

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.



Estonia

Population: 1.26 millions (#158 out of countries)

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Geography

Area: 45,228 square km. Estonia is in Eastern Europe and borders Russia, Latvia, and the Baltic Sea. More than 1,500 small islands in the Baltic Sea belong to Estonia; Hiiumaa and Saaremaa are the largest. The maritime climate creates cool summers and moderate winters. Terrain primarily consists of plains, marshes, and lowlands with some hills in the south. There are some forested areas whereas grassland and farmland cover most the country. Natural hazards include periodic spring flooding. Air and water pollution are environmental issues. Estonia is divided into fifteen administrative counties.

Peoples

Estonian: 68.7%

Russian: 24.8%

Ukrainian: 1.7%

Belarusian: 1.0%

Finn: 0.6%

Other: 1.6%

Unspecified: 1.6%

Estonians form the largest ethnic group. Russians tend to live in Tallinn, other large cities, or Ida-Viru County in the east bordering Russia.

Population: 1,244,288 (July 2018)

Annual Growth Rate: -0.60% (2018)

Fertility Rate: 1.6 children born per woman (2018)

Life Expectancy: 72.3 male, 82.0 female (2018)

Languages: Estonian (68.5%), Russian (29.6%), Ukrainian (0.6%), other (1.2%), unspecified (0.1%). Estonian is the official language. Approximately 85% of the population speaks Russian as a first or second language.

Literacy: 99.8% (2015)

History

Various Baltic tribes and neighboring peoples populated Estonia in antiquity. In the Middle Ages, the area was divided among several different political powers until integration into the Holy Roman Empire in the early thirteenth century. Prior to independence in 1918, Estonia was controlled by several neighboring nations for centuries, including Denmark, Sweden, Germany, and Russia. In 1940, the USSR annexed Estonia. Independence was regained in 1991, and the last Russian troops left in 1994. In 2004, Estonia joined NATO and the European Union. Estonia became a euro zone member in 2011. Estonia maintains close economic and political ties to Scandinavia and Western Europe.

Culture

Estonia draws upon cultural influences from Eastern Europe, Central Europe, and Scandinavia. The Estonian language is closely related to Finnish. Most consider Estonians to be quiet and to maintain distance from those around them. Saunas have been in use for centuries. There is a proud tradition of art, literature, and music. Family is traditional in structure.[1] Common cuisine consists of black bread, dairy products, potatoes, and pork. Cigarette consumption rates are comparable to Western Europe and alcohol consumption rates are comparable to the United States. Divorce rates are high and comparable to other Eastern European countries.

Economy

GDP per capita: $31,700 (2017) [53% of U.S.]

Human Development Index: 0.871 (2017)

Corruption Index: 71 (2017)

Estonia experienced consistent economic growth in the 1990s and 2000s as a result of market-based economic policy. Telecommunications and electronics are strong industries. GDP per capital is among the highest in Eastern Europe, yet 21.1% of the population was estimated to live below the poverty line in 2016. The worldwide financial crisis in the late 2000s resulted in a 14% drop in GDP per capita during 2009. Unemployment has also rapidly increased during this time period from 5.7% to 14.3%. However, unemployment in 2017 was estimated at only 5.8%. Estonia currently faces a shortage of skilled and unskilled workers. Services employ 76.8% of the workforce and produce 68.1% of the GDP, whereas industry accounts for 20.5% of the workforce and produces 29.2% of the GDP. Lead industries include food, engineering, electronics, and wood products. Potatoes, vegetables, livestock, and fish are agriculture products. Primary export partners include Finland, Sweden, Germany, and nearby Eastern European nations.

Estonia enjoys the lowest rate of corruption among former Soviet republics. Corruption rates are comparable to some developed nations like France and Japan.

Faiths

None: 54.1%

Christian: 28.3%

Other: 0.9%

Unspecified: 16.7%

Christians

Denominations – Members – Congregations

Evangelical Lutheran – 180,000

Estonian Orthodox – 180,000

Estonian Apostolic – 30,000

Roman Catholic – 6,000

Union of Free Evangelical and Baptist Churches of Estonia – 6,000

Jehovah's Witnesses – 4,053 – 56

Seventh Day Adventists – 1,480 – 19

Latter-day Saints – 1,133 – 4

Religion

Christians are the largest religious group but account for less than a third of the population, and many are not active in their faith. Most Estonians have little involvement with religion. A Gallup poll in February 2009 asked individuals whether religion was important to them in everyday life, and only 14% responded in the affirmative.[2] There are 2,500 Jews and 1,500 Muslims.[3]

Religious Freedom

The constitution protects religious freedom, and government upholds this right. Registered congregations must have at least twelve adult members and a management board.[4] Estonia exhibits strong tolerance for differing religious groups.[5]

Largest Cities

Urban: 68.9%

Tallinn, Tartu, Narva, Parnu, **Kohtla-Jarve**, **Viljandi, Rakvere, Maardu, Kuressaare, Sillamae.**

Cities in **bold** do not have congregations of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Four of the ten largest cities have a Church congregation. Fifty-five percent (55%) of the population lives in the ten largest cities.

