



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.



Italy

Population: 61.68 millions (#24 out of countries)

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Geography

Area: 301,340 square km. Located in Southern Europe, Italy consists of a peninsula stretching into the Mediterranean Sea, along with Sicily, Sardinia, and many small islands in the surrounding ocean. Italy borders France, Switzerland, Austria, and Slovenia and surrounds the city-states of San Marino and Vatican City. Most areas experience a Mediterranean climate, whereas extreme northern areas in the Alps are subject to a cold alpine climate, and southern areas have a hot, dry climate. Mountains and hills cover most areas. Natural hazards vary by region and include landslides, avalanches, earthquakes, flooding, volcanic eruptions, and land subsidence. Air and water pollution, acid rain, and waste water treatment are environmental issues. Italy is administratively divided into fifteen regions and five autonomous regions.

Peoples

Italian: 92.5%

Other European: 4%

North African: 2%

Other: 1.5%

The population is predominantly Italian with regional differences in culture and language. There are large numbers of North African, African, and Chinese immigrants or transient workers.

Population: 62,402,659 (July 2020)

Annual Growth Rate: 0.11% (2020)

Fertility Rate: 1.47 children born per woman (2020)

Life Expectancy: 79.8 male, 85.3 female (2020)

Languages: Italian (94.5%), other (5.5%). Italian is spoken by most of the population and the official language. German, French, and Slovene are regional languages. Historical languages with over one million speakers include Napoletano-Calabrese (5.7 million), Sicilian (4.7 million), Venetian (3.8 million), Lombard (3.6 million), and Sardinian dialects (1.2 million). Many of these languages have limited use due to standardization of the Italian language throughout the country.

Literacy: 99.2% (2018)

History

Various ancient civilizations settled the Italian Peninsula prior to the founding of the Roman Empire that at its height stretched from central Europe and Britain in the north to Mesopotamia to the east and to North Africa in the south. In the third century, the Roman Empire divided, and the Western Roman Empire eventually divided into small city states due to Gothic invasions. The Byzantine Empire annexed Italy in the sixth century but was unable to maintain control. In the Middle Ages, the Maritime Republics—Venice, Genoa, Pisa, and Amalfi—operated as centers of trade and development. The Italian city-states of Florence, Milan, and Venice played a central role in the Renaissance in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Spain conquered much of Italy in the sixteenth century and retained control of much of the peninsula until these possessions were ceded to Austria in the War of Spanish Succession culminating in the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713. An independence and unification movement began in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The Kingdom of Sardinia-Piedmont united Italy in the 1850s following favorable referendums in Parma, Modena, Tuscany, and Romagna and military annexation of the Two Sicilies in 1861. Milan, Venice, Brescia, Bergamo, Padua, and other regions were added following a military alliance with Prussia against the Austrians in 1866. Benito Mussolini came to power in the 1920s under a Fascist dictatorship that later allied with Nazi Germany in World War II. In 1946, a democratic republic was established that played a central role in the establishment of NATO and the European Economic Community, which later become the European Union. Northern Italy has grown increasingly more prosperous, whereas southern Italy faces many societal problems, including low incomes and a lack of economic development.

Culture

Italian music, cuisine, art, law, and language have significantly influenced the world for centuries. Renaissance masterpieces continue to captivate and excite audiences around the world. The rich history of Italy draws millions of tourists annually. The Catholic Church claims the largest membership of any Christian denomination and is headquartered in Vatican City, a small city-state in Rome. Catholicism continues to shape cultural attitudes although secularism has increased. Alcohol consumption rates compare to the United States and cigarette consumption rates are similar to many Western European nations.

Economy

GDP per capita: \$38,200 (2017) [63.9% of U.S.]

Human Development Index: 0.883 (2018)

Corruption Index: 53 (2019)

Wages and the distribution of wealth compare to other Western European nations. A productive, industrialized north stabilizes the economy and accounts for much of the economic growth and development over the past several decades. Southern regions tend to have high unemployment and an agricultural-based economy. High public debt, which exceeds Italy's GDP, remains a major deterrent for greater economic growth. Services produce 73.9% of the GDP and employ 67.8% of the workforce, whereas industry accounts for 23.9% of the GDP and employs 28.3% of the workforce. Primary industries include tourism, machinery,

iron and steel, food processing, and clothing. Fruits, vegetables, and potatoes are major agricultural products. Major trade partners include Germany, France, Spain, the United States, and China.

