



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.



Panama

Population: 3.61 millions (#131 out of countries)

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Geography

Area: 75,420 square km. Bridging North and South America, Panama occupies the narrow Panama Isthmus and borders Costa Rica and Colombia. The surrounding ocean produces a humid and wet climate with a short dry season. Plains and hills cover most coastal areas whereas rugged mountains dominate the interior. Severe storms and forest fires are natural hazards. Water pollution, deforestation, and soil erosion are environmental issues. Panama is administratively divided into 11 provinces and one territory.

Peoples

Mestizo: 70%

Mestizo and black: 14%

White: 10%

Amerindian: 6%

Mestizos form the majority and are a mixture of Amerindian and white ancestry. Blacks arrived as slaves or migrants from the Caribbean.

History

Amerindian tribes populated the Panama Isthmus for millennia prior to Spanish exploration and settlement in the sixteenth century. The isthmus' central location was strategic to Spain's territorial claims in the New World. In 1821, Panama broke away from Spain and formed a portion of the Republic of Gran Colombia. Following its dissolution in 1830, Panama continued as part of Colombia until independence occurred in 1903. The United States assisted in Panama's independence effort and Panama quickly signed a treaty allowing the construction of the Panama Canal, which included granting sovereignty to the United States

in the Panama Canal Zone. The United States completed the canal in 1914. Increased political instability began in the 1960s and continued into the 1980s. The United States assisted in the removal of dictator Manuel Noriega in 1989. All United States' land holdings in the Panama Canal Zone and military bases returned to Panamanian control by the end of 1999. Expansion of the canal began in 2007 and will be completed in the mid 2010s, possibly doubling its capacity.

Culture

Culture differs on ethnic group and location. Those living in urban locations with ancestry from Europe tend to occupy the highest social classes. Mestizos and educated blacks and Amerindians form the middle class in Panama City and other large cities. Culture in many rural areas reflects the heritage of Africans or Amerindians. A strong sense of worth and interest toward adolescent girls is found nationwide. Amerindian groups have their own customs and traditions. Leaders of the Guaymí Indians may practice polygamy. The Kuna are known for their elaborate wood carvings and the remote region where they reside along the Caribbean coast near Colombia. Alcohol consumption rates are comparable to the more developed nations in Latin American, such as Chile and Costa Rica whereas cigarette consumption rates are low. Divorce rates are low.

Economy

GDP per capita: \$13,600 (2011) [28.3% of US]

Human Development Index: 0.768

Corruption Index: 3.3 (2011)

Panama's economy is highly dependent on the operation of the Panama Canal. 29% of the population lives below the poverty line. Wealth is unequally distributed and there is a shortage of skilled labor. Services account for 76% of the GDP and employ 67% of the workforce. Industry employs 18% of the workforce and produces 18% of the GDP. Primary industries include construction, brewing, and cement. Bananas, rice, corn, and coffee are popular crops. Natural resources include copper, lumber, and hydropower. Primary trade partners include the United States, Costa Rica, and the Netherlands.

Drug trafficking and money laundering is a major issue. Panama serves as a transit for illegal drugs - especially cocaine, heroin, and marijuana - leaving the region and launders revenue back to suppliers. Government has sought to address the drug problems but struggles with several accusations of corrupt government officials.[\[1\]](#)

Faiths

Christian: 99%

Other: 1%

Christians

Denominations Members Congregations

Catholic 2,500,000

Seventh Day Adventists 97,984 247

Latter-day Saints 47,427 72

Jehovah's Witnesses 14,188 282

Religion

75-85% of Panamanians are Catholic. Evangelical Christians are the next largest religious group, comprising 15-25% of the population. Catholics are found throughout Panama and are among all levels of society whereas Evangelical Christians are growing in prominence, especially in urban areas.[\[2\]](#)

Religious Freedom

Persecution Index:

The constitution protects religious freedom which is upheld by the government. Catholicism receives some favoritism as most Panamanians are Catholic. Catholicism is taught in public schools, but students can be exempted from religious instruction.[\[3\]](#)

Largest Cities

Urban: 75%

Panamá, San Miguelito, Tocumen, David, Arraiján, Colón, Las Cumbres, La Chorrera, Pacora, Santiago.

