

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.



Belize

Population: 0.34 millions (#181 out of countries)

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Geography

Area: 22,966 square km. Just south of the Yucatan Peninsula in Central America, Belize borders Guatemala, Mexico, and the Caribbean Sea. The tropical climate experiences hot, humid conditions with rainy and dry seasons. Swampy coastal plains cover most the terrain with some small mountains in southern areas. Dozens of cays dot the sea near the coast and are part of one of the largest barrier reefs in the world. Tropical rainforest occupies most of the interior. Natural hazards include frequent hurricanes and coastal flooding. Deforestation and water pollution are environmental issues. Belize is divided into six administrative districts.

Population: 307,899 (2009)

Annual Growth Rate: 2.154% (2009)

Fertility Rate: 3.36 children born per woman (2009)

Life Expectancy: 66.44 male, 70.05 female (2009)

Peoples

Mestizo: 48.7%

Creole: 24.9%

Maya: 10.6%

Garifuna: 6.1%

Other: 9.7%

Mestizo have mixed ancestry from Europeans and Amerindians. Creole are descendents of African slaves whereas Garifuna

arise from a mixture of Amerindian tribes and escaped African slaves. Maya are descendents of the ancient Mayan Empire.

Languages: Spanish (46%), Creole (32.9%), Mayan dialects (8.9%), English (3.9%), Garifuna (3.4%), German (3.3%), other (1.4%), unknown (0.2%). Mayan dialects include Kekchí and Maya. English is the official language.

Literacy: 76.9% (2000)

History

Many populous Mayan cities states occupied portions of present-day Belize a little over a thousand years ago and were mysteriously abandoned. Smaller numbers of Mayans continued to live in the region during European exploration. The English and Spanish contended over the territory during the 17th and 18th centuries. In1854, the territory of Belize became a British colony named British Honduras. A major hurricane devastated Belize City in 1961, leading to the subsequent relocation of the capital to Belmopan to reduce damage to government and national infrastructure in event of another major hurricane. Belize did not achieve independence until 1981, due in part to border disputes with Guatemala which continue to the present.

Culture

British, Latin American, and Caribbean cultures have heavily influenced Belize and increased cultural diversity. Bilingualism is very common. Poverty remains a major issue, especially among indigenous peoples. Common staples include wheat, corn, beans, and rice. Soccer is the most popular sport. Alcohol consumption rates are average compared to other nations.

Economy

GDP per capita: $8,100 (2009) [17.5% of US]

Human Development Index: 0.772

Corruption Index: 2.9

Tourism sustains the Belizean economy. Shortages of skilled labor limit economic growth. Belize remains dependent on international donors to reduce poverty levels. In 2002, 33.5% of the population lived below the poverty line. Oil was discovered in the 2000s and has begun to be exploited. Tourism, clothing, food, and construction are primary industries. Services employ 72% of the workforce and generate 54% of the GDP. Agriculture produces 29% of the GDP and employs 10% of the workforce. Common agricultural products include bananas, cacao, citrus, and sugar. The United States is the primary trade partner, followed by the United Kingdom and Mexico.

Increasing crime related to poverty and drug trafficking from South America are sources of corruption. Belize's small population and geographic location make it difficult to combat these challenges.

Faiths

Christian: 76.6%

Other: 14%

None: 9.4%

Christians

Denominations Members Congregations

Catholic 152,718

Seventh Day Adventists 33,364 75

Pentecostal 22,785

Anglican 16,318

Mennonite 12,624

Methodist 10,776

Latter-Day Saints 3,609 11

Jehovah's Witnesses 2,072 50

Religion

The majority of the religiously active population is Christian. Catholics reside throughout Belize and are the largest religious group in each of the six administrative districts. Mennonites and Pentecostals primarily live in the Cayo and Orange Walk Districts.[1]

Religious Freedom

Persecution Index:

The constitution protects religious freedom, which is upheld by the government. There is no official religion. Foreign missionaries must obtain a religious worker's permit which has a modest yearly fee. Christian holidays are recognized national holidays. There have been no recent reports of societal abuses of religious freedom.[2]

Largest Cities

Urban: 52%

Belize City, San Ignacio, Orange Walk, Belmopan, Dangriga, Corozal, San Pedro, Benque Viejo del Carmen, **Punta Gorda**, **Valley of Peace**.

