

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.



Aruba

Population: 0.11 millions (#195 out of countries)

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Geography

Area: 180 square km. Aruba is a small island in the southern Caribbean Sea north of Venezuela that is a constituent country of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. The tropical island is sparsely vegetated, has no rivers, enjoys a near-constant temperature year round, and is covered by flat terrain. White sandy beaches circumscribe the island, making Aruba a popular tourist destination. Infrequent hurricanes are a natural hazard.

Peoples

Aruban: 66.0%

Columbian: 9.1%

Dutch: 4.3%

Dominican: 4.1%

Venezuelan: 3.2%

Cuacaoan: 2.2%

Haitian: 1.5%

Peruvian: 1.1%

Chinese: 1.1%

Other: 6.2%

Unspecified: 1.2%

Above percentages reflect nation of birth for the island population as of 2010.

Population: 116,576 (July 2018)

Annual Growth Rate: 1.24% (2018)

Fertility Rate: 1.83 children born per woman (2018)

Life Expectancy: 74.1 male, 80.3 female (2018)

Languages: Papiamento (69.4%), Spanish (13.7%), English (7.1%), Dutch (6.1%), Chinese (1.5%), other (1.7%), unspecified/unknown (0.5%). Dutch and Papiamento are the official languages; English is widely spoken. Papiamento is the only Iberian-based Creole spoken worldwide.

Literacy: 97.5% (2015)

History

Arawak Amerindians were the first known inhabitants of Aruba, settling the island as early as 1000 AD. Spanish explorers first sighted Aruba in 1499. Spanish rule endured until shortly after the Dutch overtook neighboring Bonaire and Curacao in 1634. The English captured Aruba from the Dutch in 1805 during the Napoleonic wars, and Dutch control was reestablished in 1816. A nineteenth-century gold rush was followed by the establishment of an oil refinery in 1924. Tourism developed the economy in the late twentieth century. Aruba seceded from the Netherland Antilles in 1986, becoming an autonomous entity under the Kingdom of the Netherlands.[1]

Culture

Aruban culture shares its greatest similarities with Caribbean and Dutch culture, but immigrants from Latin America, Asia, and Europe have each made cultural contributions to society and cuisine. Christianity is a dominant influence on society as many attend church. American influence on society has also increased in recent years as greater numbers of tourists from the United States visit.

Economy

GDP per capita: $37,500 (2017) [63.7% of U.S.]

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

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

Offshore banking and tourism sustain the economy. Petroleum transshipment facilities also operate on the island. More than two million tourists visit annually. Services generate two-thirds of the GDP, whereas industry generates one-third of the GDP. Tourism and transshipment facilities are major industries. Agricultural and fishing activity is limited and includes fishing, raising livestock, and cultivating aloe. The United States, the Netherlands, and Colombia are the primary trade partners.

Corruption appears less prevalent than many Caribbean nations. Illicit drug trafficking and money laundering are concerns. The Aruban population suffers from a high rate of cocaine use.

Faiths

Christian: 94.2%

Other/None/unspecified: 5.8%

Christians

Denominations – Members – Congregations

Catholic – 90,000

Evangelicals – 8,153

Methodist – 1,255

Jehovah's Witnesses – 1,080 – 14

Seventh Day Adventists – 948 – 10

Latter-day Saints – 591 – 2

Religion

At least four-fifths of Arubans are Catholic. Protestants account for most of the rest of the population that identifies with a religious group. Non-Christian religious groups and those who do not identify with a religious group comprise less than six percent of the population.

Religious Freedom

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

Largest Cities

Urban: 43.4% (2018)

Oranjestad, San Nicolas.

Both of the largest cities have a congregation of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Forty-three percent (43%) of the national population resides in the two largest cities.

Church History

The first branch was organized in 1986,[3] and full-time missionaries arrived the following year.[4] The Book of Mormon translation in Papiamento was completed in 1987.[5] Jurisdiction over Aruba was transferred from one of the Venezuelan missions to the West Indies Mission sometime in the 1990s and later to the Puerto Rico San Juan Mission. President Hinckley and Elder Dallin H. Oaks visited Aruba in 2001.[6] Church meetings began to be conducted in Papiamento in 2003.[7] In 2007, Aruba was assigned to the Puerto Rico San Juan West Mission[8] and in 2010 was assigned the Dominican Republic Santo Domingo East Mission. In 2015, Aruba was reassigned to the realigned Trinidad Port of Spain Mission.

