



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.



Georgia

Population: 4.94 millions (#122 out of countries)

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Geography

Area: 69,700 square km. Occupying a strip of land in the Caucasus, Georgia borders Russia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Turkey, and the Black Sea. The Great Caucasus Mountains and Lesser Caucasus Mountains form the northern and southern borders, respectively. The wide range in elevation and terrain allows for a variety of climates. Low-lying plains line the Black Sea coastal areas, whereas the central and eastern regions consist of plains and plateaus. Mediterranean climatic conditions prevail along the coast, whereas interior climate ranges from semi-arid to temperate to alpine. Heavy rain and snowfall support some temperate rainforests in the west. Earthquakes are natural hazards. Environmental issues include air, soil, water pollution, waste disposal, and water shortages. Georgia is administratively divided into nine regions, one city, and two autonomous republics. Two small de facto states along the Russian border—Abkhazia and South Ossetia—are officially part of Georgia, but maintain separate administrations with close political ties with Russia.

Peoples

Georgian: 86.8%

Azeri: 6.3%

Armenian: 4.5%

Other: 2.4%

Georgians reside in all areas of Georgia proper except for some southern border regions. Azeris primarily reside south of Tbilisi, whereas Armenians reside south of Tbilisi and in pockets in Abkhazia. Russians populate northern areas.

Population: 4,003,000 (July 2018)

Annual Growth Rate: 0.01% (2018)

Fertility Rate: 1.76 children born per woman (2018)

Life Expectancy: 72.5 male, 80.9 female (2018)

Languages: Georgian (87.6%), Azeri (6.2%), Armenian (3.9%), Russian (1.2%), other (1.1%). Georgian is the official language and only language with over one million speakers (3.5 million). Abkhaz is the official language in Abkhazia. Several languages have approximately 100,000 speakers or more, including Azerbaijani, Armenian, Abkhaz, and Mingrelian.

Literacy: 99.8% (2015)

History

The kingdoms of Colchis and Kartli-Iberia ruled the region until the Roman Empire expanded into the Caucasus after the birth of Christ. By the 330s, Christianity became the state religion. Roman influence waned, and Persians, Turks, and Arabs occupied the region. Georgia reached its most powerful and influential height between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries that ended as a result of the Mongol invasions. The Ottomans and Persians gained control of Georgia until it came under Russian rule in the nineteenth century. A brief three-year independence from 1918 to 1921 came to an end when Georgia was integrated into the Soviet Union. In 1991, Georgia regained independence from the Soviet Union. During the first decade following independence, little progress occurred fighting corruption and addressing separatist movements in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Adjara. The Rose Revolution began in late 2003 following disputed presidential election results and resulted in major changes in government policy and administration and instigated economic reform. Mikheil Saakashvili came to power in 2004 following the Rose Revolution and regained control over the previously de facto state of Adjara. The geopolitical issues regarding the continued separatist control of Abkhazia and South Ossetia reached greater complexity as these de facto states received assistance from Russia and maintained close political ties that included the intention of joining the Russian Federation. For instance, in South Ossetia, Russia issued Russian passports and provided electricity. A major military conflict occurred in August 2008 over a Georgian military response to South Ossetian and Russian provocation that resulted in the Russian military occupying both de facto republics and large areas of Georgia proper. Russia withdrew its forces shortly thereafter from most areas and officially recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The 2010s was characterized by frequent tensions between political leaders. At present, Georgia's primary objectives include greater integration with Europe and membership in organizations such as the EU and NATO. In the late 2010s, Russian forces continued to occupy Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Culture

Georgian culture has endured for thousands of years and has developed over time through indigenous and foreign influences to produce a proud tradition of art, theater, architecture, folklore, music, and dance. Georgia has been a renowned producer of wine for centuries that has been especially popular in Russia. Cuisine is diverse and includes Khinkali (dumplings), soup, bread dishes, and vegetables. The Georgian Orthodox Church is among the oldest Christian faiths and strongly influences local culture and social attitudes. Cigarette consumption rates are high and alcohol consumption rates are moderate.