Italy suffers from high levels of corruption among the European Union. Illegal economic activity may account as much as 17% of the GDP. Organized crime, particularly in southern Italy and Sicily, is a major problem. Italy is a common destination or thoroughfare for migrants from Africa and the Middle East. Many illicit drugs destined for the rest of Europe travel through Italy.

Faiths

Christian: 85.1%

Muslim: 3.7%

Unaffiliated/Other: 11.2%

Christians

Denominations – Members – Congregations

Roman Catholic – 50,250,000

Evangelicals – 632,714

Jehovah's Witnesses – 251,303 – 2,892

Orthodox – 120,000

Latter-day Saints – 27,486 – 95

Seventh Day Adventists – 9,374 – 128

Religion

Although 87% of native Italians claim membership in the Catholic Church, only about 20% of Catholics attend regularly. Non-Catholic Christians account for about 5% of the population. Non-Christians primarily include Muslims, Jews, and Hindus.^[1] Many non-Catholics are foreign residents.

Religious Freedom

The constitution protects religious freedom, which is usually upheld by the government. There is no state religion, but the Catholic Church receives special treatment due to historical and cultural ties. Catholic holidays are recognized as national holidays. Religious groups must obtain an intesa (accord) from the government to perform marriages, allow clergy access to government installations to visit church members, and state funding if requested. The twelve groups with accords include the Confederation of Methodist and Waldensian Churches, Seventh-Day Adventists, Assemblies of God, Jews, Baptists, Lutherans, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Orthodox Church of the Constantinople Patriarchate, the Italian Apostolic

Church, the Buddhist Union, Soka Gakkai Buddhists, and Hindus. All religious groups may worship freely. Societal abuses of religious freedom are primarily directed towards Muslims and Jews.[\[2\]](#)

Largest Cities

Urban: 71% (2020)

Rome, Milano, Napoli, Torino, Palermo, Genova, Bologna, Florence, Bari, Catania, Venice, Verona, Messina, Padova, Trieste, Brescia, Taranto, **Parma**, Prato, Modena, Reggio di Calabria, Reggio nell'Emilia, Perugia, Livorno, Ravenna, Cagliari, Foggia, Rimini, Salerno, Ferrara, Sassari, **Latina**, Giugliano in Campania, Monza, Bergamo, Siracusa, Pescara, Trento, Forlì, Vicenza, Terni, Bolzano, **Novara**, Piacenza, Ancona.

Cities listed in **bold** have no congregation (i.e. ward, branch, or member group) of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

Forty-two of the forty-five cities with over 100,000 inhabitants have a Latter-day Saint congregation. Twenty-three percent (23%) of the national population lives in the forty-five largest cities.

Latter-day Saint History

The first missionaries, including Elder Lorenzo Snow, arrived on the Italian Peninsula in 1850. Preliminary missionary efforts were concentrated in the Piedmont Valley among French Protestants. By 1855, sixty-four members lived in Italy, and fifty members had immigrated to the United States. Government restrictions and persecution limited the Church's presence and outreach for more than a century until permission was granted in 1966 to restart missionary work. In 1966, the first congregation was organized in Brescia, and the Italian Mission was organized in Florence. Seminary and institute began in 1969 and 1974, respectively. A second mission was organized in northern Italy in 1971, later becoming the Italy Milan Mission. Two additional missions opened in Padova (1975) and Catania (1977). The Italy Padova Mission was discontinued in 1982, reopened in 1990, and discontinued again in 2002. The Church achieved formal legal status in 1993.[\[3\]](#) The Church announced a temple for Rome in 2008. In 2010, the Italy Catania Mission was consolidated into the Italy Rome Mission, reducing the number of missions to two. The Church received the highest level of government recognition in May 2010. In 2019, the Church dedicated the Rome Italy Temple with all fifteen members of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and the First Presidency present.[\[4\]](#) Church President Russell M. Nelson described the dedication as “a hinge point in the history of the Church” given the city's historical significance in Christianity.[\[5\]](#) Additionally, President Nelson also became the first President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to meet with the pope of the Roman Catholic Church during his trip to dedicate the Rome Italy Temple.[\[6\]](#)

Membership Growth

Church Membership: 27,486 (2019)

In 1967, there were sixty-six members. Church membership reached 2,307 in 1972.[\[7\]](#) By the late 1970s, membership numbered approximately 5,000. The most rapid growth occurred between the late 1970s and late 1980s. By 1985, membership more than doubled to 12,000 and increased to 16,000 by the mid-1990s. By 2000, there were 19,188 members. During the 2000s and 2010s, the Church added between 200 and 700 members a year. Membership reached 21,791 in 2005, 23,976 in 2010, 26,248 in 2015, and 27,486 in 2019. Annual membership growth rates have ranged between 1% and 3.5% in the past two decades.