Church History

The first Estonians joined the Church as early as 1951 outside their homeland.[6] The first Estonian members living in Estonia joined the Church in 1989 and were baptized in Finland. Valtteri Rotsa was baptized in July and returned to Estonia with Church literature and shared his newly found faith with friends and associates. The first baptism in Estonia occurred in December 1989, and the first branch was organized in 1990 for Russian and Estonian speakers. The Church gained formal recognition in June 1990. The first missionary called from Estonia was at the time the first missionary called from the Soviet Union who began serving in January 1991.[7] In 1990, there were approximately fifty members in Tallinn.[8] By May 1991, there were two congregations in Tallinn—one for Estonian speakers and one for Russian speakers—which had a combined 130 members. Missionary activity was supervised by the Finland Helsinki East Mission until the creation of the Russia St. Petersburg Mission in early 1992.[9] Estonia joined the Latvia Riga Mission in 1993. At the time there was a combined 150 members in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.[10] The Latvia Riga Mission was renamed the Lithuania Vilnius Mission in 1996 and later renamed the Baltic Mission in 2002. Estonia became part of the Europe East Area in 2000.

Membership Growth

Church Membership: 1,133 (2017)

During the mid-1990s membership stood around 200 and climbed to 551 by year-end 2000. Membership reached 751 in 2005, 1,010 in 2009, 1,106 in 2014, and 1,146 in 2016. Annual membership growth rates have slowed dramatically from 4-10% for most years prior to 2010, to 0-2% for most years in the 2010s. In the mid-2010s, local members reported that there were many Estonian and Russian families with young children who were born to temple-married parents. In the late 2010s, there was a significant surge in births in Latter-day Saint families.

In 2017, one in 1,105 was a Latter-day Saint.

Congregational Growth

Branches: 4 (2018)

By the end of 1991, there were two Estonian-speaking branches and one Russian-speaking branch in Tallinn. Tartu opened for missionary work in September 1991. By 1997, only one Estonian branch functioned in Tallinn.[11] The Tallinn Estonia District was organized in late 1997. There were three branches by year-end 2000: two in Tallinn and one in Tartu.

In March 2000, Narva was opened to missionary work.[12] A branch was organized in 2001. Estonian and Russian branches in Tallinn were combined in 2003 and separated in 2006. In 2008, a branch was created in Parnu, bringing the total of branches to five. In late 2009, the city of Keila opened for missionary work. In early 2013, mission leaders consolidated the two branches in Tallinn into a single branch.

Activity and Retention

In 1999, approximately 180 attended sacrament meeting in Estonia. In 2000, 200 youth throughout the Baltic States traveled to Lithuania for a youth conference.[13] In 2009, over 400 throughout the Baltic States attended a fireside with Elder L. Tom Perry in Latvia.[14] Sixty-five young single adults from Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania met in Riga, Latvia in March 2010 for a young single adult conference. Between 2009 and 2010, the Tartu Branch had between forty and fifty attending Sunday meetings. Attendance grew from less than ten members to current levels during a nine-month period in the late 2000s.[15] In 2009, the Narva Branch had less than twenty attending meetings. In March 2010, the Parnu Branch had thirty-five attending church weekly—nearly double Church attendance in January 2009—whereas there were eighty-seven members on the branch records. One of the Tallinn Branches had 80-100 people attending weekly in mid-2009. Forty-two were enrolled in seminary or institute during the 2008–2009 school year. The 2011 census counted only 185 self-identified Latter-day Saints nationwide.[16]

The number of converts baptized in Estonia significantly decreased in the 2010s, but convert retention rates have risen. In the mid-2010s, several returned missionaries estimated that half of new converts remained active one year after baptism. In the late 2010s, all five recent converts within a twelve-month period remained active. However, there were only five converts for the entire country of Estonia during this period. At the time, sacrament meeting attendance was approximately fifteen in the Narva Branch, thirty in the Parnu Branch, thirty-five in the Tartu Branch, and 100 in the Tallinn Branch. Member activity rates appear around 15-20% for all branches except Parnu which appears around 25-30%.

Nationwide active membership likely stands around 180-200, or 15-20% of total membership.

Language Materials

Languages with LDS Scripture: Estonian, Russian.