Economy

GDP per capita: \$10,700 (2017) [17.9% of U.S.]

Human Development Index: 0.780 (2017)

Corruption Index: 58 (2018)

The establishment of the new government in 2004 led to many improvements in economic policy and administration. Strong

economic growth occurred until the 2008 Russian conflict. In 2009, Georgia suffered a recession mainly due to declining demand for Georgian goods, a lack of foreign investment, and the global financial crisis. However, the economy has since rebounded and there have been many improvements with sound economic policies and a reduction in corruption. Due to its position bridging Asia and Europe, Georgia has begun to better capitalize on its potential as a transporter of goods between these regions and is economically integrated into the region. In recent years, several pipelines—notably the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline—have been completed bringing oil and gas from the energy-rich Caspian Sea to Asia Minor and the Black Sea for distribution in Europe. Hydropower meets most of Georgia’s energy needs. Services produce 67.9% of the GDP and employ 35.5% of the workforce, whereas industry accounts for 23.7% of the GDP and 8.9% of the workforce. Major industries include steel, machine tools, electrical appliance, and mining. Agriculture employs over half of Georgians but generates only 8.2% of the GDP. Primary crops include citrus, grapes, tea, and hazelnuts. Turkey, Russia, Azerbaijan, and China are the primary trade partners.

Georgia has made progress fighting corruption and is perceived as the least corrupt nation in the Caucasus. In the 2010s, Georgia achieved some of the greatest progress of any country in the world with the reduction of perceived corruption according to Transparency International. In 2018, perceived corruption levels ranked at the same levels as Czechia, Lithuania, and Spain. The government has pledged to address corruption problems and develop the economy, which it has generally carried out. Recent issues the government has sought to improve include strengthening the law, implementing a fair university entry exam system, and reforming the judicial system.[\[1\]](#)

Faiths

Christian: 89.3%

Muslim: 10.7%

Christians

Denominations – Members – Congregations

Georgian Orthodox – 3,338,502

Evangelicals – 65,247

Catholic – 30,000

Jehovah’s Witnesses – 18,173 – 219

Greek Orthodox – 15,000

Seventh Day Adventists – 360 – 13

Latter-day Saints – 253 – 2

Religion

Religious affiliation is highly correlated by ethnicity and location. Most ethnic Georgians are Georgian Orthodox or adhere to other Orthodox denominations. Additional traditional religious groups include Armenian Apostolic, Roman Catholicism, Judaism, and Islam. Muslims primarily consist of Azeris, ethnic Georgians in Ajara, and Chechen Kists. Nontraditional Christian denominations together constitute less than 1% of the population.[\[2\]](#) A census by the de facto government of Abkhazia reported that the population was 60% Christian, 16% Muslim, 8% atheist/unbeliever, 8% followers of pre-Christian Abkhazian religion, 7%

unspecified, and 1% other.[\[3\]](#) The religious demographics for South Ossetia appear similar to Abkhazia.

Religious Freedom

The constitution protects religious freedom, which is generally upheld by laws and government policies. The government has made considerable progress improving religious freedom and tolerance for non-Orthodox groups on a national level in the past two decades. There are no laws that prohibit unregistered religious groups from meeting in the country, albeit registration is required for benefits such as tax exemptions and owning property. Jehovah's Witnesses appear to be the group that reports the most instances of harassment. Historically, the Georgian Orthodox Church has strong influences on government policy due to its prominence among the national population. At times some view the Orthodox Church's influence and treatment by the government as unfair and unequal compared to other religious groups. Furthermore, religious minorities complain of opposition in regards to the establishment of religious buildings and schools.[\[4\]](#)

Largest Cities

Urban: 59% (2019)

Tbilisi, **Batumi**, **Kutaisi**, **Rustavi**, **Sukhumi**, **Gori**, **Zugdidi**, **Poti**, **Tskhinvali**, **Khashuri**.

