

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.



American Samoa

Population: 0.05 millions (#214 out of countries)

By David Stewart and Matt Martinich

Geography

Area: 199 square km. Located halfway between Hawaii and New Zealand and consisting of the eastern islands of the Samoan Islands chain, American Samoa is the southernmost territory of the United States. Tutuila is the primary island, and the territory also includes Rose Atoll, the Manu'a Islands, and Swains Island. Terrain consists of rugged mountains and a narrow coastal plain on the five volcanic islands whereas the two coral atolls are flat and low-laying. Tropical maritime climate with little seasonal variations in temperature occur with a marked rainy season (November to April) and dry season (May to October). Typhoons are a natural hazard. Environmental issues include few fresh water sources, water scarcity, erosion, and pollution. The United States government maintains no administrative divisions in American Samoa, but local government administratively divides the territory into three districts and two islands.

Peoples

Samoan: 88.9%

Tongan: 2.9%

Other Pacific Islander: 0.8%

Filipino: 2.2%

Other Asian: 1.4%

Mixed: 2.7%

Other: 1.1%

Population: 50,826 (July 2018)

Annual Growth Rate: 1.211% (2018)

Fertility Rate: 2.57 children born per woman (2018)

Life Expectancy: 71.6 male, 76.2 female (2018)

Languages: Samoan (88.6%), English (3.9%), Tongan (2.7%), Tagalog (2.2%), other (2.6%). Most are bilingual.

Literacy: 97% (2017)

History

American Samoa appears to have been inhabited from as early as 1000 BC. Polynesians settled the islands, which were explored by Europeans in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Western powers competed for control of the islands, and in 1899, the United States and Germany divided the administration of the Samoan islands with the United States obtaining islands part of present-day American Samoa. Hurricane Val damaged or destroyed 65% of residential homes in 1991.[1] Poor economic conditions have encouraged many to serve in the United States military in recent years. Over 150 American Samoans perished in the September 2009 earthquake and tsunami.

Culture

There are few cultural differences between Samoa and American Samoa due to comparable ethnic composition and shared history until the end of the nineteenth century. Samoans continue to practice many aspects of their indigenous cultural, political, social, and linguistic customs and systems known as “fa’a Samoa.” Christianity supplanted indigenous religious beliefs that supported an intricate mythological system, and today Samoa and American Samoa are among the most religious countries and territories in the world. Dances and ceremonies mark many social occasions. Cuisine consists of coconuts, seafood, taro, rice, fruit, and seaweed. Samoans traditionally receive gender-specific tattoos called Pe’a for males and malu for females. [2] American football and rugby teams worldwide frequently have Samoan team members, and American football is American Samoa’s most popular sport. Cigarette and alcohol consumption rates are low. There are an estimated 415,000 Samoan speakers worldwide[3] – 165,000 more people than the total population of Samoa and American Samoa combined. Most Samoans who live abroad reside in the United States, Australia, and New Zealand.

Economy

GDP per capita: $11,200 (2016) [19.0% of U.S.]

Human Development Index: N/A (United States: 0.924 [2017])

Corruption Index: N/A (United States: 71 [2018])

With a traditional Polynesian economy and land ownership system in which over 90% of the land is communally owned, American Samoa depends on tuna fishing and tuna processing for its economic vitality. Pumice and fish are natural resources. Pago Pago has an excellent natural harbor that has favored trade. The United States government dedicated $25 million toward a relief and reconstruction program following devastation of the September 2009 earthquake and tsunami. Economic development is limited, and the population suffers from high unemployment rates (30% in 2005). There are some favorable prospects for the development of a tourist industry. Tuna canneries are the primary industry and canned tuna accounts for most exports. Fruit, coconuts, vegetables, taro, yams, copra, dairy products, and livestock are agricultural products. Trade primary occurs with the United States.

Corruption in the local government is perceived as more widespread that in the United States. Some local government officials have faced corruption charges in recent years.

Faiths

Christian: 98.3%

Other: 1.7%

Christians

Denominations – Members – Congregations

Evangelicals – 14,597

Latter-day Saints – 16,390 – 43

Catholic – 14,000

Seventh Day Adventists – 1,674 – 15

Jehovah's Witnesses – 287 – 3

Religion

Congregationalists account for approximately half of the population, whereas The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the second largest denomination and claims one-third of the population. The remainder of the population adheres to Roman Catholicism (approximately 28%) and Protestant denominations.

Religious Freedom

The United States' constitution protects religious freedom, which is upheld by national and local laws. There have been no instances of societal abuse of religious freedom.

