



# 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.



## Belgium

Population: 10.45 millions (#84 out of countries)

By David Stewart and Matt Martinich

### Geography

**Area:** 30,528 square km. Located in Western Europe, Belgium borders the Netherlands, Germany, Luxembourg, France, and the North Sea. Flat plains occupy Flanders, which consists of coastal northwestern areas, which rise to hills in the interior of Middle Belgium, also known as Wallonia. Mountains occupy Ardennes in the southeast of Belgium. Temperate climate modified by the nearby ocean generates cool summers and mild winters with frequent precipitation. The Meuse and Scheldt are the largest rivers and the Meuse has marked past political boundaries, such as with the Holy Roman Empire. Flooding along rivers and reclaimed coastal land is a natural hazard. Environmental issues include the repercussions of high population density in urban areas, industry, intense agricultural activity, and pollution. Belgium is divided into three administrative regions, two of which are subdivided into five administrative provinces.

**Population:** 10,423,493 (July 2010)

**Annual Growth Rate:** 0.082% (2010)

**Fertility Rate:** 1.62 children born per woman (2010)

**Life Expectancy:** 76.21 male, 82.68 female (2010)

### Peoples

Fleming: 58%

Walloon: 31%

mixed/other: 11%

Flemings constitute the majority in northern areas whereas Walloons form the majority in southern areas. Both ethnic groups populate the Brussels area. Other common ethnic groups include Italians, French, Dutch, Moroccans, Spanish, Turks, and

Germans.[\[1\]](#)

**Languages:** Officially, Belgians speak Dutch (57.9%), French (31.7%), bilingual Dutch and French (9.7%), and German (0.7%). Dutch, French, and German are official languages. Other commonly spoken languages include Flemish, a Belgium dialect of Dutch [Vlaams] (58%); Walloon (11%); Limburgish (6%); and Italian (3%). Languages with over one million speakers include Dutch (7.05 million), Flemish (6.0 million), French (4.32 million), and Walloon (1.1 million).

**Literacy:** 99% (2003)

## History

Prior to Rome annexing present-day Belgium in the first century B.C., a Celtic tribe named the Belgae populated the region. Roman rule lasted for three centuries. Germanic tribes arrived at the beginning of the fourth century AD as a result of Attila the Hun invading Central Europe, driving the indigenous Germanic population westward. The Franks conquered Belgium in about 400 A.D. Belgium's current French and Dutch population demographics originated from enduring Germanic influence in the north and French and Latin-based language and culture infiltrating from the south during the Middle Ages. Several large Belgian cities became large economic centers in Western Europe toward the end of the Middle Ages and beginning of the Renaissance, such as Ghent, Brussels, and Antwerp. William Tyndale, the first scholar to translate the Bible into English, was arrested by Catholic authorities and later strangled and burned at the stake for heresy in Belgium. The Spanish controlled Belgium from 1519 to 1713 followed by Austria through the marriage of ruling families in Europe including the Hapsburgs. Napoleon invaded Belgium in the late eighteenth century. The territory remained under French rule until the Congress of Vienna in 1815 which made Belgium part of the Netherlands. Fifteen years later, Belgium achieved independence from the Netherlands in an uprising. A constitutional monarchy was established in 1831. Belgium colonized the Congo in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Germany invaded Belgium during both World Wars, which resulted in widespread damage to the country and suffering to the Belgian people. Social division between Dutch-speaking and French-speaking areas have remained over the past several centuries and were exacerbated in the late twentieth century as a result of rapid economic development of the Flanders area and the decline of industry in Wallonia. In the past two decades, Belgium has experienced increased political divisions resulting in defining ethno-linguistic boundaries and granting greater autonomy to these regions, but there have been no major social conflicts as a result of these issues.[\[2\]](#)

## Culture

French and Flemish customs, history, and traditions have heavily influenced Belgian culture in their respective areas of the country. The Catholic Church dictated many aspects of society and government for centuries, and today holds more of a traditional religious position in society rather than a practical one. Many Catholic holidays continue to hold societal and cultural significance despite low rates of church activity among most Catholics. During the Renaissance, Belgium became a center of art, learning, and commerce, producing many famous painters and artists such as Jan van Eyck. In the past two centuries, local artists like Rene Magritte have offered significant contributions to romanticism, expressionist, and surrealism in their works. Belgian architects excelled in Gothic, Romanesque, Renaissance, and Baroque styles of architecture. Cartography, mathematics, mining, chemistry, and physics are among the scientific fields Belgian scholars have influenced through their research. Soccer and cycling are the most popular sports. Famous Belgian foods include waffles, french fries, beer, and chocolate.[\[3\]](#) Alcohol and cigarette consumption rates are high. Belgium exhibits one of the highest divorce rates in Europe.