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

One of the ten most populous cities has an official Church congregation. Forty-five percent (45%) of the national population resides in the ten largest cities.

Church History

Elder Jeffrey R. Holland dedicated Georgia for missionary work in March 1999. Georgia was assigned to the Armenia Yerevan Mission shortly thereafter. Humanitarian missionaries were assigned in June and began donating relief supplies to orphanages and teaching English.[\[5\]](#) In September, the first Georgians to join the Church were baptized in Armenia due to the Church's unregistered status. The first priesthood ordinations and Relief Society, priesthood, and young women meetings were held in 1999 and 2000.[\[6\]](#) In 2000, Georgia became part of the Europe East Area. In 2005, the Church registered with the government, allowing the first full-time proselytizing missionaries to be assigned in the spring of 2006. In 2008, missionaries were withdrawn for a nearly three months period due to conflict with Russia. The seminary and institute programs were introduced in 2008 – the same year the first local member served a full-time mission. The Church translated General Conference talks into Georgian for the first time in October 2011.[\[7\]](#)

Membership Growth

Church Membership: 253 (2018)

In March 2000, there were fourteen members, which increased to thirty by June 2001.[\[8\]](#) In 2003, there were sixty-three members. Membership doubled to 126 in 2006 and reached 178 in 2008. Essentially stagnant membership growth has occurred in the 2010s as Church membership has increased, decreased, or remained unchanged year to year. Church membership totaled 216 in 2012, 289 in 2015, and 253 in 2018.

In 2018, one in 19,471 was a member on Church records.

Congregational Growth

Branches: 2 Groups: 1 (2019)

The Church created its first group in September 2001. The following June the first branch was organized in Tbilisi.^[9] In 2007, the Tbilisi Branch split into two branches, the Avlabari and Saburtalo Branches, and in 2011 the two branches were consolidated into a single branch. In 2012, a group was organized in Rustavi. In 2018, the Church reestablished a second branch in Tbilisi named the Temka Branch. The Temka Branch services northern areas of Tbilisi, whereas the Avlabari Branch services southern areas of Tbilisi. Both branches reported directly to the Armenia/Georgia Mission in 2019.

Activity and Retention

Eighteen were enrolled in seminary or institute during the 2008–2009 school year. Active membership in 2007 may have reached as high as eighty to one hundred, initiating the creation of a second branch. The 2008 conflict with Russia resulted in reduced member activity rates. In the late 2000s, returned missionaries estimated that only 20% of recent converts remained active one year after baptism. In 2010, active membership was between forty-five and fifty-five, or 25% to 30% of total membership. In 2011, the Church News reported that there were approximately fifty active members in Georgia.^[10] In 2014, the Avlabari Branch had an average of 40-60 people who attended church on Sundays. Local members at the time estimated that between 25-33% of the members on Church records were active. Two surveys from local members in Tbilisi indicated that more than twenty converts had joined the Church within the past year in 2014, albeit only one-third of these new converts remained active one year after baptism. The Rustavi Group had approximately ten who attended church services in early 2014.^[11] A survey completed by a local member from the Temka Branch in 2018 noted that 40-60 people attended the branch on most Sundays, and that there were between 5-9 converts baptized within the past year in the branch. Convert retention for the Temka Branch one year after baptism was estimated at 70-79%. Returned missionaries in 2018 reported that each Tbilisi branch has approximately forty-five active members, whereas the Rustavi Group had ten active members. At the time, as many as 90% of new converts remained active one year after baptism. The number of active members in Georgia is estimated at one hundred, or 40% of total church membership.

Language Materials

Languages with Latter-day Saint Scripture: Georgian, Russian, Armenian.