Largest Towns and Villages

Urban: 87.2% (2018)

Tafuna, Nu'uuli, Pago Pago, Ili'ili , Pava'ia'i, Aua, Vaitogi, Leone, Faleniu, Fagatogo.

All ten of the most populous towns and villages have a congregation of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Fifty-five percent (55%) of the population resides in the ten largest towns.

Church History

The Church sent two Hawaiian missionaries in 1862 to begin mission outreach, but their efforts were unsuccessful. In June 1888, the first mission president of the Samoan Mission arrived on Tutuila to begin establishing the Church.[4] The first convert baptisms occurred on Aunu'u, and the first branch began functioning in 1893.[5] Seminary and institute began in the mid-1970s. In the 1970s, American Samoa and Western Samoa (currently known as Samoa today) were the first nations/territories to be entirely covered by stakes. In 1977, the Church announced plans to construct a 1.5 million dollar temple in American Samoa and slated its completion date for 1980.[6]However, the announced temple site was relocated from Pago Pago to Apia, Samoa in 1980 to better meet the needs of Samoan members.[7] In 1988, a monument commemorating one hundred years since the establishment of the Church in American Samoa was unveiled in Mapusaga.[8] Government leaders participated in the centennial celebration and spoke positively of events they attended.[9] In 1989, Latter-day Saint and former lieutenant governor of American Samoa F. Eni Hunkin Jr. began serving in the U.S. Congress.[10] Meetinghouses have at times suffered damage from typhoons, such as in 1990,[11] 1991,[12] 2004,[13] and 2018.[14] One Latter-day Saint perished in a 1991 typhoon.[15] The Church first organized Boy Scout organizations in 1938, and by 2004, there were nearly one hundred scouting packs, troops, and teams in the Church.[16] In April 2019, President Russell M. Nelson announced a temple for Pago Pago. In 2019, American Samoa remained part of the Samoa Apia Mission and was assigned to the Pacific Area.

Membership Growth

Church Membership: 16,390 (2018)

The Church reported 3,933 members in 1983. There were 6,000 Latter-day Saints in American Samoa in 1988.[17] Membership increased to 11,000 in 1991, 12,901 in 2001, 14,252 in 2005, 15,159 in 2010, and 16,390 in 2018. Annual membership growth rates have generally ranged from 0-3% for most years in the past two decades. However, the percentage of members in the population has significantly increased during this time due to a decline in the population. Church-reported membership constituted 10.9% of the population in 1983, 23.5% of the population in 1993, 23.2% of the population in 2003, and 32.2% of the population in 2018.

Congregational Growth

Wards: 38 Branches: 5 (June 2019)

The first stake was organized in 1969 in Pago Pago. Additional stakes were organized in Pago Pago West (1980), Pago Pago Central (1994), Pago Pago Mapusaga (1997), and Pago Pago Malaeimi (2012).

There were thirty-four congregations by year-end 2000, including twenty-nine wards. The number of total congregations increased during the 2000s to thirty-five in 2003, thirty-six in 2007, and thirty-seven in 2009. New congregations organized in the 2000s included the Malaeimi Second and Pago Pago Third Wards, and the Aua Third (English) Branch. Steady congregational growth occurred in the 2010s as the number of congregations reached thirty-eight in 2013, forty in 2014, forty-one in 2015, forty-two in 2017, and forty-three in 2018. New congregations organized during the 2010s included the Amanave Branch (2013), Aoloau Aasu Branch (2013), Mesepa Third Ward (2014), Mapusaga Fourth Ward (2014), Tafuna Third Ward (2015), Fagaitua Branch (2016), Nuuuli Third Ward (2017), and Laulii Branch (2018). One branch closed in 2012: the Fagasa Branch.

Activity and Retention

Large meetings and conferences have been well attended. Seven thousand nine hundred attended a special meeting with President Gordon B. Hinckley in Pago Pago in 1997.[18] Over 600 Latter-day Saint scouting youth attended a conference in 2004.[19] 5,000 attended a temple celebration commemorating the recent completion of the rebuilt Apia Samoa Temple in 2005.[20]

Nine hundred eighty-eight were enrolled in seminary and institute during the 2008–2009 school year. During the 2000s, the average number of members per congregation increased from 379 in 2000 to 400 in 2009, but then decreased to 381 in 2018 as congregational growth rates outpaced membership growth rates. Most wards have between 120 and 200 active members, whereas most branches likely have between fifty and 100 active members. Active membership is estimated at 6,100, or 37% of official Church-reported membership.

Language Materials

Languages with Latter-day Saint Scripture: Samoan, Tongan, English.

All Latter-day Saint scriptures and most church materials are translated into Samoan and Tongan. Other commonly spoken languages in the South Pacific often have scriptures and church materials available.

