

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.



Armenia

Population: 3.06 millions (#137 out of countries)

By David Stewart and Matt Martinich

Geography

Area: 29,743 square km. Located north of the Middle East in the Caucasus, Armenia borders Azerbaijan, Iran, Turkey, and Georgia. Two Azerbaijani enclaves are in extreme northeast Armenia, and one Armenian exclave is in Azerbaijan near Lake Sevan. Highlands cover most areas, with large rivers and fertile valleys for agriculture. Hot summers and cold winters characterize the climate. Lake Sevan occupies 5% of Armenia and is the largest lake in the Caucasus Mountains. Severe earthquakes and droughts are natural hazards. Environmental issues include contaminated soil from chemicals, deforestation, and water pollution. Armenia is administratively divided into eleven provinces.

Peoples

Armenian: 98.1%

Yezidi (Kurd): 1.2%

Other: 0.7%

Almost the entire population is Armenian. Most ethnic Armenians live outside Armenia in neighboring Middle Eastern nations, Eastern Europe, the United States, and other Western nations. Yezidi (Kurds), Russians, and Azerbaijanis are minority ethnic groups. Low birth rates and emigration result in a negative population growth rate.

Population: 3,038,217 (July 2018)

Annual Growth Rate: -0.25% (2018)

Fertility Rate: 1.64 children born per woman (2018)

Life Expectancy: 71.8 male, 78.7 female (2018)

Languages: Armenian (97.9%), Yezidi (1.0%), other (1.1%). Eastern Armenian is spoken in Armenian and border regions of neighboring nations. Western Armenian is spoken outside of Armenia. Up to 75% of Armenians speak Russian as a second language.[1] Armenian is the official language and only language with over one million speakers (3.0 million).

Literacy: 99.7% (2015)

History

Armenia has a long and complex history. The Bible states that Noah's Ark came to rest on Mount Ararat, which today sits in Turkey near the Armenian border. Several ancient kingdoms occupied the region until the formation of the Kingdom of Armenia in 600 BC. Greeks and Romans invaded the region in the following centuries. Armenia became one of the first areas Christianity spread to and by the fourth century became the first country to officially adopt Christianity. For the following centuries, various kingdoms conquered Armenia, although there were some periods of autonomy. The Byzantine, Sassanid, Mongol, and Ottoman Empires at one point controlled Armenia. Integration of Eastern Armenia into the Russian Empire occurred in the early 1800s, whereas Western Armenia was annexed into Turkey. The Armenian Genocide in the 1910s resulted in between 500,000 and 1.5 million deaths of Armenians in Eastern Turkey. These events remain disputed by Turkey, and the topic remains sensitive for both Armenians and Turks.

Brief independence occurred in the late 1910s until the arrival of Soviet troops. During Soviet rule Armenians continued to voice their discontent with foreign occupation and their desire for greater autonomy. In 1988, a massive earthquake severely crippled much of the country, killing approximately 50,000. Conflict over predominantly Armenian Nagorno-Karabakh, which was in the jurisdiction of Azerbaijan, intensified in the late 1980s, and war with Azerbaijan began. Armenia won independence in 1991 and remained at war with Azerbaijan until 1994. Turkey protested Armenian endeavors to regain Nagorno-Karabakh by closing the border in 1994. The borders of Turkey and Armenia remain closed today as a result of ongoing tensions, limiting trade and economic development, and restricting access of Armenians to ancestral territory in what is now eastern Turkey. As a result of progressive encroachments on the Armenian homeland, persecution of Armenians under the Ottoman Empire, and economic pressures, Armenia has a large diaspora estimated at approximately eight million—more than twice the number of Armenians remaining in Armenia.

Armenia is one of the only nations in the world to simultaneously maintain good relations with Russia, Iran, and the United States, although its relations with other neighbors are not as favorable. Surrounded by hostile neighbors along the Turkish and Azerbaijani borders, Armenia retains close ties with Russia. Russian troops guard Armenian borders with Turkey and Iran.

Culture

Armenia possesses a unique culture that has endured for thousands of years. There is a rich legacy of dance and art. The Armenian alphabet was created in the fifth century. The Armenian Apostolic Church strongly influences culture and daily life. Marriage and engagement ceremonies are elaborate and traditional and often are accompanied with alcohol, although alcohol use is lower than most nations. Cigarette consumption rates rank high compared to the world average.

Economy

GDP per capita: $9,500 (2017) [15.9% of U.S.]