## Economy

**GDP per capita:** \$36,800 (2009) [79.3% of US]

**Human Development Index:** 0.867

**Corruption Index:** 7.1

Belgium's modernized economy is highly integrated into the European community and is sensitive to worldwide demands in manufactured goods as a result of reliance on importing raw materials due to few natural resources. Standard of living is high and wealth is evenly distributed. In the late 2000s, the global financial crisis severely impacted Belgian banks, many of which relied on the government bail-outs to stay afloat. The ageing population is an additional economic challenge that places an additional financial burden on the government. Services employ 73% of the labor force and generate 77% of the GDP whereas industry employs 25% of the labor force and generates 22% of the GDP. Major industries include engineering, metal products, transportation equipment and cars, food products, chemicals, and textiles. Agriculture accounts for less than three percent of the labor force and GDP. Sugar beets, vegetables, fruit, grain, and tobacco are major crops. Beef, veal, and pork are the most commonly produced meats. Primary trade partners include Germany, the Netherlands, France, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

Perceived corruption is lower than most nations, but slightly higher than most other Western European nations. Belgium is a transshipment point for many illicit drugs such as cocaine, heroin, hashish, and ecstasy. Money laundering vulnerability is a

concern.

## Faiths

Christian: 49%

nonbelievers: 9%

Muslim: 4%

Jewish: 0.5%

other/unknown: 37.5%

## Christians

### Denominations Members Congregations

Catholic 4,800,000

Jehovah's Witnesses 24,965 373

Anglican 10,800

Latter-Day Saints 5,980 17

Seventh Day Adventists 2,090 28 (includes Luxembourg)

## Religion

46% of the population identifies as Catholic, yet a 2008 report by the Catholic University of Leuven estimated that only seven percent of Catholics regularly attend religious meetings. Many Belgians participate in religious ceremonies or ordinances as 61% of funerals, 26.7% of marriages, and 57% of births include a religious service. Those who actively identify as nonreligious number nearly one million.[\[4\]](#)

## Religious Freedom

### Persecution Index:

The constitution protects religious freedom which is upheld by the government and the law. Government authorities possess the power to monitor religious groups and have limited or infringed on the religious rights of religious groups deemed as sects or cults such as Scientology. The 2007 Anti-Discrimination Act forbids religious persecution and discrimination. Six organized religions are recognized by the government: Catholicism, Protestantism, Judaism, Anglicanism, Islam, and Orthodox Christianity. Local, regional, and federal government provides subsidies to these recognized religious groups along with a secular humanist organization. The government and parliament pay religious worker salaries for these recognized religious groups. There are five criteria a religious group must meet in order to receive government recognition, including possessing a structure or hierarchy, having enough members to merit recognition, maintaining a long-term presence in Belgium, offering social value to the general population, and following state laws and keeping public order. Societal abuse of religious freedom primarily targets Muslims and Jews, but both of these groups worship freely with little interference from the general public.[\[5\]](#)

## Largest Cities

### Urban: 97%

Brussels, Antwerp, Liège, Gent, Charleroi, Mons, Leuven, Brugge, Namur, Kortrijk, **Mechelen**, **Hasselt**.

10 of the 12 cities with over 100,000 inhabitants have an LDS congregation. 51% of the national population resides in the 12 largest cities.

