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.

Greece

Population: 10.78 millions (#81 out of countries)

By David Stewart and Matt Martinich

Geography

Area: 131,957 square km. Greece is in Southeastern Europe and borders Turkey, Albania, Macedonia, and Bulgaria. The Aegean, Mediterranean, and Ionian Seas also surround Greece. Greece experiences a temperate climate with mild, wet winters and hot, dry summers. Mountains dominate the landscape. Forest covers much of the country and is home to many endangered species. Most of the country consists of peninsulas and approximately 2,000 islands stretching to the western coast of Turkey. Greece's strategic location controls many seaways to the Black Sea. Earthquakes are a major natural hazard. Environmental issues include air and water pollution. Greece is administratively divided into thirteen regions and one autonomous monastic state.

Peoples

Greek: 91.6%

Albanian: 4.4%

Other: 4.0

All citizens are regarded as Greek and account for 91.6% of the population. Albanians are the largest ethnic minority. Foreign citizens living in the country account for most of the remaining inhabitants, many of which come from the Middle East, Europe, or East Asia.

Population: 10,761,523 (July 2018)

Annual Growth Rate: -0.07% (2018)

Fertility Rate: 1.44 children born per woman (2018)

Life Expectancy: 78.2 male, 83.6 female (2018)

Languages: Greek (99%), other (1%). Greek is the official language. Other languages with native speakers include Slavic, Turkish, Romani, Albanian, Aromanian, and Bulgarian. Greek is the only language with over one million speakers (10.7 million).

Literacy: 97.7% (2015)

History

Greece has a long and rich history and is regarded as the cradle of Western civilization. The Minoan and Mycenaean civilizations ruled present-day Greece prior to 1000 BC. Greece was divided into independent city states during much of the ancient and classical eras. Wars with Persia ensued, and later Greece came under Roman rule by 146 BC. Following Christ's ministry, the Apostle Paul visited Greece several times to proselyte. Greece became part of the Byzantine Empire from the fourth century to the fifteenth century, following which Greece was absorbed into the Ottoman Empire. Greece gained independence in 1830 and included Central Greece, Attica, the Peloponnese, and the Cyclades. Gradual territorial expansion occurred until 1947, much of which came from victories as a result of the Balkan Wars. Greece was occupied by Germany during World War II, and civil war broke out following liberation by Allied forces. During the 1960s and 1970s government turmoil and instability ensued, resulting in a temporary military dictatorship, but a democratic government returned to power in 1974. Greece joined NATO and the European Community (now the EU) shortly thereafter and experienced marked economic growth. The 2004 Summer Olympic Games were held in Athens. However, economic crisis has gripped the country since the late 2000s. Several bailouts have occurred with the European Commission, the European Central Bank, and the International Monetary Fund during the past decade.

Culture

The Greek Orthodox Church is the dominant cultural influence, although most are nominal members who identify with the Church and its traditions. Greeks have little tolerance for outsiders, especially foreign religious groups. Greek cuisine includes lamb, salads, cheese, pita bread, olives, and vegetables. A rich legacy of literature, science, and technology continues to influence modern culture. Tobacco cigarette consumption rates are high, whereas alcohol consumption rates are average. The Olympic Games originated in Greece, and soccer is highly popular. Millions of Greeks live in other nations, notably the United States, Cyprus, the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, and Albania.

Economy

GDP per capita: $27,800 (2017) [46.5% of U.S.]

Human Development Index: 0.870 (2017)

Corruption Index: 48 (2017)

Greece has rapidly developed its economy over the past several decades from a poor nation to one of the wealthiest in the region. However, the economy has been in shambles for most of the past decade due to difficulties with debt and reduced credit ratings. The black market may account for up to one-quarter of the GDP. Many do not report their income to avoid taxes which after recent government reforms requires up to 70% of an individual's total income. The unemployment rate was 21.5% in 2017 and an estimated 36% of the population lived between the poverty line in 2014. Unemployment among youth and young adults ages 15-24 is among the highest in the world at 47.3% in 2016. Services employ 72.4% of the workforce and produce 79.1% of the GDP, whereas industry accounts for 15.0% of the workforce and 16.9% of the GDP. Wheat, corn, and barley are primary agriculture products, and tourism, food processing, and textiles are the largest industries. Primary trade partners include Italy, Germany, Russia, and Turkey.

Corruption permeates society and politics and is among the most severe in the EU although perceived corruption has slightly improved in the last decade. Bribery allegedly occurs frequently, usually involving doctor fees, building permits, and tax evasion.[1] Tax corruption and evasion are major problems.[2] Religious minorities sometimes experience harassment.