Human Development Index: 0.755 (2017)

Corruption Index: 35 (2018)

Armenia has successfully privatized much of the small- and medium-sized government enterprises over the past three decades. Financial ties with Russia remain pronounced as trade with Armenia's most populous neighbors is restricted due to conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh and historic tensions over the Armenian Genocide. The Turkish and Azerbaijani borders remain closed, resulting in greater geographic isolation. High GDP growth rates were maintained for much of the 2000s but the financial crisis in the late 2000s initiated a severe economic recession. Growth rates have since recovered, and the GDP increased by 7.5% in 2017. Agriculture employs 36.3% of the workforce and produces 16.7% of the GDP. Services account for 46.7% and 54.8% of the workforce and GDP, respectively. Fruit, vegetables, and livestock are primary agricultural products, whereas brandy, mining, diamond processing, and machinery are major industries. Russia, China, Bulgaria, and Switzerland are the primary trade partners.

Government attempts to reduce corruption have been largely unsuccessful. Only modest improvement in the reduction of corruption has occurred in the 2010s. Corruption is regarded as endemic and entrenched in government. There is a lack of separation between government officials and private enterprises. The judiciary, law enforcement, and healthcare are regarded as most vulnerable to corruption.[2] Some drug trafficking and illicit drug use occurs.

Faiths

Christian: 98.5%

Other: 1.5%

Christians

Denominations – Members – Congregations

Armenian Apostolic – 2,800,000

Catholic – 60,800

Jehovah's Witnesses – 10,977 – 134

Latter-day Saints – 3,560 – 11

Seventh Day Adventists – 830 – 30

Religion

Estimates indicate that 90-94% of Armenians adhere to the Armenian Apostolic Church. Most of the non-Apostolic population resides in Yerevan. Catholics tend to live in northern religions. Yezidi—a monotheistic religion with incorporates some aspects of nature worship—is followed by many Kurds around Mount Ararat.[3] There are approximately 800 Jews.[4]

Religious Freedom

The constitution protects religious freedom, which is upheld by the government. Some minority groups experience a few legal

restrictions that are not enforced by government officials. The Armenian Apostolic Church maintains special relations with the government as it is considered the national church. Only registered religious groups can rent spaces for worship services and must be deemed socially acceptable. Unregistered religious groups may operate in the country, but they must register to own property and conduct business transactions. To register, a religious group must have at least 200 adult members. Jehovah's Witnesses and atheists are often persecuted.[5]

Largest Cities

Urban: 63.2% (2019)

Yerevan, Gyumri, Vanadzor, **Vagharshapat, Abovyan, Kapan,** Hrazdan, **Armavir, Masis,** Charentsavan.

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

Five of the ten most populous cities have a Church congregation. Fifty-one percent (51%) of the national population lives in the 10 largest cities.

Church History

Missionary work commenced among Armenians outside Armenia in the late nineteenth century particularly in Turkey. These efforts were sporadic due to conflict in the region, and by 1950 most of the Armenian converts lost contact with the Church or immigrated to the United States.[6] Elder Russell M. Nelson delivered a check for $100,000 to the Soviet Ambassador to provide relief for victims of the 1988 Armenian earthquake.[7] The Church gained converts among American-Armenians by the late 1989.[8] In 1989, the Church announced that it would begin long-term assistance in Armenia, rebuilding and distributing humanitarian aid following the severe earthquake.[9] In June 1991, Elder Dallin H. Oaks dedicated Armenia for missionary work.[10] Seminary and institute programs began in 1995. The Armenia Yerevan Mission was created in 1999 from the Russia Rostov Mission, and the translation of the Book of Mormon in Eastern Armenian was completed in 2000.[11] In 2000, Armenia became part of the Europe East Area. Elder M. Russell Ballard visited the Armenian President in 2006.[12] In the 2010s, the Armenia Yerevan Mission was renamed the Armenia/Georgia Mission. In 2013, Elder Russell M. Nelson organized the first stake in Armenia in Yerevan,[13] but the stake was discontinued and reverted to district status in 2016.

Membership Growth

Church Membership: 3,560 (2018)

Membership has grown rapidly since the establishment of the Church in the early 1990s. There were 200 members in 1995 and by year-end 1997, there were 656 members. By year-end 2000, there were 792 members.

Growth continued in the 2000s as membership reached 1,265 in 2002, 2,083 in 2005, and 2,888 in 2010. During this period the first missionaries were assigned outside of Yerevan and additional congregations were organized. Membership growth rates ranged from 10–20% during most of the 2000s. In 2008 and 2009, membership growth rates slowed dramatically to 3% to 4%. Missionaries reported that the drop in membership growth was attributed to increased reactivation efforts and raising the standards for investigators to be baptized. Membership growth rates generally ranged from 0-5% most years in the 2010s. Church membership totaled 3,159 in 2013 and 3,612 in 2016. Membership decreased to 3,560 in 2018.