## LDS History

Sporadic LDS missionary outreach occurred in Belgium prior to the late 1880s.<sup>[6]</sup> The LDS Church was first established in Belgium in 1888 through the efforts of LDS missionary Mischa Markow, a Hungarian convert baptized in Turkey a year earlier. As Markow traveled across Europe preaching, he stopped in Belgium and baptized a family of six in Antwerp and reported the baptisms to the Swiss-German Mission. 80 converts joined the LDS Church and three branches were organized in Liege, Brussels, and Antwerp just two months after three full-time missionaries sent to open missionary work under the Swiss-German Mission. The Netherlands Mission began administering Belgium in 1891, and by 1924 all non-Flemish-speaking congregations were transferred to the French Mission. Latter-day Saints experienced persecution at times during the late nineteenth century, with some missionaries receive death threats and misinformation about the Church being published in local newspapers. Both world wars suspended LDS missionary activity and resulted in widespread property damage for the Church and its members.<sup>[7]</sup> Many of the LDS congregations had few members before and after both World Wars. Elder Charles Didier of the Presidency of the Seventy noted that when he and his family first attended an LDS Church service in the 1950s, there were fewer than 15 members in the congregation, five of whom were members of his family.<sup>[8]</sup> In 1963, the Church created the Franco-Belgian Mission from the French East Mission<sup>[9]</sup> which was later renamed the Belgium Brussels Mission in 1974. A second mission, the Belgium Antwerp Mission, was created in 1975 but discontinued in 1982. Seminary and institute began in the 1970s.

In 1990, the Church recreated the Belgium Antwerp Mission from the Netherlands Amsterdam Mission and included Flemish-speaking areas of Belgium. The new mission had 1,000 members in one district.<sup>[10]</sup> In 1991, the Church divided Belgium along ethno-linguistic lines between the Europe Area and the Europe Mediterranean Area.<sup>[11]</sup> 6,000 attended four performances of the BYU Ballroom Dance Company in Belgium in 1992.<sup>[12]</sup> In 1995, the Church discontinued the Belgium Antwerp Mission. LDS Church President Gordon B. Hinckley visited Belgium in 1996.<sup>[13]</sup> In 2000, Belgium joined the Europe West Area<sup>[14]</sup> and in 2002 the Belgium Brussels Mission was consolidated with the Netherlands Amsterdam mission to create the Belgium Brussels/Netherlands Mission.<sup>[15]</sup> In 2010, French-speaking Wallonia became part of the France Paris Mission.

## Membership Growth

**LDS Membership:** 5,980 (2009)

There were fewer than 1,000 members by 1963.<sup>[16]</sup> In 1973, there were approximately 3,500 Latter-day Saints.<sup>[17]</sup> Membership reached 6,000 by 1996.<sup>[18]</sup> In the late twentieth century, LDS membership became increasingly more diverse, with members from the Philippines, Chile, Russia, Sweden, China, New Zealand, Zaire [Democratic Republic of the Congo], and the United States. By year-end 2000, there were 5,784 members.

Membership grew slowly between 2000 and 2006, totaling 6,030 in 2003 and 6,363 in 2006. Annual membership growth rates ranged from 0.9% to 2.5% during this period. The number of Latter-day Saints declined in the late 2000s as the Church reported 6,029 members in 2007 and 5,890 members in 2009. Likely reasons for membership decline during this period include emigration, few convert baptisms, and membership record updates. In 2009, one in 1,743 was LDS.

## Congregational Growth

**Wards:** 9 **Branches:** 8

The first LDS congregations were organized in the late nineteenth century and fluctuated in number due to war. Six LDS Belgian branches functioned during World War II.<sup>[19]</sup> By 1973, there were four districts and 13 branches. Districts were located in Brussels-Liege (four branches - Brussels French, Herstal, Liege, Seraing, and Verviers), Charleroi (three branches - Charleroi, Jumet, and Namur), Antwerp (four branches - Antwerpen, Brussels, Gent, and Michelen), and a fourth district for English-speakers (two branches - Brussels English and SHAPE Servicemen).

Created in 1994, the Antwerp Belgium Stake initially contained four wards and 11 branches in Belgium and the Netherlands.<sup>[20]</sup> The Liege Belgium District was formed from the Brussels Belgium Stake prior to 1996, but was discontinued in 2006. There were 27 congregations in the late 1990s. By year-end 2000, there were 26 congregations, including 11 wards.