Faiths

Christian: 89.5%

Other: 10.5%

Christians

Denominations Members Congregations

Greek Orthodox – 10,030,000

Catholic – 80,000

Evangelicals – 41,376

Jehovah's Witnesses – 28,773 – 370

Latter-day Saints – 802 – 3

Seventh Day Adventists – 384 – 14

Religion

Some estimates place the percentage of Greek Orthodox adherents in the population as high as 98%. However, researchers have found that Greek Orthodox members likely account for as low as 81.4% of the population. Furthermore, atheists may be the second largest religious group per data from a 2015 poll at 14.7% of the population. Religious minorities primarily reside in Athens. Roman Catholics and Muslims are the two largest minority groups; the latter has a visible presence in Thrace. Muslims constitute nearly three percent of the population (approximately 300,000 people) and primarily consist of permanent residents, immigrants, foreign workers, and refugees.[3] The remainder of the population are Protestant Christians or belong to other religious groups.

Religious Freedom

The constitution allows for religious freedom, and the government generally upholds this right. The Greek Orthodox Church is regarded as the prevailing religion, and government finances much of its costs. Non-Orthodox groups experience legal restrictions and difficulty obtaining official standing needed for meetinghouses. The primary religious freedom concern in recent years has been in regards to blaspheme laws that criminalize insults against Orthodox Christianity. There have been historical challenges with the government issuing "house of prayer" permits for religious groups to hold meetings. Public proselytism is forbidden, and religious groups that are active in the country must maintain social order.[4] Missionaries have been arrested frequently on charges of proselytism. Membership in the EU has helped to liberalize laws limiting religious freedom for minority groups.

Largest Cities

Urban: 79.1% (2018)

Athinai**,** Thessaloniki**, Patrai, Irakleion, Larisa, Volos, Acharnai, Chania, Ioannina, Chalkis.**

Cities listed in **bold** have no official congregation of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Two of the ten most populous cities have a Church congregation. Forty-six percent (46%) of the national population lives in the ten largest cities. The Athens metropolitan area accounts for up to 29% of the population.

Church History

The first known convert from Greece was taught by the president of the mission in Turkey and baptized in 1905. Many Greek-Americans joined the Church in the twentieth century. [5] The first was organized in Athens in 1965. Elder Gordon B. Hinckley dedicated Greece for missionary work in 1972.[6] The Greek translation of the Book of Mormon began in the 1970s and was completed in 1987. A native Greek in the United States named Lica Catsakis Bywater translated the full edition.[7] Full-time missionaries began serving in Greece in 1986 and numbered twenty in 1990.[8] The Austria Vienna East Mission administered Greece prior to the creation of the Greece Athens Mission in 1990.[9] Greece became part of the Europe/Mediterranean Area in 1991.[10] The first youth conference was held in 1995.[11] In 2018, the Greece Athens Mission closed and Greece was reassigned to the Tirana-based Adriatic South Mission.

Membership Growth

Church Membership: 802 (2017)

There were 177 members in 1975. In 1990, membership remained relatively unchanged at 200.[12] Thirty-two attended the

creation of the Thessaloniki Branch in 1992, which had twenty-five members.[13] By 2000, membership reached 515.

Membership grew slowly in the 2000s and 2010s, numbering 591 in 2002, 631 in 2005, 693 in 2008, 751 in 2012, and 802 in 2017. Annual membership growth rates decreased from 6-8% between 2002 and 2002 to 0-5% for most years since 2003. Foreigners constitute the majority of Church members in Greece. For example, in early 2010 only one native Greek member was active in the Thessaloniki Branch.

Congregational Growth

Branches: 3 (2018)

In 1988, there were three branches, increasing to four in 1992 and seven in 1994. In the early 1990s, a district functioned in Greece.[14] A branch was organized in Thessaloniki in 1992 after many years of diligent work from missionary couples and elders.[15] The number of branches decreased to six in 1996, four in 1998, and returned to five by 2000. An additional group began meeting in Kavala in the late 2000s. A group has functioned in Patra for many years. Kavala was closed to missionary work in late 2009, and the group was discontinued. In early 2012, a group met on Crete. Branches in Athens were realigned into two branches in 2016 – one for Greek speakers and one for English speakers. By the late 2010s it was unclear whether member groups functioned in any locations.

Activity and Retention

The groundbreaking for the first meetinghouse in Greece occurred in 1997 with seventy-three in attendance.[16] Over 200 attended the dedicatory services for the meetinghouse in 1999.[17] Twenty-three were enrolled in institute during the 2007–2008 school year. Forty attended a young adult youth conference in June 2004.[18] In 2007, there were around one hundred active members in Athens. In mid-2009, there were less than twenty attending meetings in Patra. In early 2010 there were less than fifteen active members in Thessaloniki. Active membership is likely between 100 and 200, or 15% to 25%.

Language Materials

Languages with Latter-day Saint Scripture: Greek, English, Turkish, Albanian, Bulgarian.