Eight of the 10 largest cities have a congregation. All cities over 6,000 inhabitants have a congregation. 48% of the national population lives in the 10 largest cities.

LDS History

In 1980, the president of the Honduras Tegucigalpa Mission visited Belize to begin formal missionary work. The first branch was organized shortly thereafter. The first meeting was held in May 1980, and by the beginning of 1981 a district had been organized.[3] Seminary and institute began in the early 1980s. In 1990, the newly created Honduras San Pedro Sula Mission administered Belize.[4] 36 members attended a meeting at which Elder Russell M. Nelson dedicated Belize for missionary work in 1992.[5] In 1993, Belize was assigned to the Guatemala Guatemala City North Mission.[6] Belize returned to the jurisdiction of the Honduras San Pedro Sula Mission shortly thereafter. President Hinckley visited in late 1997 and encouraged members to serve missions and pay their tithing. He informed members of Belize's importance in the worldwide Church. President Hinckley also noted that the international Church assists the operation of the Church in Belize through tithing funds.[7] In the late 2000s, Belize was assigned to the El Salvador San Salvador West Mission/Belize Mission.

Membership Growth

LDS Membership: 3,609 (2009)

Belize typically experiences a steady increase in converts year to year with the most rapid growth experienced occurring in the 1980s and 1990s. By 1990, there were 1,100 members.[8] Membership reached 2,000 in the late 1990s. At the end of 2000, there were 2,701 members. There were 3,079 members in 2005, increasing to 3,306 in 2007. Negative membership growth occurred in 2003, likely as the result of updating member records and few convert baptisms. Membership growth rates have usually ranged from three to five percent annually.

At year-end 2009, one in 85 Belizeans was nominally LDS.

Congregational Growth

Branches: 11

One district functioned in 1990. By the end of 1992, eight branches had been organized and three districts operated in Belize City, Orange Walk, and Cayo.[9] Branches numbered 14 in 2000 and decreased to 13 in 2003, 12 in 2007, and 11 in 2009. Discontinued branches met in Belize City and the Cayo District along the Guatemalan border. In 2008, the Orange Walk Belize District was discontinued and the remaining two branches joined the Belize City District.

Activity and Retention

289 members gathered in late 1992 for the dedication of the Belize City meetinghouse.[10] In 1997, 1,200 members gathered in a meeting with President Hinckley.[11] Around 100 Belizean youth attended seminary in 2001.[12] The ratio of members to congregations is much lower than most of Central America and the Caribbean. However, this indicator has increased from 199 in 2001 to 328 in 2009 as congregations have been consolidated even as nominal membership has grown. Poor retention of converts was noted by Belizean leadership in 1998 as home teaching and visiting teaching programs faced challenges in fellowshipping new members. At the time, additional branches appeared likely to be organized,[13] but poor retention and limited leadership prevented this from occurring. 90 youth attended the first youth camp in Belize in 2006.[14] 103 were enrolled in seminary and institute during the 2008-2009 school year. Most branches have between 50 and 100 active members. Active members likely number between 700 and 900, or 20-25% of total membership.

Language Materials

Languages with LDS Scripture: English, Spanish, German, Kekchí, Maya

All LDS scriptures are available in Spanish, German and Kekchí. An LDS edition of the Bible is translated into Spanish. Most Church materials are available in Spanish and German. The Church has translated the sacrament prayers, Gospel Principles, The Prophet Joseph Smith's Testimony, hymns, children's songs, and few Priesthood and audio/visual resources into Kekchí. Book of Mormon selections are translated in Mayan. Mayan Church materials include The Prophet Joseph Smith's Testimony, hymns and children's songs.

Meetinghouses

Most congregations meet in Church-built meetinghouses.