The Church published its translation of the entire Book of Mormon into Georgian in 2018,^[12] albeit no print copy of the translation has been produced as of late 2019. Plans to translate the Doctrine and Covenants and the Pearl of Great Price into Georgian were announced in 2017.^[13] All Church scriptures and many Church materials are available in English, Russian, and Armenian (East). Many basic Church materials are available in Georgian, such as Gospel Fundamentals, several church declarations and proclamations, Book of Mormon stories, Preach My Gospel and accompanying lesson booklets, the Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith, the Articles of Faith, and limited numbers of family history and teaching resources.

Meetinghouses

The first church meetings were held in humanitarian missionaries' homes. Shortly thereafter, the Church began renting facilities for Sunday meetings. In 2010, each of the Tbilisi branches met in separate rented facilities. In 2019, each of the Tbilisi branches met in their own meetinghouses.

Health and Safety

Conditions in Abkhazia and South Ossetia remain politically unstable and dangerous for full-time missionary work. Georgia proper is generally safe.

Humanitarian and Development Work

The Church has conducted extensive humanitarian and development work in Georgia, with 388 projects completed since 1985. [14] Most of these projects have donated supplies to orphanages, provided emergency relief to conflict victims, and supplied medical equipment and furnishings to hospitals and other agencies. There have also been clean water projects, refugee relief, and wheelchair donations.

Opportunities, Challenges, and Prospects

Religious Freedom

Georgia has experienced increasing levels of religious freedom especially since 2000. Orthodox denominations continue to receive favoritism from government. Public opinion and media reports have historically portrayed non-Orthodox religious in a negative light, which may include The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Cultural Issues

The surge in Georgian nationalism since independence from the Soviet Union has also resulted in a revival of the Georgian Orthodox Church. Georgian ethnic identity and affiliation with the Georgian Orthodox Church are highly intertwined. Many newly arrived religious groups such as Latter-day Saints tend to struggle creating effective approaches tailored to Georgian Orthodox believers. Negative media exposure on recently arrived religious groups reduces interest and tolerance for the majority. In recent years, Georgia has strengthened political and economic ties with Western Europe but retains the xenophobia characteristic of many post-communist nations toward Protestant or nontraditional Christian groups.

National Outreach

Georgia has a strong potential for increased national outreach due to the close proximity of mission headquarters in Yerevan and the mission's small stewardship limited to just Armenia and Georgia. Thirty-three percent (25%) of the national population resides in the largest city, Tbilisi, the only location with a Church presence until 2012. Only two branches serve Tbilisi and its population of 1.3 million. However, due to the recent arrival of missionaries and their limited numbers, most in Tbilisi likely know little or nothing about the Church and its beliefs and practices. Cottage meetings may be an effective means to meet with isolated members or investigators and encourage them to invite friends and family to meet with missionaries to discuss Church doctrines and principles in lesser-reached areas of Tbilisi and beyond. Larger cities in government-controlled territory near Tbilisi appear most likely to open for missionary work, such as Gori.

Abkhazia and South Ossetia will likely remain unreached for many years due to political conflict in these de facto states and occupation by Russian armed forces. However, their combined population constitutes only 7% of the national population. The political situation in Ajara has stabilized in the 2000s, which increases the likelihood of mission outreach in this autonomous region especially due to the large population of its capital, Batumi. Ajara also has a large Muslim population, which could potentially offer unique proselytism opportunities for missionaries.

Member Activity and Convert Retention

The 2008 conflict with Russia resulted in significant member attrition likely due to members relying on foreign missionaries for Church administrative tasks and testimony-building support. The brief 2008 war with Russia caused no damage or casualties in

the capital of Tbilisi, where both branches were located. The temporary removal of missionaries during this conflict demonstrates that the Church's presence in Georgia was fragile and heavily dependent on foreign missionaries.

The lack of Georgian language Church materials may have further contributed to historically low convert retention and member activity rates due to limited understanding of the Church through second language materials like Russian and possible resistance to use such materials. Low member activity rates and the demand of administrative responsibilities on the few active Georgian leaders prompted the consolidation of the two branches in 2011. However, significant progress occurred in the mid- to late 2010s in regard to the number of active members nearly doubling, major improvement in convert retention rates, and the reestablishment of a second branch in Tbilisi. Seminary and institute programs may be effective to increase local members' knowledge and understanding of Church doctrines and strengthen their testimonies, thus improving member activity and convert retention rates.