All Latter-day Saint scriptures and most church materials are translated into Estonian and Russian. Translations of General Conference talks in Estonian began in 1996, and the first Estonian edition of the Liahona was published in 1999. The Book of Mormon translation in Estonian became available in 2000. The Liahona magazine has two issues in Estonian and twelve in Russian a year.

Meetinghouses

The first and only Church-built meetinghouse was completed in late 1999 in Tallinn. A major expansion of the Tallinn Branch meetinghouse was underway in 2018 to provide more classroom space to accommodate Russian, Estonian, and English speakers. Congregations outside of Tallinn meet in renovated buildings or rented spaces.

Humanitarian and Development Work

The Church has conducted sixty humanitarian and development projects in Estonia since 1985.[17] Food was donated by the

Church to needy members in Estonia and Russia in 1991.[18] Food shipments continued from the Europe Area in 1992.[19]

Opportunities, Challenges, and Prospects

Religious Freedom

Missionaries may openly proselyte. Government has not restricted Church activities. The Church may face some obstacles in registering small congregations with fewer than twelve members.

Cultural Issues

Secularism and atheism are the greatest barriers to mission outreach. Most Estonians do not consider religion an important aspect of everyday life and have become increasingly more secular due to Soviet occupation during much of the twentieth century and increasing materialism during the 2000s and 2010s. Returned missionaries report that the Church has a negative reputation as a small, cult-like denomination and is often confused with Jehovah's Witnesses. Moderate to high rates of cigarette and alcohol use present barriers for many prospective members and contribute to convert relapse when substance addictions have not been fully overcome. Youth and young adults are more receptive to full-time missionary efforts than the older population.

The Church has benefited from the strong Estonian ties to Scandinavia and Central Europe, as there is greater tolerance for other religious groups. This has likely increased receptiveness to the Church as indicated by the relatively high percentage of nominal Latter-day Saints compared to the rest of Eastern Europe.

National Outreach

The Church has established outreach centers in cities that account for 47% of the national population. Missionaries serve in four of Estonian's fifteen administrative counties, which are home to 73% of the national population. Rural areas distant from the largest cities are the most challenging for mission outreach due to their small populations and remote locations.

Larger cities within counties possessing current outreach centers appear likely for future mission efforts. The opening of Keila to missionary work in late 2009 was the first full-time missionary effort in a city with fewer than 10,000 inhabitants. However, these efforts were short-lived and resulted in no permanent Church establishment. There are nearly eighty cities with 1,000 to 10,000 inhabitants without congregations. Large cities in unreached counties also appear likely candidates for active missionary efforts. Additional cities will likely only open once active members living in these locations facilitate the development of the Church's basic organization and infrastructure.

The Church maintains an official website for Estonia in Estonian at http://www.jeesusekristusekirik.ee/. The Church also publishes many of its Estonian materials on www.lds.org. These websites permit Estonians to investigate the Church in locations with and without mission outreach and to request additional information. There is also a Mormon Newsroom website in Estonian at: https://www.mormoonideuudised.ee/. However, the Church has yet to translate www.mormon.org into Estonian.

Member Activity and Convert Retention

Member activity and convert retention has been poor over the past two decades as evidenced by membership more than tripling, whereas sacrament attendance has not noticeably increased. Although convert retention rates have significantly improved in recent years, the number of converts has been too few to noticeably increase church attendance. Low member participation led to the closure of the second Estonian-speaking branch in Tallinn in 1997 and the consolidation of the Russian and Estonian branches in Tallinn in 2013. Missionaries have served in Narva nearly two decades, yet active membership remains very small. Tactics of missionaries baptizing investigators who have not made necessary life changes in firmly establishing positive gospel habits and fully overcoming negative behaviors, as well as language and cultural issues, appear the greatest contributors to member inactivity and convert retention problems.

In the late 2000s, the Estonian-speaking Tallinn 1st Branch was regarded as one of the best functioning congregations in the Baltic States. The branch had a full branch presidency and Estonian youth passing the sacrament, uncommon characteristics for much of Eastern Europe. There were also several member families in the branch. Close associations between active members may pose challenges for new converts to integrate into the congregation.

Future growth and improved member activity will largely depend on Estonian members serving missions and participating in member-missionary work. In 2009, a senior missionary couple from the United States served in Tartu and Parnu. The wife was

Estonian and fled to Sweden in 1944 and later immigrated to the United States, where she married an American. The senior couple greatly facilitated the growth in these two cities, especially by increasing sacrament attendance. [20] Native Estonian couples and young local missionaries may outperform foreign missionaries in some ways. However, interest appears low as recently returned full-time missionaries note a lack of member involvement in finding and teaching interested individuals. Outreach among youth is challenging, as adults account for the bulk of membership. Missionaries report challenges in fellowshipping youth investigators, as they often lose interest the Church with few active members with whom to associate.