All of the 10 largest cities have a congregation. 38% of the population lives in the 10 largest cities.

LDS History

The Church organized the first congregation in 1941 for American military stationed in the Panama Canal Zone. 100 members lived in the country at the time.[\[4\]](#) Panama fell under the jurisdiction of the Mexican Mission until the creation of the Central American Mission in 1952. The Church was not officially recognized by the government until 1965, the year formal missionary work began.[\[5\]](#) Prior to this time some natives had joined the Church. Seminary began in 1964 and institute started in 1973. Panama was included in the San Jose Costa Rica Mission beginning in 1974. North American missionaries were withdrawn for a period in the late 1980s.[\[6\]](#) President Howard W. Hunter dedicated Panama for missionary work in 1991 with 50 in attendance.[\[7\]](#) President Monson and several General Authorities met with the President of Panama and the First Lady following the dedication of the Panama City Panama Temple in 2008.[\[8\]](#)

Membership Growth

LDS Membership: 47,427 (2011)

The Church counted fewer than 2,000 members in the late 1970s. Rapid growth began in the 1980s as membership exceeded 10,000 and doubled to 20,000 by the early 1990s. Membership reached 30,000 in the late 1990s and has increased slowly since 2000. By year-end 2000, membership totaled 37,133, reaching 39,738 in 2003, 41,640 in 2006, and 43,703 in 2008. Growth rates dropped from over three percent in 2001 and 2002, to less than two percent from 2003 through 2006. Since 2007 membership growth rates have increased to a 10-year high of 3.75% in 2009. By 2009, one in every 74 Panamanians was nominally LDS.

Congregational Growth

Wards: 39 Branches: 33 (April 2012)

The first stake was created in Panama City in 1979. Three additional stakes were created in the late 1980s in San Miguelito, David, and Bellavista. The Church created the Panama Panama City Mission in 1989 from the Costa Rica San Jose Mission. In addition to the four stakes, three districts functioned in Chitre, Colon, and San Blas.[\[9\]](#) The Church created three additional stakes between 1995 and 1999 in Colon, San Isidro, and Tocumen. Districts were also organized in Changuinola, Puerto Armuelles, Los Altos de San Francisco, Alcalde Diaz, and Concepcion. By 2001, Panama had seven stakes and eight districts. An eighth stake was created in Arraijan in 2006, and districts were discontinued in Los Altos de San Francisco and Puerto Armuelles in the 2000s. In April 2010, eight stakes and five districts functioned. In 2011, the San Isidro Panama Stake was discontinued and consolidated with neighboring stakes in Panama City.

In 1990, 31 congregations functioned, half of which were wards. The number of congregations increased to 63 in the mid-1990s and reached a high of 112 in 2001. The number of congregations declined to 97 in 2004, 93 in 2007, 78 in 2010, and 72 in early 2012. Branches constituted nearly all the approximately 40 units closed between 2001 and 2011.

Activity and Retention

3,000 attended a visit by President Hinckley in 1997.[\[10\]](#) A nationwide meeting with President Hinckley in late 2000 had 5,000 in attendance.[\[11\]](#) During the 2008-2009 school year, 1,593 were enrolled in seminary or institute. The average number of members per congregation has increased in the 2000s from 342 in 2001 to 482 in 2009, an average increase of 140 members

per congregation. Active membership has not experienced commensurate increase; most congregations have between 50 and 100 active members and hundreds of inactive members. In late 2009, missionaries estimated there were around 5,000 active members. Active membership may be as high as 6,500, and likely ranges from 11% to 14% of total membership.

Language Materials

Languages with LDS Scripture: Spanish, English, Kuna

All LDS scriptures are available in Spanish, including an LDS version of the Bible. Only selections from the Book of Mormon have been translated in Kuna. Other church materials in Kuna include The Prophet Joseph Smith's Testimony, Gospel Principles, the Articles of Faith, hymns and children's songs, and a family guidebook.