In 2018, one in 853 was a Latter-day Saint on Church records.

Congregational Growth

Branches: 11 Groups: 2? (2018)

A branch was organized in Yerevan in 1994. In 1995, the first district was organized in Yerevan. The sole Yerevan branch met in six groups, and each group became a branch in the new district.[14] In 2000, there were seven branches, all in Yerevan and surrounding communities. Additional cities were opened for missionary work in the 2000s, including Ararat, Ashtarak (2000), Gyumri (2001), Vanadzor (2003), and Charentsavan (2005). Congregations increased to eight in 2001, ten in 2003, and fifteen in 2006.

The Yerevan Armenia District was divided to create the Yerevan Armenia South District in 2008, the former included eight branches and the latter consisted of six branches. In 2011, the two districts in Yerevan were consolidated into a single district and the Alaverdi Branch and Ararat Branch became member groups. Additional branches closed in the 2010s, including Nork (2012) and Malatia (2018). In 2013, the Yerevan Armenia District became a stake with five wards (Achapnyak, Arabkir, Artashat, Malatia, and Vanadzor) and four branches (Ashtarak, Charentsavan, Gyumri and Yerevan). However, the Yerevan Armenia Stake was discontinued in 2016 primarily due to concerns with improper handling of church finances and leadership development problems. In 2014, a branch was organized in Hrazdan. A group began to operate in Margahovit in 2015. In 2018, a branch was reestablished in Alaverdi and all three branches in northern Armenia were organized into their own district (Vanadzor). Other cities have appeared to have had groups organized since 2000 but no longer have groups such as Stepanavan. The Armenia/Georgia Mission Branch administers to members living in remote regions of the country.

Activity and Retention

In 2001, 75% of the 220 convert baptisms were retained in early 2002. Nationwide meetings tend to be well attended. Eight hundred of the 2,000 Church members attended a meeting with Elder M. Russell Ballard in 2006.[15] In 2008, 700 members assembled to witness the creation of a second member district.

The number of inactive members has increased substantially since 2002 as membership more than tripled, whereas there has been a net increase of only three branches. The average number of members per congregation increased between 2000 and 2018 from 113 to 324, respectively. The number of active members varies from branch to branch. The Gyumri Branch had approximately forty active members and hundreds of inactive members in late 2009. A branch in Yerevan had 340 members on the records and only thirty attending weekly in 2010. The Alaverdi Branch had between twenty and thirty active members in 2009. Most branches appeared to have between fifty and seventy-five active members in the late 2000s. Two hundred forty-six were enrolled in seminary and institute in 2008–2009. Church attendance by congregation during the early 2010s and mid-2010s was as follows per reports from returned missionaries: Ajapnyak (60-70), Arabkir (40-50), Gyumri (40-65), Yerevan (40-50), and Malatia (25). In the late 2010s, most branches appeared to have between 40-80 active members. Convert retention rates one year after baptism increased from 10-20% in the late 2000s to 60-80% in the mid to late 2010s after much higher standards for prebaptismal preparation were implemented.

Nationwide, there are approximately 600-650 active members, or 17-19% of total church membership.

Language Materials

Languages with Latter-day Saint Scripture: Armenian (East), Russian, Armenian (West).

All Church scriptures are available in Armenian (East) and Russian. A wide selection of Church materials is translated in Russian, whereas several priesthood, unit, temple, Relief Society, Sunday School, teacher development, young women, primary, missionary, audio/visual, family history, church proclamations, hymns, and children’s songs are available in Armenian.

The Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith, Book of Mormon selections, Doctrine and Covenants, and Pearl of Great Price are translated in the western dialect of Armenian, which is spoken outside of Armenia.

Meetinghouses

In 2002, the Church dedicated its first meetinghouse in Yerevan.[16] Most congregations meet in renovated buildings or rented spaces. In 2019, there were ten meetinghouses nationwide, including multiple Church-built facilities.