Ethnic Issues and Integration

Estonians and Russians compose 93.5% of the population. Integrating these two ethnic groups into the same congregation poses difficulties due to language barriers, historical conflict, and ongoing political tensions. Some cultural differences with etiquette and social attitudes may hamper greater cooperation and understanding between these two ethnicities in an ecclesiastical and social setting. Despite these challenges, the Church in Tallinn has appeared able to keep both Estonian and Russian members active

Language Issues

The large number of Russian speakers in the predominantly Estonian-speaking population challenges mission efforts for both language groups. In Tallinn, membership has been large enough to justify a Russian-speaking congregation at times, whereas in other locations, congregations must accommodate speakers of both languages. In Narva, the branch is predominantly Russian-speaking, whereas in Parnu, Estonian is most spoken in Church, although there are several Russian members. Language use in smaller congregations may alternate based on whether Russian or Estonian speakers form the majority of active membership. Shifts in language use in small congregations may pose difficulties for activity and convert retention. In recent years, the Baltic Mission has reported challenges in simultaneously staffing Estonian and Russian-speaking missionaries, as there is a demand for the limited number of Russian-speaking missionaries in Latvia and Lithuania.

Missionary Service

Two districts of full-time missionaries served in Estonia (one Estonian-speaking and one Russian-speaking) in mid-2009. There are very few native Estonian missionaries. Outreach among youth and involvement in regular member-missionary activities may help instill desire for more Estonians to serve missions and lessen reliance on foreign missionaries. Estonia is likely to remain highly dependent on foreign missionaries for many years because of the small number of youth members potentially eligible for missionary service.

Leadership

Estonia benefits from strong local leaders who have served in the Church often for one or two decades but remain limited in numbers. There were fifty men who held the Melchizedek Priesthood in the late 1990s. By the late 2010s, there were 130 Melchizedek Priesthood holders. District conferences usually only have a few male members announced to receive the Melchizedek Priesthood. In early 2010, native branch presidents lead both Tallinn branches and the Tartu Branch, whereas missionaries lead branches in Parnu and Narva. In the 2010s, local members report some progress with the development of local leadership in outlying branches. Developing local leadership in small congregations will promote ensure greater stability and foster long-term growth.

Temple

Estonia pertains to the Finland Helsinki Temple district. Prior to the completion of the temple in 2006, members traveled to the Stockholm Sweden Temple. Temple trips occur regularly. Members benefit from the close proximity of the temple despite the few members who live in Estonia. Finland and Estonia's membership in the European Union facilitates border crossing to attend the temple. Temple and family history work among members has increased in recent years.

Comparative Growth

Estonian has seen growth comparable to Latvia and Lithuania, as all these nations have between 950 and 1,300 members. Estonia has the highest percentage of Latter-day Saints in the national population among the Baltic States. Member activity rates in Estonia are slightly lower than in Latvia or Lithuania. Membership and congregation growth have been stagnant for many years.

Other Christian groups report little growth. The Seventh-Day Adventist Church and Jehovah's Witnesses have reported slight decreases in the number of members and essentially stagnant congregational growth. However, these groups report substantially higher total membership and ten times as many congregations as The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Most Christian groups appear to have had better development of local leadership and member participation than the Church, likely because these groups have been less reliant on foreign missionaries, have better mobilized member-missionary outreach,

or have operated in Estonia longer than the Church.

Future Prospects

The future outlook for growth in Estonia appears mildly positive as church attendance has remained constant despite recent declines in membership among other proselytism-focused groups. Furthermore, convert retention rates in the past few years have significantly improved albeit there have been extremely few converts during this time. Local members also report progress with larger numbers of children born into the Church in Latter-day Saint families who have parents married in the temple. However, there are concerns with youth and young adults who leave Estonia to study abroad at BYU in the United States and do not return to their homeland once they finish their degrees.

A lack of progress in regards to the expansion of the Church into additional cities suggests ongoing problems with stagnant membership and congregational growth trends for the foreseeable future. The Church has primarily focused its missionary efforts on the four most populous cities where all of the Church's branches operate. Recent efforts to open additional locations to missionary work have been denied by area leadership, likely due to difficulties with a lack of active members in branches outside of Tallinn. Due to its large population and proximity to Narva and Tallinn, Kohtla-Jarve appears a likely candidate for future mission outreach. The vision of a future stake for Estonia appears unlikely to come to fruition within the next three decades, as total and active membership numbers and present real growth rates are too low to support a stake. Small family size among existing members, the low number of active youth members, low member involvement in finding and teaching prospective members, and small cohort of future missionaries pose challenges for the goal of the church becoming self-sustaining and self-perpetuating in Estonia.

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