were two districts in Guanacaste and Guapiles.[11] Additional stakes were organized in Alajuela and San Jose in 1990 and 1991, respectively, bringing the total of stakes to four. By year-end 1996, six districts also functioned in Cañas, Rio Claro, Puntarenas, Limon, Naranjo, and Liberia. A fifth stake was organized in San Jose in 1999.

There were 60 congregations in 1992, 20 of which were wards. The number of total congregations between 2000 and 2009 remained nearly unchanging, dropping from 78 to 77. In 2003 and 2004, congregations dropped to 74 but rebounded to 77 by 2009. During the 2000s the number of wards increased from 35 to 44. In late 2009, the Cañas Costa Rica District was discontinued and combined with the Liberia Costa Rica District.

Activity and Retention

Costa Rica has experienced challenges retaining converts and keeping members active. The average number of members per congregation rose from 317 in 1992 to 399 in 2000 and 482 in 2008. Poor retention in recent years is indicated by nominal membership growing by 5,500 between 2000 and 2008 with no increase in congregations. 7,000 attended a conference held with President Hinckley in 1997.[12] At the temple groundbreaking in 1999 there were 1,900 in attendance.[13]

The size of active membership varies on congregation and location; however major inactivity problems exist nationwide. The La Rita Branch in San Jose had 50 attending meetings in 2009 whereas one ward on the outskirts of San Jose in Santo Domingo had as few as 35 attending meetings regularly in early 2010. Another ward in the Heredia area of San Jose had nearly 200 attending sacrament meetings but 300 inactive members in just one neighborhood within the ward boundaries. Most wards appear to have around 100-120 active members and most branches have around 50 active members. The number and strength of active members appears greatest in San Jose and other large cities. 1,610 were enrolled in seminary or institute during the 2008-2009 school year. Active membership is likely between 6,000 and 7,000, or 17-20% of total membership.

Language Materials

Languages with LDS Scripture: Spanish, English, Chinese

All LDS scriptures, an LDS version of the Bible, and a wide body of Church materials are available in Spanish. All LDS scriptures and most Church materials are available in Chinese.

Meetinghouses

Congregations usually meet in Church-built meetinghouses. Some small or remote congregations meet in renovated buildings or rented spaces.

Humanitarian and Development Work

Few humanitarian and development projects have occurred due to relative economic prosperity. Local members and missionaries engage in service projects in individual communities.

Opportunities, Challenges and Prospects

Religious Freedom

There are no laws or government policies which limit the Church's missionary program. Missionaries serve freely from a wide range of nations.

Cultural Issues

Many Costa Ricans struggle to actively participate in church meetings on a weekly basis due to casual cultural attitudes towards church attendance and worship. Missionaries report that many have difficulty understanding the need to attend meetings weekly, hold callings and develop an individual, personalized religious experience. Greater wealth than in many other Latin American nations may have also contributed to increased materialism and irreligiosity.

National Outreach

LDS congregations operate in areas populated by approximately 46% of the national population. San Jose is central to mission efforts nationwide as 38% of the population lives in the metropolitan area. There remain many communities in San Jose without an independent congregation, particularly in northern and central areas. These lesser reached neighborhoods could provide opportunity for greater growth as they have large populations, are close to current church outreach centers, and likely have many active and less active members. Long-term growth will depend on coordinated efforts from local members, leaders and missionaries.

Mission outreach outside the San Jose metropolitan area is challenging due to the small population of the largest cities and the large rural population. Limón (63,500) is the second largest city but only accounts for 1.5% of the national population. Every city with over 10,000 inhabitants, with a couple possible exceptions, has a congregation, yet only 8% of the national population lives in cities over 10,000 people outside the San Jose metropolitan area. Most of the more than 100 small cities between 1,000 and 10,000 inhabitants do not have congregations. Many rural areas have no nearby congregations, including northern Alajuela and Heredia Provinces, large portions of Guanacaste and Puntarenas Provinces, and San Jose Province outside of the capital. Cottage meetings held with investigators and active or interested less active members in lesser reached rural and small urban locations may help the Church establish greater national outreach.

Member Activity and Convert Retention

High inactivity and poor convert retention primarily originated in the 1990s and has slowed growth. Membership more than doubled in the 1990s yet the number of congregations increased only by 53%. Most inactive members likely experienced little or no meaningful Church attendance, making reactivation efforts very challenging. The major increase in membership in the 1990s resulted from quick baptism techniques which resulted in a failure of many converts to develop habitual church attendance and develop understanding and testimony of church doctrines and principles.

Low member activity and poor convert retention take a heavy toll on the Church's future growth prospects and outreach both in San Jose and elsewhere. Some branches outside San Jose have been discontinued due to inactivity problems. More neighborhoods without a congregation in San Jose have likely not had congregations created due to limited active members and leadership.

Convert retention and reactivation efforts appear to have come to some fruition in several congregations in San Jose in 2009 and 2010. Several congregations set periodic new sacrament meeting attendance records during this period.