Humanitarian and Development Work

The Church has provided extensive humanitarian and development work in Armenia since 1985, with as many as 633 projects completed. Projects completed have included Benson Food initiatives, clean water projects, community projects, emergency response, immunizations, maternal and newborn care, refugee response, vision care, and wheelchair donations.[17] The Church donated 10,000 pounds of powdered milk in 1989.[18] In addition to large amounts of food donated, the Huntsman family constructed a cement plant in the late 1980s and early 1990s that provided concrete to rebuild homes for the 500,000 homeless following the earthquake. Humanitarian missionaries participated in a private aid relief effort that feeds over 200,000 needy Armenians.[19] In 2008, the Church conducted clean water projects[20] and donated wheelchairs.[21]

Opportunities, Challenges, and Prospects

Religious Freedom

The Church enjoys the privileges of a registered religious group, and missionaries openly proselyte. Past humanitarian projects have fostered cooperation with the government and the many citizens who benefited from Church assistance. Societal abuses of religious freedom directed toward the Church have not been reported.

Cultural Issues

Strong societal and family ties to the Armenian Apostolic Church create challenges for missionaries to find investigators and for potential converts to be baptized and remain active. Missionaries report that many Armenians do not view the Church in a favorable light, but that the Church does not receive persecution like Jehovah's Witnesses (albeit many Armenians confuse Latter-day Saints with Jehovah's Witnesses). Some cultural practices, like drinking alcohol during engagement or marriage festivities, may create friction between Latter-day Saints and the general population. High cigarette consumption rates create challenges for potential converts to quit smoking because there is likely a high frequency of investigators who smoke. Converts who discontinue substance use and join the Church may be more prone to relapse than in other nations due to societal influences.

National Outreach

Yerevan is central to national outreach as it is home to 49% of the population. Six of the twelve city districts used to have congregations in the late 2000s, but in the late 2010s only three of the twelve city districts had a branch and meetinghouse. This reduction in the number of meetinghouses and congregations in Yerevan limits the Church's outreach in the city. Some areas are distant from the nearest meetinghouse, such as in southern and southwestern Yerevan. Moreover, there are cities on the outskirts of Yerevan that have never appeared to have had a Church presence, such as Vagharshapat and Abovyan, which appear favorable for future outreach. The combined population of all ten cities with branches or groups accounts for 60% the national population.

In recent years, mission efforts have expanded into smaller towns, the smallest with an independent congregation being Alaverdi. Missionaries have conducted periodic visits to towns—such as Stepanavan and Spitak in northern Armenia—where small groups of members have been. The mission branch allows for flexible and dynamic outreach in unreached areas with the organization of small groups of members for Sunday meetings. Outreach in rural areas, particularly in the southern areas of the country, will be challenging due to distance for Yerevan, a small population dispersed over rough terrain, and conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Nagorno-Karabakh—a de facto republic in Azerbaijan bordering Armenia—is predominantly Armenian and has a population of over 100,000 inhabitants. Violence and political instability in the region have prevented Latter-day Saint mission efforts in the breakaway state under Azerbaijani sovereignty, but close proximity to Armenia and a large ethnic Armenian population provide opportunities for future expansion of missionary work in the region and establishing a Church presence in Azerbaijan, which as of 2019 had no members meeting in congregations.

Mission efforts among Armenian diaspora around the world can assist in expanding mission efforts in Armenia through referrals of relatives and friends. An Armenian branch once functioned in Glendale, California and was discontinued in the early 2000s. Efforts to reactivate and strengthen Armenian members in the area were renewed in May 2010 with the assignent of a senior missionary couple. The missionary couple reported that they frequently asked members for references of interested individuals back in Armenia who may be taught by missionaries. Use of Armenian language Church websites such as https://www.comeuntochrist.org/hye?locale=hye, https://www.hqvose.am/, and https://www.mormonnews.am/ can be useful to reach interested individuals through the internet and provide accurate information about the Church and its teachings.

Member Activity and Convert Retention

Member activity rates have decreased over the past two decades as most converts have not been retained. Large numbers of converts baptized during the 2000s were not retained and received cursory teaching prior to baptism to achieve artificial goals. Missionaries reported in the 2000s that many branches have a small, yet organized, leadership but have been overwhelmed with the large numbers of poorly prepared new converts. Leadership was initially developed rapidly in the 1990s, which may indicate that converts in the 2000s have been less able to integrate into established congregations. Many active members emigrate, especially young people, lessening local resources in addressing and preventing convert attrition.

The Armenia Yerevan Mission has historically been the top-baptizing mission in the Europe East Area since the mid-2000s. However, much of this nominal growth has not been reflected in active membership. For several years, a policy was in place that missionaries were not allowed to teach a second discussion to investigators who did not accept the baptismal commitment on the first discussion. While the intent of this policy was ostensibly to increase baptisms and to focus missionary time on receptive investigators, it fueled patterns of very low convert retention in which investigators were rushed to baptism without first establishing positive gospel habits and overcoming substance abuse and other difficulties. There are also serious theological questions about how investigators were expected to gain a testimony based on a single missionary encounter without adequate opportunity to read, pray, study, and investigate the church. Sincere, more potentially committed investigators may have been driven off by such high-pressure approaches.