Congregation consolidations characterized the 2000s as branches were steadily discontinued. Total LDS congregations declined to 23 in 2001, 22 in 2003, 20 in 2006, 18 in 2008, and 17 in 2009. During this period, the number of wards declined by two. Congregations discontinued after May 2001 include the Antwerpen II Ward, Huy Branch, La Louviere Branch, Aalst Branch, SHAPE Military Branch, Brussels (Flemish) Branch, Louise Ward, and the Mechelen Branch.

## Activity and Retention

In the mid-1990s, 75% of the converts baptized were found through member referrals or street contacting.<sup>[21]</sup> In 1997, 4,010 members from northern France and Belgium attended a regional conference with President Thomas S. Monson.<sup>[22]</sup> Later that year, 1,500 members from Belgium and the Lille France Stake participated in a parade commemorating the founding of the Church in what was believed to be Belgium's largest parade ever organized. The parade was attended by 6,000 spectators and 220 copies of the Book of Mormon were distributed. 70 made requests for missionary visits.<sup>[23]</sup> 202 students were enrolled in seminary or institute during the 2008-2009 school year. Most congregations appear to have between 50 and 100 active members. Nationwide active membership is estimated at 1,500, or 25% of total membership.

## **Language Materials**

**Languages with LDS Scripture:** Dutch, French, German, Italian

All LDS scriptures and most church materials are available in Dutch, French, German, and Italian. The Liahona magazine has 12 issues in Dutch, French, German, and Italian. Scriptures and LDS materials are available in many commonly spoken immigrant languages.

## **Meetinghouses**

The first LDS meetinghouses were constructed in the 1960s. In 2010, there were 16 LDS meetinghouses. In 2010, the only meetinghouse to serve more than one congregation was in Liege.

## **Humanitarian and Development Work**

The LDS Church has not completed any large-scale humanitarian or development work in the past couple decades. In 1993, LDS missionaries in Mechelen picked up garbage in streets, parks, and forest which drew media attention to the Church.<sup>[24]</sup> Full-time missionaries and local members have opportunities to perform community service, but high standards of living and economic prosperity lessen humanitarian and development needs in Belgium.

## **Opportunities, Challenges and Prospects**

### **Religious Freedom**

Latter-day Saints are not among religious groups formally recognized by the Belgian government, but the Church does not experience any major restrictions on its activities. Foreign full-time missionaries regularly serve and proselyte.

### **Cultural Issues**

Secularism and nominalism exhibited by much of the indigenous population erode Belgium's rich Christian legacy and frustrate church growth efforts. LDS missionaries have struggled to find and baptize converts among the indigenous Belgian population due to their strong traditional religious ties to the Catholic Church and disinterest in the active religious participation. Member-missionary efforts are valuable in overcoming these cultural obstacles to proselytism as local members are familiar with these issues and have successfully dealt with them. Missionary lessons and approaches need to be tailored to a population that has some background in Christianity but fails to see a need for observing religious principles, reading scriptures, and attending church regularly. The LDS Church has achieved greater success in the biggest cities due to large populations and stronger receptivity of non-traditional religious groups that has been generated by the cosmopolitan atmosphere;<sup>[25]</sup> many recent converts have been foreign immigrants. Nonetheless, low receptivity and high cost of living making it infeasible to assign large numbers of full-time missionaries at present. High rates of alcohol consumption, cigarette use, and divorce create societal challenges for full-time missionaries and local members. Investigators and converts who do not completely overcome smoking and drinking habits can experience convert attrition.

### **National Outreach**

51% of the national population resides in a city with an LDS congregation. There are over 120 cities and communes with over 20,000 inhabitants without an LDS mission outreach center. Luxembourg, the least populated province, is the only province without a mission outreach center and accounts for 2.5% of the national population. Cities which once had LDS congregations constitute three percent of the national population.