Ethnic Issues and Integration

Most blacks reside in Caribbean coastal areas and are likely well integrated into congregations. The integration of Amerindians may also be challenging due to their marginalization in Costa Rican society.

Language Issues

There are few language issues due to the widespread use of Spanish. English-speaking minorities may have difficulties assimilating into Spanish-speaking congregations. However, many non-native Spanish speakers have some functionality in Spanish. There has been little to no active outreach among the growing Chinese community.

There are no church materials in Limón Creole English or Amerindian languages spoken in Costa Rica. Future materials in Limón Creole English may come forth due to the use of the language among some members in Caribbean coastal areas. Language materials appear unlikely to be developed in Amerindian languages as there appear to be few Amerindian Costa Rica members and the use and functionality of these languages is declining.

Missionary Service

In early 2009, 160 missionaries were serving in Costa Rica. The Central American Area became self-sustaining in its missionary force in 2009. Costa Ricans readily serve missions throughout Latin America. North American missionaries continue to serve in large numbers.

Leadership

Costa Rican leadership is strong but limited. Most or all congregations appear to be lead by native members, but sometimes smaller congregations in rural areas depend on leadership from neighboring congregations or full-time missionaries. It is not uncommon for some congregations to not have a ward or branch mission leader to coordinate missionary efforts between members and missionaries due to limited leadership.

In 1991, two members in two newly organized stake presidencies worked for the Church in the Church Education System or for distribution services.[14] Currently it does not appear that administration and leadership depends on Church employees. Regional representatives were called from Costa Rica prior to the mid-1990s. In 1995, Enrique R. Falabella was called as an Area Authority Seventy[15] and in 2003, Luis G. Chaverri was called as an Area Authority Seventy.[16] In 2010, a Costa Rican native was called to serve as a mission president in Nicaragua.[17]

Temple

Prior to the dedication of the San Jose Costa Rica Temple, members travelled great distances to attend the temple in the United States, Mexico, or Guatemala. The San Jose Costa Rica Temple was announced in 1999 and completed in 2000. 18,841 attended the open house and 3,985 attended the dedication.[18] The temple served members in Panama prior to the completion of the Panama City Panama Temple in 2008.

The San Jose Costa Rica Temple remains underutilized compared to many other temples. In 2010, endowment sessions were held only on Wednesdays through Saturdays. Wednesdays had five sessions, Saturdays had four sessions, and Thursdays and Fridays had three sessions only held in the evenings. Although some temple ordinances and activities likely occur outside of published endowment session times, temple attendance appears low.

Comparative Growth

Costa Rica was the Central American nation to which the Church first assigned missionaries, yet has the fewest members and stakes besides Belize. The Church began organized proselytism in Panama at the same time as Costa Rica, yet in early 2010 Panama had three more stakes, 11 more congregations, and 7,000 more members. Although inactivity rates are high throughout Central America, Costa Rica appears to have had one of the most devoted, mature active memberships. This may be indicated by Central America's second temple being constructed in Costa Rica despite larger church memberships and more stakes in Honduras, El Salvador, and Panama in the late 1990s. In the 2000s, membership growth rates in Costa Rica were comparable to most of Central America whereas congregational growth rates were average or below average.

Several Christian groups have seen strong growth, most notably Seventh Day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses. Seventh Day Adventists experienced rapid membership growth in the 1990s like the LDS Church. However, consistent congregational growth has taken place and much higher retention has been achieved by Adventists than Latter-day Saints. Steady, strong growth continued in the 2000s and Seventh Day Adventists now have two missions and a conference organized in Costa Rica. Jehovah's Witnesses also see strong growth and in 2009 had nearly 1,300 baptisms and 371 congregations. These denominations have been successful at retaining converts and developing local leadership to guide congregations.

Future Prospects

Prospects for future growth appear moderate as membership growth has increased in the late 2000s. Increased convert retention through more disciplined prebaptismal teaching and more rigorous qualification for baptism will be needed to sustain growth and lead to consistent increase in congregations. Additional congregations may be organized in San Jose whereas some small congregations in other areas may combine with neighboring wards or branches or become dependent branches or groups. Several of the stakes in San Jose have enough wards to divide to create additional stakes, one of which is in the Heredia area. The Liberia Costa Rica District may become a stake in the future, indicated by comments from missionaries and the consolidation of the Cañas Costa Rica District in late 2009.

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[3] "Costa Rica," Country Profiles, retrieved 6 April 2010. http://newsroom.lds.org/ldsnewsroom/eng/contact-us/costa-rica

[4] Gaunt, LaRene Porter. "Costa Rica: Rising in Majesty and Strength," Ensign, Dec 1996, 22

[5] "Central America: Saints in Six Nations Grow in the Gospel," Ensign, Feb 1977, 25

[6] "Three areas to be realigned Aug. 15," LDS Church News, 14 June 2003. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/43897/Three-areas-to-be-realigned-Aug-15.html

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[17] "New Mission presidents," LDS Church News, 3 April 2010.
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