In 2008, President Ronald Dunn reversed the policies of his predecessor and emphasized the need for higher quality pre-baptismal preparation of new converts, leading to substantially higher retention rates. In 2009, missionaries reported that the average convert attended church for at least six weeks before baptism, and one-year convert retention had increased to over 50%. Convert retention has increased in the 2010s to 60-80% for one year after baptism based upon several returned missionary reports, albeit the number of converts who have joined the Church has substantially decreased.

Ethnic Issues and Integration

The lack of ethnic diversity simplifies mission outreach. Integration issues have not been reported. Conflict between Armenians

and Azerbaijanis may be a future source of friction once Azerbaijanis join the Church, although very few Azeris live in Armenia.

Language Issues

The Church has translated a large amount of ecclesiastical materials in Armenian, allowing for concentrated efforts in outreach distributing proselytism literature. There are no church materials in Azerbaijani or Yezidi because these groups have few if any members.

Missionary Service

Eighteen full-time missionaries served in the Armenia Yerevan Mission in early 2001.[22] A missionary zone was created in Gyumri in early 2002. In 2010, missionaries reported spending significant amounts of time on reactivating less active members. Armenians regularly serve full-time missions, but not in sufficient numbers for Armenia to be self-reliant on its full-time missionary force.

Leadership

Limited leadership remains a primary obstacle for greater church growth. Emigration of returned missionaries has reduced potential leadership and set back long-term growth. Available leadership appears well-trained and dedicated. Arayik V. Minasyan from Artashat became the first Area Authority Seventy from Armenia in 2010.[23] The organization of a stake in 2013 indicates that the Church in Armenia has developed a sufficient number of quality church leaders to meet the administrative demands of stake responsibilities, albeit there were serious concerns that warranted the stake's discontinuation only three years later. Furthermore, Church employees may also be overrepresented in leadership positions. For example, one of the three members of the former stake presidency worked for the Church.[24]

Temple

Armenia pertains to the Kyiv Ukraine Temple district. Prior to the completion of the Kyiv Ukraine Temple, temple trips to Switzerland occurred at least twice annually. The costs of travel, lodging, and document preparation are largely paid by the Church, as few local members would be able to afford such trips. Armenia may have its own temple announced one day once there is a strong, self-sufficient stake in Yerevan given significant geographical distance to the nearest temple.

Comparative Growth

No other nation in the Middle East or Caucasus have as many members, congregations, and missionaries as Armenia. Moreover, no other nation in the region has Church congregations as accessible to the population as Armenia. Georgia is the only other nation in the Caucasus with a Church presence and had fewer than 300 members and only two branches in 2019. War in Chechnya, few members, and distance from Rostov has prevented a Church establishment in Russian areas of the Caucasus. In the Middle East, there are no nations with an active missionary program and most members are nonnatives. Armenia achieved some of the most rapid membership and congregational growth in the 2000s among former-Soviet republics. However, only a fraction of nominal membership is active, and so Latter-day Saint growth achievements in Armenia are much more modest than they may appear on paper. Membership and congregational growth trends in Armenia have been largely stagnant in recent years, which has been consistent with most other countries in the former Soviet Union. Armenia holds the unfortunate distinction as the only country in the former Soviet Union where a stake has been discontinued as stakes organized in Russia and Ukraine remain in operation as of 2019.

Many Christian denominations report slow to moderate growth. Evangelicals and Jehovah's Witnesses have experienced the greatest growth. Seventh-Day Adventists gain few converts annually as Adventists increased by about one hundred between

2002 and 2008. Adventists reported a net decrease in membership during the 2010s. Witnesses report very slow growth in terms of the number of active members and congregations in operation.

Future Prospects

Emigration of Armenian Church members and low member activity rates stunt greater church growth. Continued and consistent implementation of appropriate pre-baptismal preparation is necessary to break low retaining patterns of the past and foster long-term indigenous growth, and retain a Church presence in cities where congregations have been organized. Greater member-missionary efforts will be required to expand national outreach and organize additional congregations. The greatest opportunities for growth appear to exist in the Yerevan metropolitan area, where the Church has discontinued several branches in the past decade to consolidate active membership into congregations with larger numbers of active members. A stake in Yerevan may be reestablished once local leadership has been adequately self-sufficient and accountable to warrant these responsibilities.

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