In 2019, one in 2,268 was a member on Church records.

Congregational Growth

Wards: 62 Branches: 33 Groups: 7? (May 2020)

The Italy District was organized under the Swiss Mission in 1964.^[8] In 1967, there were nine congregations, seven of which had both Italian and American military servicemen.^[9] There were 27 branches that met in 21 cities in Italy as of mid-1973, including Brindisi (2), Naples (2), Pisa (2), Rome (2), Torino (2), Aviano, Bari, Brescia, Florence, Genova, Lecce, Livorno, Milan, Modena, Padova, Salerno, Siena, Taranto, Trieste, Venice, and Verona. The Church organized its first branches in dozens of additional cities later in the 1970s and 1980s.

By 1990, eighty-nine congregations functioned throughout Italy, increasing to a high of 133 at year-end 1999. Total congregations declined in the 2000s to 112 in 2005 and to ninety-nine by 2009. In 2000, there were seventeen wards. With the creation of additional stakes from districts during the 2000s, the number of wards increased to twenty-six in 2005 and thirty-one in 2007. The number of branches sharply declined in the 2000s from 112 in 2000 to eighty-six in 2005. By 2007, there were seventy-one branches. During the 2000s, branches decreased by about fifty, whereas wards increased by twenty. In the 2010s, the number of congregations decreased to ninety-eight in 2011 (forty-six wards, fifty-two branches), increased to 103 congregations in 2013 (fifty-three wards, fifty branches), and then decreased to ninety-five congregations in 2019 (sixty-two wards, thirty-three branches). Cities with the most recently established congregations include Lodi (2008), Valdorno (2013), and Brixen (2016). Cities where the Church closed its only ward or branch in the 2010s include Biella (2011), Castrovillari (2011), Pistoia (2014), Mantua (2016), Varese (2016), Siena (2017), Gela (2018), Savona (2018), Olbia (2018), and Bitonto (2019). In 2020, some of these cities likely had member groups that continued to meet.

In 1981, the Church created the first stake in Milan. A second stake was organized in Venice in 1985 and a third in Puglia in 1997. New stakes were organized in Rome (2005), Alessandria (2007), Verona (2008), Palermo (2010), Milan East (2012), Rome West (2013), and Florence (2014). As a result, the number of stakes increased from three in 1997 to four in 2005, five in 2007, six in 2008, seven in 2010, eight in 2012, nine in 2013, and ten in 2014. The number of districts dropped dramatically as a result of district maturing into stakes. Consequently, the number of districts decreased from sixteen in 1995 to fifteen in 1997, fourteen in 2001, thirteen in 2004, twelve in 2005, ten in 2006, nine in 2007, seven in 2008, six in 2009, five in 2010, three in 2013, one in 2014, and zero in 2016.

Activity and Retention

Member activity and convert retention nationwide appear modest at best. The average congregation has grown from 149 members in 2000 to 223 members in 2009 and 289 members in 2019. In addition to new converts not retained, the increase in the number of members per congregation has resulted from many branches maturing into wards and the consolidation of small branches nearby established Church centers. Nevertheless, the number of members in Italy increased by more than 11,000 between 1991 and 2019 even though the number of congregations was relatively unchanged at ninety-four and ninety-five, respectively, suggesting significant challenges with national outreach expansion and “real growth.” During the 2008–2009 school year, 921 were enrolled in seminary or institute (3.9% of membership). The number of converts baptized per Italian mission has consistently remained between 100 and 300 for the past three decades. Furthermore, convert retention rates one year after baptism have also appeared stable at approximately 50% for the past two decades. Congregations vary widely in active membership with some branches having as few as ten active members and some wards exceeding 150 active members. However, most wards usually have between sixty and 120 active members, whereas most branches usually have fewer than fifty active members. Nationwide active membership is estimated at 7,000, or 25% of total Church-reported membership.

Language Materials

Languages with Latter-day Saint Scripture: Italian, German, French, Slovenian.

All Latter-day Saint scriptures and most Church materials are translated in Italian, German, and French. All Latter-day Saint scriptures and many Church materials are also translated into Slovenian.

Meetinghouses

In the early 1990s, most congregations met in rented facilities.^[10] In 2002, there were 108 church meetinghouses,^[11] which would appear to provide adequate facilities for the 98 congregations currently in operation.

Humanitarian and Development Work

The Church has conducted at least 128 humanitarian and development projects in Italy since 1985—the vast majority of which have been refugee response initiatives.^[12] Few other types of humanitarian projects have occurred due to relative economic prosperity. Service projects are likely limited to local members serving in their communities and full-time missionaries completing weekly service hours.