National outreach has not been significantly reduced in the 2000s despite the consolidation of 35% of original wards and



branches as most discontinued units operated in smaller cities or near other LDS congregations. Most consolidated branches had few active members and appeared to rely on a handful of local leaders or full-time missionaries to function. Many of these areas had less receptive populations to LDS missionary efforts. Developed transportation systems have likely contributed to mission and regional church leadership decisions to consolidate congregations. During the 2000s, no additional mission outreach centers were established in the largest Belgian cities of Brussels, Antwerp, and Liege despite larger populations and greater receptivity.. Distance from LDS meetinghouses in urban areas creates logistical and transportation challenges for many members. Creating dependent branches and groups in sectors of the largest cities which are distant to the nearest LDS meetinghouse may facilitate expansion of national outreach and reverse the trend of congregation consolidations experienced in the 2000s.

The Church maintains an Internet site for Belgium in Dutch and English at <http://www.kerkvanjesuschristus.be/>. The website contains local news, information on church beliefs, and links to other official LDS websites like the meetinghouse locator and mormon.org. The high rate of Internet use among many Belgians offers opportunities for Latter-day Saints to use online social networking sites to perform member-missionary work like Facebook. Shortly after the Church launched its first official website, Belgian ranked among the twenty countries with the most visitors to the new site.[26] However, it is unclear whether online outreach has contributed to church growth in Belgium in view of declining membership and small numbers of convert baptisms in recent years.

Mission outreach directed toward immigrants can facilitate the introduction of the Church to some currently unreached or lesser-reached countries. Some of the first Guinean and Gambian Latter-day Saint joined the Church in Belgium. Coordination with area presidencies that administer the home countries of these immigrant groups will be required for any systematic progress to occur abroad.

### **Member Activity and Convert Retention**

Convert retention rates appeared mediocre to low during the 2000s as indicated by LDS membership increase but a decline in the number of congregations. At present, non-Belgians appear to constitute over half of convert baptisms due to higher receptivity to the LDS Church, Retention rates among foreign converts have been low due to language and integration issues as well as cultural backgrounds as "consumers" rather than "producers" of religiosity. Many are unaccustomed to expectations of lay members participating and serving regularly in the church. The transient lifestyle of many non-natives also reduces member activity rates.

Belgians who become LDS must overcome many secular and cultural obstacles which prevent many others from becoming interested in the Church or following church teachings. Native Belgians who join the Church often are dedicated and devoted, develop habits of regular church attendance, and have socially integrated into their respective congregations, but are few in number. However, divorce rates are high even among Belgium Latter-day Saints, and most active LDS families have lost one or more children to inactivity.

High costs of living for full-time missionaries and limited missionary resources dedicated to Europe demand greater member involvement in missionary activity in order to increase convert baptism rates, improve convert retention, and reduce dependence on foreign full-time missionaries.

### **Ethnic Issues and Integration**

Latter-day Saints have faced ethnic integration issues in Belgium for decades, but these challenges have been primarily language-based and not ethnically-based. Belgian members appear to accommodate immigrant converts into their respective congregations, especially French-speaking Africans or those who learn one of the three official Belgian languages. French-speaking congregations Flanders and in Dutch-speaking congregations in Wallonia can reduce the obstacles that arise from Belgians residing outside of their traditional ethno-linguistic regions.

### **Language Issues**

The Church has translated LDS materials in the three official languages of Belgium. Indigenous languages without translations of LDS materials appear unlikely to have future materials in the future. Containing few literary and vocabulary variations with standard Dutch, Flemish is unlikely to merit its own translations of LDS materials and scriptures as dissimilarities with Dutch are primarily phonological. Originating among Latin speakers over a millennia ago, Walloon is spoken in informal settings and virtually all speakers are bilingual in French today. Over the past several decades, the Church has struggled to meet the needs of immigrant groups that do not speak one of the three official languages proficiently. Language-specific congregations in larger cities with concentrations of immigrants from North Africa, Italy, Turkey, and Spanish-speaking nations may facilitate greater breakthroughs and progress establishing the Church over the long term and expand national outreach.

### **Missionary Service**

The LDS Church has greatly reduced the number of full-time missionaries assigned to Belgium to approximately a third of the

levels reported in the 1980s and 1990s. Despite this reduction, Belgium remains dependent on foreign full-time missionaries to staff its current missionary force as few serve LDS missions. Stable numbers of youth and young adults enrolled in seminary and institute in the late 2000s indicate that there are prospective full-time missionaries among local members that are active in the Church. Greater emphasis on missionary preparation may help increase the percentage of Belgians that complete full-time missions.