Meetinghouses

There were approximately seventeen meetinghouses in early 2011, most of which were built by the Church. In 2019, there were at least twenty meetinghouses in American Samoa.

Humanitarian and Development Work

The Church maintained a high school in Mapusaga in 1988[21] and formerly managed a school near Pago Pago.[22] By the mid-2000s, all church schools had closed.[23] The Church has conducted thirty-nine humanitarian and development projects in American Samoa since 1985.[24] Tens of thousands of pounds of emergency relief were sent to Pago Pago in 1990 following Hurricane Ofa.[25]

Opportunities, Challenges, and Prospects

Religious Freedom

There are no restrictions on religious freedom. Latter-day Saints proselyte, worship, and assemble freely.

Cultural Issues

Samoans maintain an intimate connection with Christianity and regular church attendance, which has favored Latter-day Saint

mission outreach initiatives over the past century. Strong family connections have fostered the development and growth of the Church through member referrals and member-missionary activity. Opposition does occur in some villages toward nontraditional Christian groups, but the Church does not appear to have been specifically targeted, nor do counter-Latter-day Saint efforts appear to have significantly affected Church growth trends. The degree of cooperation and friendship exhibited at present between Latter-day Saints and other Christian groups is demonstrated from an account following the destruction of the original Apia Samoa Temple by fire in 2003 when religious and community leaders offered support and comfort. The Methodist Church sent a check to pay for some of the finances to rebuild the temple.[26] Although theological differences distance the Church from other Christian denominations, Latter-day Saints are viewed much more favorably than in many other nations by the major Christian traditions.

Double Affiliation

Strong interest in Christianity but moderate levels of allegiance to a given denomination has created additional cultural challenges for Latter-day Saints and other Christians regarding the double affiliation of their members. Most nominal Latter-day Saints who no longer attend Church services appear to be actively involved in or identify with other Christian traditions. Doubly-affiliated Latter-day Saints who actively engage in another Christian denomination are challenging to reactivate due to their current social and religious connections outside the church. Latter-day Saint missionaries, leaders, and members also need to emphasize unique doctrinal teachings and theological positions to help curb against the loss of some Latter-day Saints to other Christian denominations and safeguard against convert attrition.

National Outreach

American Samoa receives excellent levels of mission outreach, as all towns with over 1,500 inhabitants have a congregation. The percentage of American Samoans residing within five kilometers of a Church meetinghouse may be as high as 95%. The ratio of Church congregations to the general population in the early 2010s was one to 1,795, whereas in the late 2010s it was one to 1,182. There are only sixteen villages in American Samoa without their own ward or branch: Aloafau, Aoa, Auasi, Aumi, Fagaalu, Fagasa, Fatumafuti, Masausi, Masefau, Matuu, Ofu, Onenoa, Pagai, Sa'ilele, Taputimu, Vailoatai, and Vaitogi. Most of these villages are located in Eastern District. Many of these villages appear favorable for future mission outreach centers as Church members likely live in these villages. Additionally, the creation of a member group or branch can help improve church attendance and outreach among non-members. Moreover, several of the new congregations organized by the Church have been in villages where the Church previously operated no ward or branch. Possible reasons for why additional congregations have not been established in these villages may include limited numbers of priesthood holders and low member activity in these locations, opposition from the predominant church of the village, logistical difficulties, and other factors.

Latter-day Saint mission outreach directed towards Samoans occurs internationally, as there were sixty-five Samoan-language congregations outside of Samoa and American Samoa in late 2010 operating in the United States (38), New Zealand (18), and Australia (9) providing outreach to the 120,000 some Samoan speakers abroad. In mid-2019, the number of Samoan-speaking congregations outside of the Samoan Islands increased to eighty-four operating in the United States (47), New Zealand (20), and Australia (17), with scores of additional English-speaking congregations with small numbers of Samoan speaking members. The percentage of Latter-day Saints among the approximately 200,000 Samoan speakers abroad appears consistent, as indicated by the ratio of congregations to Samoan populations.

Member Activity and Convert Retention

American Samoa possesses moderate levels of member activity rates in the Church, as demonstrated by the operation of five stakes, an average of 381 members per congregation, the nearly commensurate increase of congregations with membership growth, and wards constituting almost 90% of congregations. Regular church attendance is a characteristic of Samoan culture that has contributed to current member activity levels. Self-sustainability has been achieved through the establishment of church schools in the past. Member activity rates do not appear to have fluctuated with the closing of Church schools on American Samoa. High seminary and institute attendance, the Church's historically strong scouting presence, and cultural and historical factors appear to have facilitated greater member activity and convert retention rates than in many other countries and territories.