Meetinghouses

The first Church-built meetinghouse was completed in 1970 on Ustopo Island in the San Blas Islands.[\[12\]](#) There were approximately 60 LDS meetinghouses in early 2011, most of which were built by the Church.

Humanitarian and Development Work

In 2006, the Church donated 100 specialized wheelchairs to children with cerebral palsy. Members in the Panama City area also provided volunteers to work on the project.[\[13\]](#) Additional humanitarian and development projects have included emergency aid for flood victims, toy and school kit donations for children, building a school in San Jose, donations of medical equipment, and a clean water project.[\[14\]](#)

Opportunities, Challenges and Prospects

Religious Freedom

The Church enjoys positive relations with the government. There are no laws or policies which limit proselytism, and full-time missionaries serve freely.

Cultural Issues

Many cultural practices and customs create a favorable environment for missionary work. Illegal activity in some urban areas has likely reduced the receptivity of some to the Church's message. The white population appears the most challenging ethnic group to reach due to socio-economic and cultural issues, secularism, and materialism. The wide range of cultures in Panama creates additional demands on church leaders.

National Outreach

Nine of the twelve administrative provinces or territories have a congregation, representing 93% of Panama's population. Half of the population lives in Panama Province, which has been the foremost target of mission outreach. Three provinces have only one congregation, including Los Santos (Las Tablas), Herrera (Chitré), and Veraguas (Santiago). Approximately half a million people, comprising 14% of the national population, live in these provinces. The church has consolidated congregations in Los Santos and Herrera, possibly indicating a reduction in mission outreach in these provinces.

Three provinces have no mission outreach. Ngöbe-Buglé Province - with over 100,000 inhabitants and located in western Panama - had no congregations as of April 2010 and likely has never had mission outreach due to its remote location and high concentration of Guaymí Amerindians. The other two provinces, Darien and Emberá, have a combined 50,000 people in far eastern Panama. Unreached provinces provide opportunity for greater growth and are large regions which have not yet had the gospel preached. However mission outreach with full-time missionaries is most simple and efficient in urban areas and provinces with a church presence, drawing away limited resources from remote unreached areas with small populations. Missionary work has been limited among many Christian groups in eastern Panama due to drug violence spilling over the border from Colombia.

Almost all cities with over 10,000 inhabitants have a congregation. Several large cities have no congregations but received limited outreach from nearby cities with an outreach center. The small populations of many towns and villages far from large cities are unreached by the Church's mission efforts. These locations are often effectively reached through cottage meetings,

groups, or dependent branches which utilize local members who share their beliefs with family and friends. The flexible structure of these organizations allows the Church to more quickly adapt to concentrated areas of receptivity. It is unclear whether the Panama Panama City Mission uses this proselytism approach regularly. Expanding national outreach may be a challenge due to overreliance of members on missionaries, requiring missionaries to conduct administrative and reactivation work.

Member Activity and Convert Retention

The withdrawal of full-time North American missionaries in the late 1980s allowed for greater mission responsibilities to be placed on local members.^[15] The consolidation of nearly four dozen congregations in the past decade likely indicates that activity rates in these units were too low to justify their continued operation. The large increase in the ratio of members to congregations during the 2000s points to poor convert retention and inadequate local leadership development for the creation of new units. Quick-baptism practices are a major cause for low member retention.

Ethnic Issues and Integration

The Church experienced limited mission outreach and few, if any, converts from the black minority prior to 1978. The Church likely faces a greater challenge integrating members from different socio-economic classes than integrating members from multiple ethnic groups into the same congregation. Relations between Amerindian members and other members are likely the most strained due to greater differences in language and culture than with other groups. Breakthroughs with other Amerindian groups have not occurred since the rapid growth among the Kuna in the 1970s and 1980s.

Language Issues

The widespread use of Spanish simplifies outreach to the majority. English speakers often use Spanish as a second language in church meetings and may not meet in large enough numbers to justify the creation of English-speaking units. The use of English in Panama appears to be more vernacular than in most other Central American nations, likely discouraging pursuit of greater English language usage in worship services. Language materials in Kuna have come as a result of success among the Kuna people early in the Church's history in Panama.