Ethnic Issues and Integration

Ethnic minorities residing Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and southern Georgia have segregated themselves from the ethnic Georgian majority and many remaining Georgians in these areas have moved to predominantly Georgian areas. The Church appears to have had few ethnic conflicts at church and may not experience many future ethnic integration issues due to the continued segregation of ethnicities. Outreach targeting Armenians, Azeris, Ossetians, and Abkhaz will require the establishment of mission centers in their respective areas of Georgia.

Language Issues

With the possible exception of the sacrament prayers, basic forms, and the Articles of Faith, there were no Church materials available in Georgian until late 2010 despite the presence of Georgian-speaking Latter-day Saints for almost a decade in Georgia and for several decades in the United States and Europe. Church meetings were held in Russian following the creation of the Tbilisi Branch. Full-time missionaries first communicated with members in Russian and Armenian before they began learning the Georgian language in 2006.^[15] The completion of the Georgian translation of the Book of Mormon did not occur until nearly two decades after the first Church meetings in Georgia. It is likely that delays in developing Georgian translations of Church materials have stifled growth. Nevertheless, the increased number of Georgian-language resources is encouraging. Language materials in other minority languages—such as Azeri and Mingrelian—may not be produced for decades, if ever, as these groups reside in areas without mission outreach and have few if any current Latter-day Saints.

Missionary Service

Although the first local member, an ethnic Armenian young woman, served as the first missionary called from Georgia back in 2008, the first ethnic Georgian to serve a full-time mission did not serve until late 2010. By 2008, an entire zone of missionaries served in Tbilisi. The first sister missionaries to serve in Georgia arrived in 2013. In May 2014, there were thirteen young, full-time missionaries assigned to Georgia (nine in Tbilisi, four in Rustavi).^[16] A lack of youth converts and male members reduces the availability of local missionaries. Prospects to increase the size of the local full-time missionary force will depend on increases in retained converts who are mission aged.

Leadership

The Church in Georgia has historically struggled with a lack of active men in the Church who can serve in essential local leadership positions. Prior to the calling of the first local branch president in 2006, senior missionary couples served as the branch president.^[17] In 2010, both Tbilisi branches had foreign missionaries serving as branch presidents. In early 2012, a senior missionary served as the branch president in Tbilisi. The consolidation of the two Tbilisi branches and a senior missionary serving as the branch president indicated that the Church has struggled to develop local leadership despite having native members for over a decade at the time. However, in 2019 both Tbilisi branches were led by local members, indicating significant progress with these leadership responsibilities being allocated to local members despite historical shortcomings and challenges.

Temple

Georgia pertains to the Kyiv Ukraine Temple district. Temple trips may occur, and members depend on other members to assisting in performing temple work due to their small numbers. Long distances to temple and inadequate funds for travel result in many unable to attend. A small temple in Yerevan may be forthcoming once there is at least one stake in the city.

Comparative Growth

Georgia is one of the most recently opened former Soviet republics to the Church and has experienced comparable membership growth to Kazakhstan. The Church in neighboring Armenia is significantly larger than the Church in Georgia, with more than fourteen times as many members, five times as many branches, and branches that operate in eight cities and towns. In the late 2000s and early 2010s, the Church in Georgia had one of the lowest convert retention rates and one of the least developed local church leaderships in the Caucasus and Eastern Europe. However, by the late 2010s the Church in Georgia had one of the highest convert retention and member activity rates in the region. This finding indicates that conditions can easily change for the Church, and that positive outcomes for growth can occur with the proper approach that emphasizes preparation, training, and leadership development.