Health and Safety

In 2007, 2.1% of the adult population was infected with HIV/AIDS, one of the highest prevalence rates in the Western Hemisphere. Methods of infection include illicit sexual relations and drug use. Contaminated needles and HIV-positive mothers are other methods of contracting HIV/AIDS. High rates of HIV/AIDS require health precautions. Increasing violence from drug trafficking poses a safety threat to missionaries as the homicide rate has doubled since 2000 and currently ranks among the highest in the world.

Humanitarian and Development Work

The Church donated wheelchairs to Belize in 2002.[15]

Opportunities, Challenges and Prospects

Religious Freedom

The Church faces no restrictions on missionaries serving in Belize and is permitted to openly proselyte. Violence in some areas may limit the proselytizing activities of missionaries.

Cultural Issues

Poverty in rural areas and increasing violence create challenges for greater Church growth. Nominalism in other Christian churches contribute to low activity among LDS converts, especially when individuals are baptized rapidly with little preparation.

National Outreach

All major cities, which account for 46% of the national population, have a Church presence. Outreach in some rural communities, like Bullet Tree Falls, increases the percentage of Belizeans with nearby access to an LDS congregation to approximately 50%. The Toledo District is the only administrative district without an LDS congregation and accounts for 8% of the population. All districts have large, sparsely populated areas without a nearby congregation. Two districts, Corozal and Stann Creek, have only one LDS congregation.

The Church has yet to establish a more visible presence among rural communities, especially outside of Cayo District. Active membership in these locations is small. Recent efforts to strengthen the Church in established congregations and to prepare for a future stake, in combination with continued struggles with low member activity and poor convert retention, have contributed to the lack of any expansion of national outreach over the past decade. Cottage meetings in member homes and the formation of dependent branches or groups may present future options for expanding mission outreach.

The Church has operated an Internet site for Belize since the mid-2000s at http://www.mormons.org.bz/. The site offers some country-specific internet outreach, but has not been updated recently.

Member Activity and Convert Retention

Low member activity rates have delayed the creation of a stake. Missionaries report that members have worked towards the creation of the first stake for many years, but these efforts have yet to come to fruition. Convert retention issues have also limited national outreach efforts as missionaries have had to focus on member reactivation efforts, and have held church callings or other ecclesiastical duties when native members are unable or indisposed. Poor convert retention appears partially due to poor pre-baptismal teaching and preparation and mission policies which have emphasized baptismal numbers but until recently have put little emphasis on convert retention or member activity. Distance from mission headquarters and frequent changes in mission boundaries over the past two decades have also likely exacerbated inactivity issues as Belize has received little attention from mission leadership due to more immediate needs within the countries missions have been based from.

Ethnic Issues and Integration

The small, diverse Belizean population typically demonstrates cooperation and understanding between ethnic groups. Few issuesarise integrating differing ethnic groups into the same LDS congregations. Potential for the greatest friction exists between Garifuna and Maya with the rest of the population, as indigenous peoples are sometimes marginalized due to their small populations concentrated in remote, rural areas. Gospel teachings help to reduce potential ethnic tensions in the Church.

Language Issues

The high level of bilingualism allows the Church to use fewer language-specific resources and enjoy greater flexibility addressing members' needs despite the diversity in language among the small population. LDS meetings are conducted in standard English, Belize Kriol English, and Spanish . The "decreolization" and emphasis on standard English which has been observed with increasing public education reduces the need for separate Belize Kriol translations of church materials, although a linguistic continuum of dialects exists between Belize Kriol and English which will likely persist. Church materials in Kekchí and Maya provide opportunity for greater outreach to rural areas populated by speakers of these languages. There are no Church materials in Garifuna. Additional communities of Garifuna speakers in neighboring Central American nations may warrant the translation of some Church materials in coming years to expand mission outreach.

Leadership

All branches appear to have native leadership despite modest member activity. Limited priesthood leadership, specifically reaching the threshold of at least 120 active Melchizedek Priesthood holders, appears to be one of the major obstacles towards the creation of the first stake.