All Latter-day Saint scriptures are available in Greek, English, Albanian, and Bulgarian. Only the Book of Mormon has been translated into Turkish although plans were announced in 2017 to translate the rest of Latter-day Saint scripture into Turkish.[19] Many unit, temple, priesthood, relief society, Sunday School, young women, primary, missionary, and family history materials are available in Greek, Turkish, Albanian, and Bulgarian. The Church has translated its new history book, Saints, into Greek and Albanian, and the Come, Follow Me guidebooks and manuals into Greek. Several CES manuals are available in Albanian and Bulgarian; only one is translated into Greek. The Liahona has one Greek issue, four Bulgarian issues, and six Albanian issues a year.

Meetinghouses

Elder Didier dedicated the first Church-built meetinghouse in 1999 to house the three branches in Athens.[20] In early 2010, only the Halandri Branch met in the meetinghouse. Both Athens branches appeared to meet in the meetinghouses in 2018. The Thessaloniki Branch appeared to meet in a rented space.

Humanitarian and Development Work

The Church has conducted 122 humanitarian and development projects in Greece since 1985, and 49 of these projects occurred in 2017. Four-fifths of humanitarian projects have been refugee response initiatives.[21] Missionaries have offered service in protecting Greece's forests through watching for fires. This resulted in positive relations with the city of Patra and media exposure for the Church.[22] Missionaries served as volunteers during the 2004 Summer Olympic Games.[23] Missionaries have cleaned up debris around areas of Athens including Mars Hill.[24]

Opportunities, Challenges, and Prospects

Religious Freedom

The Church is recognized as a known religion and enjoys protection granted through the constitution. Missionaries have been

arrested by police many times in the past two decades. In 2008, missionaries were detained for two days on charges of proselytizing and were acquitted. Although legal issues have not greatly limited the Church's progress, societal pressures have caused major setbacks for missionaries and members.

Cultural Issues

Faith is often viewed as an extension of the Greek ethnic identity. The fifth-century BC Greek historian Herodotus identified the Greek people as sharing common blood, common language, common culture, and common religion. Twenty-five centuries later, Herodotus' observation remains largely true: The religion of Greeks remains highly homogenous with little pluralism, and converting to a non-Greek faith is often seen as cutting oneself off from family, heritage, and culture.

Interest in religion is very low despite most identifying as Greek Orthodox. Missionaries have had a very challenging time finding those interested in the Church and are usually very poorly treated. Service activities have come as unwelcomed by many Greeks. Members, missionaries, and Church leadership in Greece face ostracism from society and are often heavily persecuted. Tradition is a very strong force that produces anger and confusion when broken. Members face cultural challenges such as accusations of not being Greek for not belonging to the Greek Orthodox Church. Those who become ostracized often lose employment and many social connections. Similar intolerance occurs in Greek communities in other nations, such as the United States, but members tend to cope with these challenges by removing or distancing themselves from Greek communities. Widespread tobacco use creates additional challenges for investigators and members to overcome in order to live Church teachings.

National Outreach

Most the population does not live near Church outreach centers located in Athens or Thessaloniki. The unreached population accounts for at least 63% of the national population, or 6.8 million people. Non-Greeks, particularly East Asians, Africans, and Albanians, have seen the greatest mission outreach, as they are the most receptive.

Athens is the most reached city by the Church as it headquartered the Greece Athens Mission for nearly three decades before its closure in 2018. The closure of the mission may significantly affect mission resource allocation to Greece in the future, but this decision also presents opportunities for Albanian language missionary efforts among Albanian speakers in Athens given resources available in the Adriatic South Mission. Decades of extremely low productivity for the Greece Athens Mission combined with severely limited opportunities for missionary activity given current cultural and legal restrictions indicate that the mission closure was warranted, especially in a time with expanding opportunities for international growth in more productive areas but limited resources available.

Many cities are very difficult for the Church to reach, as they are isolated from current Church centers or located on islands. Over half a million live on islands in the Aegean Sea, such as Lesbos, Chios, Samos, Cyclades, and Dodecanese. Over 600,000 live on Crete. About 200,000 reside on islands in the Ionian Sea. Millions more unreached Greeks populate cities and towns far from established congregations and any modern gospel witness.

Few convert baptisms and the limited number of missionaries assigned to Greece limit additional outreach. The city of Kavala opened in the mid-2000s with high ambitions and enthusiasm but only had a few baptisms over several years and closed to missionary work. The greatest opportunities for outreach are in cities with over 100,000 inhabitants without a Church presence, including Patrai, Irakleion, Larisa, Volos, and Acharnai. There have been isolated examples of individuals who join the Church in locations distant from current congregations. In 2010, missionaries baptized a Greek woman living on the island of Rhodes who had first learned about the Church in Athens and anxiously desired to join the Church despite no Church unit nearby. Instances like this one may help to expand current mission outreach to more remote locations but also jeopardize the activity of newly baptized converts.