Missionary-oriented Christian groups generally have few members and slow membership growth. For example, Seventh-Day Adventists have reported a slight decline in membership over the past decade. Jehovah's Witnesses are among the most successful Christian groups, yet Witnesses have reported slow-to-moderate membership growth rates. Nevertheless, Witnesses number among the largest nontraditional religious groups and operate congregations in scores of cities and towns. Witnesses also maintain far-reaching language-specific outreach as congregations hold services in Georgian, Armenian, Russian, Azerbaijani, Mingrelian, Mandarin Chinese, Turkish, Arabic, Persian, Hindi, Kurdish, English, and Russian Sign Language. Those seeking to become Jehovah's Witnesses complete extensive study and preparation prior to baptism and participate in member-missionary work approaches to proselytism, resulting in a high degree of long-term self-sustaining growth for this denomination.

Future Prospects

Opportunities for expanding national outreach and proselytism remain abundant. Significant improvements have occurred for the Church in the past decade that suggest better prospects for future growth. Notable examples include improvements in religious freedom, success with strengthening membership in Tbilisi to the point that a second branch has been organized and both branches are led by local members, the translation of additional church materials and the Book of Mormon into Georgian, and the sustained operation of the member group in Rustavi. Prospects appear favorable for the organization of additional branches or member groups in lesser-reached areas of Tbilisi, as well as in additional cities. The member group in Rustavi may become a branch once there are a sufficient number of active members to fill essential callings. Negative social attitudes concerning nontraditional religious groups will likely continue to affect most Georgian's perception of the Church. Missionary programs targeting youth may help Georgia to send more missionaries who can later return and serve in leadership positions. Self-sufficiency of the Church in Georgia remains a concern given the significant setbacks experienced in the late 2000s following the removal of foreign, full-time missionaries.

- [1] "Background Note: Georgia," US Department of State, 21 June 2010. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/5253.htm>
- [2] "Georgia," International Religious Freedom Report 2009, 26 October 2009. <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2009/127311.htm>
- [3] "2018 Report on International Religious Freedom: Georgia." U.S. Department of State. 21 June 2019. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-report-on-international-religious-freedom/georgia/>
- [4] "2018 Report on International Religious Freedom: Georgia." U.S. Department of State. 21 June 2019. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-report-on-international-religious-freedom/georgia/>
- [5] "Gospel taking root in Republic of Georgia," LDS Church News, 25 November 2006. <http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/49785/Gospel-taking-root-in-Republic-of-Georgia.html>
- [6] "First branch created in Republic of Georgia," LDS Church News, 10 August 2002. <http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/42262/First-branch-created-in-Republic-of-Georgia.html>
- [7] Wrigley, Heather Whittle. "Saints Hear Conference in Georgian for First Time." Church News. 14 October 2011. <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/church/news/saints-hear-conference-in-georgian-for-first-time?lang=eng>
- [8] "First branch created in Republic of Georgia," LDS Church News, 10 August 2002. <http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/42262/First-branch-created-in-Republic-of-Georgia.html>
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- [11] "Slow LDS Growth in the Republic of Georgia." www.cumorah.com. 12 August 2014. https://www.cumorah.com/index.php?target=view_case_studies&story_id=377&cat_id=2
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- [13] "First Presidency Letter." www.churchofjesuschrist.org. 9 October 2017. https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/bc/content/ldsorg/church/news/2017/10/09/15159_000_letter.pdf?lang=eng
- [14] "Where We Work." Latter-day Saint Charities. Accessed 11 November 2019. <https://www.latterdaysaintcharities.org/where-we-work>
- [15] "Gospel taking root in Republic of Georgia," LDS Church News, 25 November 2006. <http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/49785/Gospel-taking-root-in-Republic-of-Georgia.html>
- [16] "Slow LDS Growth in the Republic of Georgia." www.cumorah.com. 12 August 2014. https://www.cumorah.com/index.php?target=view_case_studies&story_id=377&cat_id=2
- [17] "Gospel taking root in Republic of Georgia," LDS Church News, 25 November 2006. <http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/49785/Gospel-taking-root-in-Republic-of-Georgia.html>