Membership Growth

LDS Membership: 591 (2017)

There were 200 Latter-day Saints in 1997, increasing to 256 in 2000. Slow membership growth occurred during the 2000s as membership numbered 297 in 2002, 320 in 2004, 395 in 2006, and 458 in 2008. Annual membership growth rates during the 2000s ranged from 2% to 11%. Stagnant membership growth occurred in the early 2010s, and slow membership growth occurred thereafter. Church membership totaled 506 in 2011, 511 in 2014, and 564 in 2016.

In 2017, one in 197, or 0.51% of the population, was a Latter-day Saint.

Congregational Growth

Wards: 0 Branches: 2 (2018)

The first branch was organized in Oranjestad followed by a second branch in San Nicolas 1991.[9] A third branch was organized in 2004 in Oranjestad but was closed in 2009. The Oranjestad Aruba District operated from 2004 until late 2009. In early 2011, there were two branches: the Oranjestad and San Nicolas Branches. In 2015, the branches were reassigned to the newly organized ABC Islands District. The district's headquarters are located in Oranjestad. The ABC Islands District also includes the Curaçao Branch and Bonaire Branch.

Activity and Retention

One hundred eighty attended a special meeting with President Hinckley in 2001.[10] The average number of members per congregation increased from 128 in 2000 to 235 in 2009 and 296 in 2017. Eight were enrolled in seminary during the 2009–2010 school year. Sacrament attendance in the Oranjestad Branch reached 125 in late 2009 whereas sacrament attendance in the San Nicolas Branch ranged from 17 to 50 in 2010. Approximately thirty youth from Aruba, Bonaire, and Curacao attended a youth district conference in 2018. Total active membership is estimated at no greater than 150, or 25% of nominal church membership.

Language Materials

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

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

Meetinghouses

In the late 2000s, the Oranjestad Branch met in a church-built meetinghouse whereas the San Nicolas Branch met in a rented home.

Humanitarian and Development Work

Latter-day Saint humanitarian and development work is limited to service projects sponsored by local congregations and full-time missionaries completing weekly service hours.

Opportunities, Challenges, and Prospects

Religious Freedom

The Church reports no restrictions on its operations in Aruba. In the late 2000s, full-time missionaries enter Aruba on tourist visas that permit them to stay for up to ninety days at a time. In the late 2010s, full-time missionaries noted challenges with transferring between Aruba and Curaçao.

Cultural Issues

Interdenominational competition for new converts poses challenges for Latter-day Saint missionaries and members to navigate, as it has produced a religious society that encourages denomination hopping. Consequently, receptivity to the Church has been modest. Materialism and secularism arising from the tourist industry and European connections may further reduce receptivity over time. Illicit drug use among many Arubans poses a challenge for mission outreach.

National Outreach

The entire urbanized population resides in cities with a Church congregation. Approximately half the population appears to reside within five kilometers of a meetinghouse. The small geographic size of Aruba reduces the need for many mission outreach centers. The operation of four or five meetinghouses would effectively reach the entire population, but limited numbers of active members and mission resources render prospects of opening additional congregations unfeasible at present. Holding cottage meetings in some lesser-reached communities is a method that offers opportunities for local leaders and full-time missionaries to gauge receptivity by location without utilizing many resources.

There are no developed Internet resources specifically dedicated to Aruba or Papiamento speakers. However, the Church publishes several of its Papiamento translations online at https://www.lds.org/study?lang=pap. The establishment of a website in Papiamento for Aruban members to utilize in their finding and member-missionary efforts may increase receptivity and national outreach.

Member Activity and Convert Retention

Nominal Latter-day Saint membership nearly doubled in the 2000s and increased by another one hundred in the 2010s, yet due to poor convert retention and mediocre member activity rates, there has been no noticeable increase in active membership during this period. Reaching arbitrary baptismal quotas through quick-baptism tactics, the assignment of multiple missionary companionships per congregation, and distance from mission headquarters have reduced accountability for new converts baptized and perpetuated local members relying on full-time missionaries for baptizing and retaining new converts and reactivating less active members. Consequently, the two Oranjestad branches were consolidated into a single unit, and the original district was discontinued. Full-time missionaries in the late 2010s noted significant problems with conflict between members, specifically in regards to the legal status of Venezuelan members in the branch and whether these members were considered to be in “good standing” despite their illegal status in the country. Full-time missionaries were required to intervene to help diffuse these conflicts. Low levels of member activity are further manifested by the extremely low percentage of members historically enrolled in seminary and the lack of an institute program despite nearly 600 members on the island. Stressing member participation in seminary and institute may generate more consistent church attendance trends, increase doctrinal understanding among members, provide greater opportunity for reactivation efforts, and ultimately lead to greater self-sufficiency among Aruban leadership.