Temple

Belize pertains to the Guatemala City Guatemala Temple district. Temple trips frequently occur and members travel by bus. Long travel times and transportation fees limit the frequency members can attend the temple, although organized trips are subsidized. Prospects appear low for a closer temple to Belize in the near future as few members live near the Belizean border in Mexico and Guatemala.

Comparative Growth

Although Belize has less than one-tenth the membership of the Central American nation with the second smallest Church membership, the percentage of LDS members in the population is comparable to most of the region. Member activity rates are consistent with most of Central America, whereas congregational growth rates are among the lowest.

Other Christian groups have developed more penetrating national outreach and have more adherents than the LDS Church. Most Christian churches operating in Belize were established decades prior to the LDS Church. Growth rates among many Christian groups are steady. Belize has one of the highest concentrations of Seventh Day Adventists in the world, which constitute approximately 10% of the population. Adventists have developed local church leadership and have capitalized on opportunities to construct hospitals and schools. Religious groups which make building these institutions on a local level a priority tend to develop long lasting and efficient church growth trends. Both Seventh Day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses have achieved much higher member activity and convert retention rates than the LDS Church while maintaining high member standards, although both of these groups generally require considerably longer preparation of prospective converts than LDS missions. This suggests suggesting that poor LDS convert retention rates are heavily influenced by quick-baptize mission policies rather than any insurmountable cultural obstacles.

Future Prospects

Accelerated growth in the late 2000s indicates that the population remains receptive to LDS mission efforts, but the decreasing number of LDS congregations points toward continued convert retention difficulties. Endeavors to establish the first stake appear close to fruition, although the current pattern of congregational consolidation and continued struggles with member activity suggest that stake formation is not imminent. Currently unreached areas may open to formal missionary work once a stake is organized, as mission resources tend to decrease within the boundaries of a stake compared to a district.

[1] "Belize," International Religious Freedom Report 2009, 26 October 2009. http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2009/127379.htm

[2] "Belize," International Religious Freedom Report 2009, 26 October 2009. http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2009/127379.htm

[3] Gardner, Mark K. "Tiny nation of Belize is dedicated," LDS Church News, 19 December 1992. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/21981/Tiny-nation-of-Belize-is-dedicated.html

[4] "Growth leads to four new missions," LDS Church News, 3 February 1990. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/19827/Growth-leads-to-four-new-missions.html

[5] Gardner, Mark K. "Tiny nation of Belize is dedicated," LDS Church News, 19 December 1992. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/21981/Tiny-nation-of-Belize-is-dedicated.html

[6] "Eight new missions announced," LDS Church News, 6 March 1993. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/23130/Eight-new-missions-announced.html

[7] Hart, John L. "Mexico's president welcomes prophet," 22 November 1997. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/29012/Mexicos-president-welcomes-prophet.html

[8] "Growth leads to four new missions," LDS Church News, 3 February 1990. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/19827/Growth-leads-to-four-new-missions.html

[9] Gardner, Mark K. "Tiny nation of Belize is dedicated," LDS Church News, 19 December 1992. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/21981/Tiny-nation-of-Belize-is-dedicated.html

[10] Gardner, Mark K. "Tiny nation of Belize is dedicated," LDS Church News, 19 December 1992. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/21981/Tiny-nation-of-Belize-is-dedicated.html

[11] Hart, John L. "Mexico's president welcomes prophet," 22 November 1997. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/29012/Mexicos-president-welcomes-prophet.html

[12] "Central American LDS youth gather to raise Title of Liberty," LDS Church News, 13 January 2001. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/39179/Central-American-LDS-youth-gather-to-raise-Title-of-Liberty.html

[13] Hart, John L. "Belize: ‘Great manifestations of faith'," LDS Church News, 7 February 1998.

http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/30446/Belize-Great-manifestations-of-faith.html

[14] "Belize youth enjoy camp," LDS Church News, 23 September 2006.
http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/49460/Belize-youth-enjoy-camp.html

[15] "Hundreds more wheelchairs distributed," LDS Church News, 28 December 2002.
http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/43004/Hundreds-more-wheelchairs-distributed.html