



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.



Albania

Population: 3.02 millions (#138 out of countries)

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Geography

Area: 28,748 square km. Bordering the Adriatic and Ionian Seas in Southeastern Europe, Albania borders Montenegro, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Greece. Most of the terrain consists of hills and mountains with few plains in coastal areas. The climate is temperate and mild with cool, wet winters and hot, dry summers. Interior areas experience wetter and cooler climate than coastal areas. Two large lakes, Lake Ohrid and Lake Big Prespa, straddle the border with Macedonia. Destructive earthquakes can occur as well as frequent floods and drought. Primary environmental concerns include deforestation and soil erosion. Albania is divided into twelve administrative counties.

Peoples

Albanian: 82.6%

Greek: 0.9%

Other: 1.0%

Unspecified: 15.5%

The population is predominantly Albanian. The Greek population resides near the Greek border. Other ethnic groups include Vlach (ethnic Romanians living outside Romania also known as Aromanians), Roma, Serb, Macedonian, Montenegrin, Egyptian, and Bulgarian.

Population: 3,074,579 (July 2020)

Annual Growth Rate: 0.28% (2020)

Fertility Rate: 1.53 children born per woman (2020)

Life Expectancy: 76.3 male, 81.9 female (2020)

Languages: Albanian (96.9%), Aromanian (1.6%), Greek (0.5%), other (less than 1.0%). The Tosk dialect of Albanian is the official language. Only Albanian has over one million native speakers (2.9 million).

Literacy: 97.6% (2015)

History

In antiquity, several ancient peoples populated the region, including the Illyrians around 1000 BC and the Greeks starting in the eighth century BC. Rome controlled Albania for several centuries followed by the Byzantine Empire. In the Middle Ages, Slavic peoples arrived and the region was later conquered by the Ottoman Empire by the fifteenth century. Albania declared independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1912. Italy invaded and occupied Albania between 1939 and 1944. A communist government took power in 1944 and allied with the Soviet Union and later with China in 1978. During the years of communist rule, limited interaction occurred with other nations, as the government enforced isolation. In the early 1990s, a democratic government came to power after nearly half a century of communism. The transition from communism to democracy has proved to be difficult due to a weak economy, organized crime, and political instability. Distrust in the government heightened, and chaos erupted in 1997 due to failed government investments offered to its citizens. Elections have been judged as free and fair since the mid-1990s, but allegations of electoral fraud persist. Albania joined NATO in 2009 and may join the EU in the future. Albania numbers among the poorest nations in Europe.

Culture

Albania is one of the few European nations with more Muslims than Christians. Communism strongly influences culture. Cuisine draws upon many common Southeastern European foods such as gyro, pita bread, cheese, and vegetables. Tobacco cigarette use rates are among the highest in the world, whereas alcohol use rates are comparable to the United States.

Economy

GDP per capita: \$12,500 (2017) [20.9% of U.S.]

Human Development Index: 0.791 (2018)

Corruption Index: 35 (2019)

Albania has struggled to make the massive transformation from a xenophobic, socialist economy to an open, free market capitalist economy. The aging country infrastructure challenges economic growth including transportation and electricity dependent on hydroelectricity. During the 2000s, significant developments occurred in updating the road networks and diversifying energy sources. Forty-one percent (41%) of the workforce labors in agriculture, which accounts for 21.7% of the GDP. Primary agricultural products include wheat, corn, and potatoes. Services employ 40% of the workforce and produce 54.1% of the GDP. Primary exports include food products, clothing, and lumber. Some petroleum resources have been exploited. Primary trade partners are Italy, Turkey, Greece, and China.

Corruption has decreased over the past two decades but remains much higher than most of Europe. Corruption continues to limit growth and detract from potential foreign investment. Organized crime networks are well established and have been better

addressed by government in recent years. Perceptions of corruption are strongest for customs, tax officials, and some ministers. The media has helped to fight corruption. Many Albanians report they pay bribes to medical professionals for treatment.