Ethnic Issues and Integration

Missionaries report no significant ethnic integration issues due to the highly eclectic, cosmopolitan society that has embraced ethnic diversity. However, issues with the integration of Venezuelans who have fled their homeland into branches in Aruba have created challenges. Many members speak several languages, providing some accommodation to those that are not fluent in Papiamento.

Language Issues

In early 2019, there was no proselytism literature translated into Papiamento. The Doctrine and Covenants and Pearl of Great Price have yet to be translated. A lack of materials in Papiamento challenges efforts for local members to develop greater gospel study habits and gain stronger testimonies about the Church and its teachings. Many members likely utilize materials available in other languages for gospel study and church instruction, albeit church services are held in Papiamento. However, only about half of the Oranjestad Branch was fluent in Papiamento in the late 2010s, whereas most of the remainder of members spoke Spanish.

Missionary Service

The Church has historically assigned a sizeable number of full-time missionaries to service a small population despite modest receptivity. There were eight missionaries assigned to Aruba in 2001.[11] There were eight full-time missionaries assigned to the Oranjestad Branch alone in late 2009. As a result of the consolidation of the two Puerto Rico missions, by mid-2010 there were four young elder missionaries assigned to Aruba with one companionship per branch. In 2018, there were eight missionaries assigned to Aruba – three companionships to the Oranjestad Branch and one companionship to the San Nicolas Branch. In early 2019, there were twenty-two full-time missionaries assigned to Aruba, Bonaire, and Curaçao. Few local members have served full-time missions. Emphasis on seminary and institute attendance and missionary preparation classes may increase the number of Arubans who serve full-time missions.

Leadership

Local members lead both branches, but active priesthood holders and total active membership remains too limited to maintain additional congregations. The reestablishment of a district in 2015 suggests some improvement in local leadership development in the past decade although this district also includes branches in Bonaire and Curaçao. A lack of returned missionaries to facilitate the establishment of enduring local leadership is a major challenge.

Temple

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

Comparative Growth

The population of Aruba has demonstrated low to modest receptivity to the Church like much of the Caribbean in recent years. Member activity rates, membership and congregational growth rates, local leadership development, and the percentage of Latter-day Saints in the general population are representative of the region. Convert retention rates have historically ranked among the lowest for the Caribbean.

Most outreach-oriented Christian groups report a strong presence on Aruba with several congregations and slow to moderate church growth. Seventh-Day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses conduct widespread mission outreach and report consistent, steady membership and congregational growth. Evangelicals have achieved the greatest growth among missionary-minded Christians in recent years.

Future Prospects

In 2001, President Hinckley predicted that one day there would be thousands of members in Aruba and Curacao and more chapels would be needed on Aruba.[12] This prediction remained unrealized as of early 2019 due to mediocre member activity levels, poor convert retention, and inadequate numbers of active priesthood holders to staff additional branches. Emphasis on the seminary and institute programs and stressing member-missionary work may increase the prospects of a self-reliant, sustainable Latter-day Saint community capable of staffing local church administration and full-time missionary needs. Increasing secularism and competition for converts among missionary-oriented Christians may further reduce receptivity over the medium term.

[1] "Background Note: Aruba," Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, 11 May 2010. http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/22491.htm

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

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

[4] "Aruba," Country Profile, retrieved 3 February 2011. http://beta-newsroom.lds.org/country/aruba

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

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

[7] "Aruba," Country Profile, retrieved 3 February 2011. http://beta-newsroom.lds.org/country/aruba

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

[9] "Aruba," Country Profile, retrieved 3 February 2011. http://beta-newsroom.lds.org/country/aruba

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

[11] Hinckley, Gordon B. "The Miracle of Faith," Ensign, May 2001, 67.

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