Ethnic Issues and Integration

The highly homogenous Samoan population has eliminated many ethnic integration challenges faced by Latter-day Saints in other countries. Religious plurality has reduced many of the challenges of Samoan Latter-day Saints assimilating into society. A combination of these conditions has favored Church growth over the past several decades despite slight declines in the population of the islands due to emigration. Two Tongan-speaking wards and two English-speaking wards assist with ethnic integration issues at church for the 11% of the population that are not Samoan.

Language Issues

The Church began translating materials into Samoan at an early stage of missionary work and today has a wide array of materials and all Latter-day Saint scriptures translated. Widespread use of Samoan has simplified mission outreach

approaches. Tongan-speaking Latter-day Saints meet in two congregations, and English-speakers meet in two congregations. Nearly the entire non-Samoan population has Church materials and language-specific congregations in their native or second language.

Missionary Service

American Samoa appears self-sufficient in its missionary force and, like Samoa, exports native missionaries abroad to serve in other countries. In 1974, Samoan Latter-day Saints constituted 75% of the missionary force assigned to the Samoan Islands.[27] The Church operated a missionary training center in Samoa, but the center appeared to have closed by the late 1990s or early 2000s. Samoan full-time missionaries now receive training in the New Zealand Missionary Training Center and frequently serve in Oceania, North America, the Caribbean, and Africa. In 2010, most full-time missionaries in American Samoa were assigned to two or three congregations. North Americans frequently serve in the Samoan Islands despite Samoan self-sufficiency in missionary manpower.

Leadership

Local leadership appears highly self-sufficient without overreliance on Church employees to staff callings. Samoan leadership has also served in some regional and international church leadership callings. In 1994, Falemao M. Pili from Mesepa was called as a regional representative.[28] In 1995, Eugene E. F. Walter Reid from Pago Pago was called as an area authority.[29] In 2003, Beaver T. Ho Ching from Pago Pago was called as an Area Authority Seventy[30] and in 2007 was called as the mission president of the Philippines Quezon City Mission.[31] In 2014, Douglas Walter Jessop from Aua was called as the Apia Samoa Temple president.[32] In 2017, Beaver Taituliatu Ho Ching from Fagaalu was called as the Apia Samoa Temple president.[33] Limited numbers of active priesthood holders in some areas may prevent the creation of additional congregations, such as on the eastern side of Tutuila.

Temple

American Samoa is assigned to the Apia Samoa Temple district until completion of the Pago Pago American Samoa Temple, which was announced in April 2019. Temple attendance is high, and members frequently travel to the temple in Apia regularly to perform temple ordinances. In 2010, the temple was moderately utilized, as six endowment sessions occurred from morning to evening Tuesday through Friday, and three sessions occurred on Saturdays. In 2019, the schedule for endowment sessions remained the same as in 2010. Additional sessions scheduled by individuals stakes or congregations likely occur regularly.

Comparative Growth

With the third-highest percentage of Latter-day Saints in the general population among countries and territories worldwide, American Samoa has demonstrated consistent Church growth. Membership and congregational growth rates have compared to growth rates in most South Pacific countries and territories. The Church in American Samoa has historically demonstrated higher member participation in seminary and institute than most Polynesian nations, as enrolled students during the 2008–2009 school year constituted 7% of LDS membership in American Samoa, whereas in New Zealand, Tonga, and Samoa, less than 5% of members were enrolled. Only French Polynesia had a higher percentage of enrolled members at the time (8%). This finding suggests that church activity rates among youth may be higher in American Samoa than in most other nations in Polynesia. In April 2019, American Samoa was the country or territory with the smallest population with a temple planned or dedicated. Prior to the announcement of the Pago Pago Samoa Temple, the country with the smallest population with a temple was Tonga.

Nontraditional, missionary-minded Christian groups have reported stagnant growth in American Samoa during the past decade. Jehovah's Witnesses have reported minimal growth in American Samoa in recent years with fewer than 300 active members in 2018. The number of active Witnesses in the territory increased by approximately seventy in the 2010s albeit the number of congregations remained unchanged during this time at three. Witnesses had eight convert baptisms in 2018. Seventh-Day Adventists have reported a seven percent decline in membership during the past decade.

Future Prospects

The Church in American Samoa continues to demonstrate self-sustainable local leadership and provides regional strength in missionary manpower and self-sufficiency despite its tiny population. The establishment of branches or wards in additional villages appears likely as long as the Church continues to report net increases in Church membership and stakes remain stable despite recent emigration trends among American Samoans. The announcement of a temple may discourage additional emigration as long as members can maintain adequate employment. Additional stakes may be organized over the medium-term as more congregations are created, particularly in the Eastern District.

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