Faiths

Muslim: 59%

Christian: 18%

Atheist: 2.5%

Unspecified: 20.5%

Christians

Denominations – Members – Congregations

Catholic – 280,921

Orthodox – 188,992

Evangelicals – 14,466

Jehovah's Witnesses – 5,647 – 87

Latter-day Saints – 3,216 – 14

Seventh Day Adventists – 461 – 7

Religion

Albania has one of the largest percentages of those who identify as Muslim in the population in Europe. Islam arrived from the Ottoman Turks and continued to be propagated until independence. Prior to the Ottoman conquest, most Albanians were Catholic or Orthodox Christians. War and almost fifty years of communism have resulted in the majority of the population being nonreligious and nominally Muslim. Many Albanians usually only identify their faith as Islam but do not share most beliefs and practices with active Muslims. Albanian Orthodox adherents mainly live around Tirana and in the southern interior. Catholics are concentrated in northern Albania and Tirana. Additional visible religious minorities include Bahai's, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Latter-day Saints. Ten percent (10%) of the population is Roman Catholic.[\[1\]](#)

Religious Freedom

The constitution protects religious freedom, which is also upheld by the government. The government does not tolerate religious discrimination and seeks to protect the religious rights of its citizens. Religious groups are not required to register with the government, but registration is required in order for religious organizations to own property and have financial assists. Public schools do not offer religious instruction. Society generally respects the rights of minority religious groups to worship.[\[2\]](#)

Largest Cities

Urban: 62.1% (2020)

Tirane, Durres, Vlorë, Elbasan, Shkoder, Fier, Korçë, Berat, Lushnjë, Pogradec.

All ten of the most populous cities have a congregation of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

All ten of the most populous cities have a Church congregation. Forty-six percent (46%) of the national population lives in the ten largest cities.

Latter-day Saint History

Prior to 1990 there was no Church activity. The first senior missionaries were assigned in mid-1990, and by the end of the year, full-time young elders were assigned. The first converts joined the Church shortly thereafter. In April 1993, seventy-eight people, including fifty-five Albanian members, attended the dedication of Albania for missionary work by Elder Dallin H. Oaks. The Greece Athens Mission administered Albania prior to the creation of the Albania Tirana Mission in 1996. In March 1997, the thirty-three missionaries and the mission president were evacuated due to disorder in Tirana. Missionaries returned the following September. In August 1998, twenty-four missionaries were temporarily reassigned to other European missions due to threats against Americans. The institute and seminary programs began in 1999.

Albania continued to be part of the Europe Central Area until it was merged with the Europe West Area to form the Europe Area in the late 2000s. In early 2012, the Albania Tirana Mission was renamed the Adriatic South Mission and began administering Kosovo, Macedonia, and Montenegro; however, Montenegro was reassigned to the Adriatic North Mission in 2013. In 2014, the Church organized its first stake in Albania. In 2018, the Church discontinued the Greece Athens Mission and reassigned Greece and Cyprus to the Adriatic South Mission. In 2020, the Adriatic South Mission serviced members in five countries: Albania, Cyprus, Greece, Kosovo, and North Macedonia.

Membership Growth

Church Membership: 2,299 (2012)

Church membership has consistently increased by 100-200 per year since 1993. There were 100 members in 1993. Church membership reached 400 in 1995, 881 in 2000, 1,498 in 2005, and 1,984 in 2010. Annual membership growth rates decelerated from 10-16% for most years between 1997 and 2003 to 5-10% between 2004 and 2009. In the 2010s, Church membership reached 2,799 in 2015 and 3,216 in 2019. Annual membership growth rates ranged from 5-10% for most years between 2010 and 2015, and then decelerated to 3-4% in the mid- to late 2010s. In 2018, 800 of the approximately 3,000 members on Church records in Albania were under age 30.[\[3\]](#)

In 2019, one in 953 was a nominal Latter-day Saint, or 0.10% of the population.