Local members in the past have achieved success in member-missionary approaches. During a 10 year period, 38 converts were baptized through the efforts of an LDS family from Herstal that invited over 250 individuals to family home evenings.<sup>[27]</sup>

## Leadership

Belgium benefits from well-trained local leadership that can administer the responsibilities and needs of two stakes. Belgian LDS leaders have occasionally served in international leadership positions. Elder Charles Didier from Liege was called to the First Quorum of the Seventy in 1975. Prior to his calling to the Seventy, Elder Didier served as a regional representative and presided over the France-Switzerland Mission from 1970 to 1973. In 1992, Elder Didier was called to the Presidency of the Seventy and became the executive director of the Priesthood Department of the Church.<sup>[28]</sup> Elder Didier was called to the Presidency of the Seventy again in 2001.<sup>[29]</sup> A lack of leadership in lesser reached areas appears a major obstacle for the Church to create additional congregations.

## Temple

Both Belgian stakes pertain to The Hague Netherlands Temple district. Local members benefit from close proximity to the temple which is uncommon for countries with as few Latter-day Saints as Belgium. Non-Dutch-speaking members in Belgium must be self-sustaining in the allocation of temple staff as Dutch is the primarily language used in the temple. Prospects for a temple in Belgium appear unlikely due to the small size of Church membership in the region, stagnant growth for the past decade, close proximity to the temple, and The Hague Netherlands Temple operating well under capacity. In 2010, the temple was opened Thursday through Saturday with four sessions on Thursday and Friday and three on Saturday.

## Comparative Growth

Belgium was one of the only European countries to experience LDS membership decline in the late 2000s. The Netherlands and France - countries with generally low levels of religious participation in the population and similar demographics with Belgium - have achieved consistent membership growth but have also experienced a decline in LDS congregations during the 2000s. Belgium and the Netherlands are among countries which have experienced the greatest congregational declines in Europe as both countries have had 20% or more of the congregations operating in 2000 discontinued by 2010. The percentage of Latter-day Saints in Belgium is comparable to the Netherlands, France, and other European nations with a long-term LDS presence. The Church has achieved greater national outreach in Belgium than in most European countries primarily due to its small geographic size and highly urbanized population.

Missionary-oriented Christian groups report slow growth. Jehovah's Witnesses are one of the most successful denominations as they number nearly 25,000 active members and rely on member-missionary approaches to sustain growth. Witnesses gained over 400 new converts in 2009. Seventh Day Adventists generally baptize fewer than 100 converts a year and gained only two new congregations over the past decade. Adventists reported half as many members as Latter-day Saints, but appear to have as many or more active members as the LDS Church. Christian groups in Belgium which gain the greatest success have developed appropriate immigrant outreach, rely on member-missionary efforts for growth, and avoid congregation consolidations.

## Future Prospects

The recent trends of slow to stagnant LDS membership growth, low receptivity, congregation consolidations, emigration of active members, and large cuts in the full-time missionary force, are appearing to stabilize but show no signs of improving from their present levels for the medium-term future. Efforts to increase the number of local members serving full-time missions may be among the most fruitful to pursue at present as additional native missionaries would help staff Belgian's missionary needs, improve member activity rates, and provide more experienced and knowledgeable leadership over the long term. Specialized mission outreach initiatives are greatly needed for the large numbers of immigrant groups and may facilitate the establishment of the LDS Church in currently unreached nations or areas from which these immigrant converts originate. Such efforts among the most receptive are uncoordinated and have yet to reach their full potential.

<sup>[1]</sup> "Belgium," Wikipedia.org, retrieved 23 November 2010. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Belgium>

<sup>[2]</sup> "Background Note: Belgium," Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs, 29 April 2010. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2874.htm>

<sup>[3]</sup> "Belgium," Wikipedia.org, retrieved 23 November 2010. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Belgium>

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[7] "The Church in Europe," Ensign, Aug 1973, 16-35

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[18] Miasnik, Chris. "6,000 members living in Belgium have rich history," LDS Church News, 7 December 1996.  
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