Opportunities, Challenges, and Prospects

Religious Freedom

The Church enjoys full religious freedom, and missionaries openly proselyte.

Cultural Issues

A historic legacy of Catholicism or minority Protestant groups creates cultural barriers to Latter-day Saint mission outreach. Strong ethno-religious ties between Italians and Catholicism has been a major barrier to many to join the Church due to fear of disapproval by family and friends. Most Italians know very little, if anything, about Latter-day Saints, and there is a significant amount of misinformation about the Church. Latter-day Saints are often misidentified as Jehovah's Witnesses or Amish. The large percentage of nominal but minimally involved Christians creates a challenge for missionaries to instill regular church attendance habits in prospective converts and less active members. Like most of Western and Central Europe, increasing secularism and materialism have been accompanied by decreasing receptivity to proselytism. Many have a background and basic understanding of Christian doctrines, providing a foundation for missionaries to teach doctrines unique to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Moderate cigarette and alcohol consumption rates require extra care for investigators struggling to quit these habits and to ensure that relapse does not occur. Casual attitudes about extra-marital sexual relations also poses challenges for receptivity among many Italians. Mission outreach with full-time missionaries in northern Italy poses challenges due to the high cost of living. High living expenses and low receptivity may make increasing the full-time missionary force unfeasible in some areas. Subsequently, the size of the full-time missionary force in Italy has dramatically decreased since the 1990s.

National Outreach

Twenty-six percent (26%) of the population resides in cities with a ward, branch, or member group. Sixty-eight of the 146 cities with 50,000 or more inhabitants have a Church presence (47%). There are only four cities with more than 100,000 people without a ward, branch, or known member group (Parma, Latina, Giugliano in Campania, and Novara; Parma and Novara used to have branches). The Church has closed its only branch in approximately 1-2 dozen cities within the past two decades largely in an effort to augment the number of active members in retained congregations to organize wards and stakes. However, the percentage of the population that resides in locations with a ward or branch has decreased by as much as several percentage points in the past decade due to this contraction in outreach. A district once functioned in Pescara with four branches and was consolidated with the stake in Rome. In 2001, two districts and twelve branches and operated in Tuscany. In May 2020, there was one stake with four wards and two branches in the region. There were seven branches in Sardinia in 2001, whereas there were only two wards and one branch on the island in 2020. Despite full-time missionaries proselytizing for over four decades, some provinces or autonomous regions remain without congregations. Aosta Valley, Molise, and Basilicata have a combined

population of over one million (2% of the national population) but no Latter-day Saint congregations. It does not appear that congregations have ever functioned in these locations. The majority of the unreached population resides in medium-sized cities and towns in provinces or autonomous regions with several Church outreach centers.

Some innovative mission outreach has occurred. In 1995, missionaries in Ascoli Piceno held a forty-five-minute long weekly radio program that discussed basic gospel principles. At the time, the branch in Ascoli Piceno had eleven members.^[13] The Church maintains an Internet site for Italy at <http://www.chiesadigesucristo.it/>. The site provides local news, information on Church doctrines, and a meetinghouse locator in Italian. Interested individuals can request Church literature or missionaries through the site. The Internet site can assist in expanding mission outreach in Italy in currently unreached areas. The Church has all Latter-day Saint scriptures in Italian available online.

Member Activity and Convert Retention

Branches in districts have weakened in the past decade for reasons including the relocation of members to other areas of the country to find employment as well as low convert growth, low birth rates in the Church, and ongoing struggles to retain members. In Sardinia, some branches have seen church attendance drop dramatically due to active members moving elsewhere. Some branch consolidations have resulted in many members becoming inactive due, at least in part, to an unwillingness to travel greater distances or difficulties integrating with members in a new congregation. Retention and integration of new converts into congregations remain major challenges.

Ethnic Issues and Integration

Full-time missionaries report that non-Italians often tend to be more receptive to proselytism; immigrants from developing world nations of the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and Africa are overrepresented in the Latter-day Saint population. The demographics of many congregations do not reflect the demographics of the population within their boundaries. The demographics of some congregations may contribute to integration problems, as some congregations have no non-Italians, and others have large numbers of foreigners. Immigrant converts often come from cultures that are primarily consumers rather than producers of religion and are less likely to become active, participating members, serve in missions, or hold leadership positions. Mission outreach among native Italians has experienced frustrations and requires greater vision.