The Church has a couple Internet sites for Greece in Greek. The official Greek version of lds.org is found at https://www.mormonoi.gr/ and provides news, information on Church teachings, and times and locations for Church meetings. There is also a Greek version of the website for individuals interested in learning more about the Church at https://www.mormon.org/ell. Use of the websites can help individuals self-refer to learn more about the Church, including in areas distant from cities where missionaries serve. Many Greek Americans have joined the Church and demonstrate interest in expanding mission outreach in Greece, particularly among friends and relatives.

Member Activity and Convert Retention

Members of the Church are often severely persecuted by friends, family and the community. Ostracism can become so severe that many active members have left the Church. Active Greek members have strong testimonies as they have had to weather the persecution heaped upon them from society. Persecution has made many members stronger in their testimonies, but at significant costs in sacrifice and endurance.

Ethnic Issues and Integration

The majority of active membership is non-Greek and poses a significant challenge for integrating native Greeks into congregations. This congregational demography has originated from non-Greeks greater receptivity to the Church's teachings. Church leaders in Southeastern Europe reported successes with greater progress regarding the establishment of the Church among Albanians in Athens during the late 2010s.

Language Issues

The Church benefits from a wide body of materials in Greek and many minority languages despite a small active membership who are native speakers of Greek. Missionaries report challenges becoming proficient in the Greek language. Limited membership results in the diverse membership communicating in a second language in Church meetings. Slavic, Romani, and Aromanian have no language materials.

Missionary Service

In 1997, there were fifty-eight missionaries serving in Greece.[25] The number of missionaries serving in Greece and Cyprus fell dramatically during the 2000s from around one hundred in the mid-2000s to less than thirty in early 2010. Few local members have served missions. During the decade of the 2000s, just four members from Greece, only one of whom was an ethnic Greek, served missions. Member-missionary participation has been limited, in part due to hostility and isolation from the surrounding culture. In the 2010s, nearly all missionaries who served in Greece were from Europe.

Leadership

The Church in Greece has a very limited native leadership, which is reflected in the lack of a district. Nevertheless, local members served as branch presidents for all three branches as of 2018. Mission leadership helps mentor and supervise congregations. The small number of congregations within the former Greece Athens Mission may have resulted in local members relying on the mission to run the Church on the local administrative level. Very few Greek members have served in leadership positions.

Temple

Greece is assigned to the Kyiv Ukraine Temple district. Temple trips likely occur infrequently due to few active members, long distance from the temple, and constraints on time and money.

Comparative Growth

Greece has arguably seen the slowest membership and congregational growth in the world for any nation where the Church had consistently operated a mission for almost three decades. The number of returned missionaries who have served in Greece is likely greater than the number of members who currently reside in the country. The Greece Athens Mission was one of two missions worldwide to not have stakes or districts organized within its boundaries until the creation of the Nicosia Cyprus District in 2007 (as of early 2010 the Russia Vladivostok Mission still did not have a stake or district). The fact that native Greeks form only a small minority of membership provides an even more disappointing dimension on comparative growth. Missionaries reported in 2010 that the mission was the lowest baptizing in the world. Activity rates appear consistent for the region.

Christian groups have reported slow growth over the past several decades. Seventh-Day Adventists have membership size and national outreach comparable to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints albeit Adventists have reported a 20% decrease in membership during the past decade. Jehovah's Witnesses number among the largest nontraditional religious groups. However, Witnesses in recent years have reported a slight net decrease in the number of active members and congregations.

Future Prospects

Cultural and societal challenges continue to slow and limit the Church's progress in Greece. Increased materialism from recent economic growth has exacerbated negative attitudes toward foreign religious groups. These social views continue to weigh heavily upon native Greek membership and intimidate potential converts. Pressure from the EU for greater religious tolerance may help the Church in the long term. However, Greece still lacks a native membership base to assist in the Church's national outreach, leaving this responsibility primary to the foreign missionary force. The cutback in the full-time missionary force combined with the closure of the Greece Athens Mission in 2018 likely reflects the low receptivity and slow growth. Large, currently unreached cities may one day open for missionary work, yet it is difficult to justify the manpower and resources needed for expansion when there has been so little response in regions with established congregations. The formation of additional branches and a district seem unlikely in the near future with the exception of an Albanian-speaking branch if there are enough active members to warrant such a congregation one day. There has been little receptivity to foreign missionaries; well-trained member-missionaries may one day be able to achieve greater success, although intensive efforts will be necessary in a

challenging environment. The future of the Church in Greece will depend heavily on the development of a strong, indigenous member base and on finding more effective ways of working, although such goals appear distant.

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