Some Amerindian groups have no church materials in the native language. Ngabere is the largest, with over 100,000 speakers, without available Church materials. The Church has not translated Church materials into Ngabere due to the likely few Ngabere-speaking members being proficient in Spanish and the lack of any mission outreach in Ngöbe-Buglé Province where many Guaymí reside. The New Testament is available in Ngabere.

Missionary Service

177 missionaries were serving in Panama in early 1997.^[16] In 2008, nearly 200 missionaries were serving in Panama.^[17] In recent years, the full-time missionary force has primarily consisted of Latin Americans, but North American missionaries remain a large minority.

Leadership

Local leadership in stakes has been successfully developed despite limited numbers of active members. Only on a few occasions have church employees held stake leadership positions, particularly in the past decade. In 1992, when membership growth was most rapid, stake reorganizations for the Panama City Panama^[18] and San Miguelito Stakes had no church employees in leadership positions.^[19] Local leadership appears most limited in rural areas where small congregations operate. Developing leadership in the Panama City area appears challenging as the number of leadership positions has decreased in the past decade from the consolidation of several congregations, yet the number of potential priesthood leaders has increased as membership continued to grow. The closure of the San Isidro Panam Stake also points toward poor local leadership sustainability and low member activity rates. Missionaries appear to rarely serve as branch presidents.

Panamanian members have served in international Church leadership positions. In 1992, Jose Antonio Garcia became a regional representative.^[20] In 1999, Jose A. Garcia began serving as mission president of the Chile Osorno Mission^[21] and was called as an Area Authority Seventy in 2003.^[22] In 2006, Rene Arturo Martinez began serving as a mission president in Bogota, Colombia.^[23]

Temple

Panama is assigned to the Panama City Panama Temple district. Prior to the completion of the temple in 2008, Panama pertained to the San Jose Costa Rica Temple district. In 2000, President Hinckley promised members that if they pay their tithing and keep other commandments a temple would be built in Panama despite an insufficient amount of tithing paid by local

members to fund a temple's construction.^[24] The Panama City Panama Temple was announced in 2002 and construction began in 2005. Following the dedication, as many as half a dozen endowment sessions were scheduled during weekdays. In 2010, four endowment sessions occurred on weekdays and sessions were held every hour from 7:00 AM to 2:00 PM. The temple appears well-utilized by the small active membership in Panama on the weekends but functions well under capacity on weekdays.

Comparative Growth

Panama experiences one of the lowest member activity rates worldwide as between 85-90% of nominal members do not attend church regularly. Activity rates for most Latin American nations range from 20-30%. Panama numbers among the countries with the most congregations closed during the 2000s and early 2010s. Nominal membership growth has occurred less rapidly than most other Spanish-speaking Central American nations. Only Costa Rica had fewer members in 2009. Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador had a lower ratio of nominal LDS to the population than Panama in the late 2000s. The Church began organized proselytism in Panama at the same time as in Costa Rica, yet in early 2010 Panama had three more stakes, 11 more congregations, and 7,000 more members. Panama was the third nation in Central American to have a temple built, prior to nations with many more members and congregations like Honduras and El Salvador. The extent of national outreach in Panama is comparable to most of Central America.

Many Christian groups have seen more rapid growth than the LDS Church in Panama. Seventh Day Adventists have twice as many members and more than double the number of congregations. Evangelical Christians have continued to see rapid growth over the past 50 years. These Christian groups have utilized church planting approaches in rural areas, maintain outreach among Amerindian groups, and have successfully developed located leadership.

Future Prospects

The outlook for future growth is moderate as the Church has established outreach centers near many small cities and towns which in the future may have their own congregations. However the steady decline in congregations over the past decade combined with increasing membership indicates that convert retention and low member activity are persistent concerns. Currently unreached areas of Panama will likely remain without mission outreach until larger numbers of mature members and recent converts take greater responsibility to lead congregations and remain active with less reliance on full-time missionaries. Some districts may mature into stakes in the near future, particularly Alcalde Diaz but some stakes may be consolidated. Prospects appear favorable for the creation of additional small branches in communities on the outskirts of Panama City once convert retention issues are rectified sufficiently.

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