Language Issues

Language needs among the native population appear well addressed in most areas. Some challenges related to differences in regional dialects may create barriers. The large number of non-Italian members may one day necessitate language-specific congregations in larger cities, particularly for English speakers.

Missionary Service

Italy remains dependent on foreign missionaries to staff its missionary force. Mission leaders have indicated that decisions to consolidate two of Italy's four original full-time missions were linked to increased self-sufficiency of local leadership. One hundred twenty missionaries served in the Italy Rome Mission following the consolidation of the Italy Catania Mission. Decreases in full-time missionary numbers and missions are also likely due to low receptivity, particularly among native Italians.

Leadership

Italy has produced a large number of dedicated leaders who have served in the Church both nationally and internationally. The Church in northern Italy has benefited from strong priesthood leadership since as early as the late 1980s.^[14] In 1992, Vincenzo Conforte from Foggia was called as a regional representative.^[15] In 1993, Mario V. Vaira from Como was called as the temple

president of the Bern Switzerland Temple.^[16] By 1994, Raimondo Castellani from Muggio was called as a regional representative.^[17] In 2016, Elder Massimo De Feo from Taranto was called as the Church's first Italian General Authority Seventy^[18] and Alessandro Dini Ciacci from Rome was called as an Area Authority Seventy.^[19] However, Italian members have infrequently served as mission presidents and temple presidents in the past few decades which has appeared largely due to limited numbers of leadership in most areas of the country. In the 2010s, stake presidency members were generally not Church employees; however, Italian stakes appear to have a higher number of Church employees in executive leadership positions than in other nearby countries, suggesting some challenges with local self-sufficiency that has required Church employees to also sometimes serve in lay leadership positions.

Temple

The Church has assigned Italy, Albania, Cyprus, Greece, Malta, and Romania to utilize the Rome Italy Temple since the temple was dedicated in 2019. Prior to this time, Italian members utilized the Bern Switzerland Temple. A total of 52,000 people toured the new temple during the open house.^[20] The Rome Italy Temple is centrally located for Italian members throughout the country. However, approximately half of Church membership resides in northern Italy where the Bern Switzerland Temple is in closer proximity to most members than the Rome Italy Temple. Given the size of the Rome Italy Temple, a second temple in Italy based on Milan appears unlikely unless greater growth in the country necessitates a second temple.

Comparative Growth

Italy is one of the seven European nations with over 20,000 members and is the nation in Europe that experienced the greatest increase in stakes in the 2000s. Member activity rates compare to other Western European nations. Membership and congregational growth rates are comparable to most Western European countries.

Many Christian groups operating in Italy have experienced mixed results. Jehovah's Witnesses number among the most successful, as there are a quarter of a million active members and more congregations than The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in any nation outside the United States. However, Witnesses have maintained a presence in Italy much longer than Latter-day Saints and have also maintained a much wider field of operation. For example, in 1970 Witnesses reported a peak of 15,346 active, proselytizing members who witnessed in 64% of the country^[21] at a time when Latter-day Saints had only a couple thousand members in approximately one dozen congregations. The Jehovah's Witness faith has become prominent as the dominant protest group to the Catholic Church, whereas Latter-day Saints have sought more respectful ties with other faiths. However, the number of active Jehovah's Witnesses increased by only 2.3% during the 2010s and the total number of Witness congregations decreased by approximately 160. Seventh-Day Adventists report stagnant growth with no measurable change in the number of Adventists or congregations during the past decade. Christian churches that experience growth tend to have had a long-term presence and developed local leadership and member-missionary oriented proselytism approaches.

Future Prospects

The trend of decreasing numbers of congregations and missionaries during the past two decades has resulted in more limited national outreach. Although membership has matured in many areas, smaller cities and rural areas have seen little or no progress in the growth of the Church over the past two decades. Long-term growth and self-sufficiency of the Church will largely depend on increasing native-Italian missionaries, breakthroughs in outreach among Italians, and a sustained reversal of congregational declines. Some positive developments have occurred in lieu of the Rome Italy Temple announcement and dedication, such as increasing convert baptisms of full Italian families. However, the Church in Italy continues to struggle with a lack of progress among Italian members and expanding the Church's outreach rather than consolidating it. With the entire country administered by stakes as of 2020, stake presidents may have better opportunities to identify cities and towns which appear favorable to begin member groups to help spur greater growth. In sum, future Latter-day Saint growth in Italy will strongly depend on the local Italian Church's ability to be self-sufficient in leadership and missionary needs, and the mobilization of local members to take the lead to find, prepare, and fellowship new converts who develop a lifelong conversion to the Church.

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