Congregational Growth

Wards: 6 Branches: 8 Groups: 3 (June 2020)

The first branch in the country was organized in Tirana in 1992. The Church created branches in additional cities, including Durres (1993) and Elbasan (1999). The Tirana Albania District, the first district ever organized in the country, was created in 1999. By the end of 2000, there were seven branches: four in Tirana, one in Durres, one in Elbasan, and the Albania Tirana Mission Branch for members in locations without a nearby congregation. The Church organized its first branches in several additional cities during the 2000s, including Fier (2001), Lushnjë (2003), Vlorë (2006), and Shkoder (2009). The total number of branches in the country increased from three in 1993 to five in 1995, six in 1997, seven in 1999, eight in 2001, nine in 2003, ten in 2006, and eleven in 2009. A new proselytizing area on the outskirts of Tirana in the suburb of Kamez opened in 2008 and a member group was organized; however, the group closed shortly thereafter.

The Church organized the Tirana Albania Stake in 2014 with six wards (Durrës, Tirana 1st, Tirana 2nd, Tirana 3rd, Tirana 4th, and Vlorë) and four branches (Elbasan, Fier, Lushnjë, and Shkoder) after approximately six years of preparation. Several additional cities had branches organized for the first time in the 2010s, including Berat (2016), Korçë (2017), and Pogradec (2018). A member group began to operate in Lezhë in 2018. Member groups opened in Kamez and Kombinat in late 2019 or early 2020.

Activity and Retention

Seventy young women participated in the first girls' camp in 2004. The Durrës Branch chapel had 2,000 people visit during the open house following construction, and had 218 in attendance for the first sacrament meeting, more than twice the usual attendance. One hundred thirty young single adults and leaders attended the opening events of the first Institute Outreach Center in Albania in 2007. Two hundred attended district conference in the Durrës Branch meetinghouse in mid-2009. One hundred fourteen were enrolled in seminary or institute between 2007 and 2008. Overall, activity rates decreased in the 2000s as sacrament attendance remained unchanged, whereas membership more than doubled.

The Kamez Group had fewer than ten active members in late 2009. The Elbasan Branch had fifty active members out of 200 in mid-2009. The Fier Branch had thirteen active members out of seventy in late 2009. The Tirana 1st Branch had seventy active members in late 2009. The Tirana 2nd Branch had seventy active members, seventy-eight Melchizedek Priesthood holders, and 268 baptized males in late 2009. The Tirana 3rd Branch had approximately forty-five active members in early 2010. The Tirana 4th Branch had sixty active members in mid-2009. The Shkoder Branch had as many as thirty active members in early 2009, a figure that fell to less than ten by the end of the year. The Vlorë Branch had sixty active members in early 2010. The Durres Branch had ninety active members in early 2010. Missionaries estimated that there were around 400 continually active members in late 2009, or 22% of total membership at the time. Nationwide sacrament meeting attendance fluctuated between 400 and 500 in the late 2000s and early 2010s.

In 2008, the Albania Tirana Mission began an aggressive program to reactivate less active members, continuing to baptize and retain new converts, and increase active Melchizedek Priesthood holders in order to create the first stake. A major setback occurred in 2009 as the district president fell into inactivity and a United States expatriate became the district president. Members were told that in order for a stake to be organized, there would need to be five wards with thirty active Melchizedek Priesthood holders each and an additional sixteen to fill stake leadership positions. The average number of members per congregation increased from thirty-three in 1993 to 113 in 1999, 175 in 2009, and 254 in 2015, but then decreased to 220 in 2018 as a result of the creation of several new branches. In the late 2010s, the Church in Albania had the highest baptisms-per-missionary ratio in continental Europe.

Returned missionaries reported the following numbers of active members by country as of the mid- to late 2010s: Vlorë (60-80), Tirana 1st (50-80), Tirana 2nd (50), Tirana 4th (50), Korçë (35-50), Tirana 3rd (35), Elbasan (30-40), Lushnjë (30), Pogradec (30), Berat (20), Fier (15-25), and Shkoder (10-20). The total number of active Latter-day Saints in Albania is estimated at 600, or 26% of total Church membership.

Language Materials

Languages with Latter-day Saint Scripture: Albanian, Greek, Serbian, Macedonian

All Church scriptures are available in Albanian, Greek, and Serbian. Many unit, temple, priesthood, Relief Society, Sunday School, young women, primary, missionary, and family history materials are available in Albanian, Greek and Serbian. A portion of the Book of Mormon has been translated into Macedonian as of mid-2020. Several CES manuals are available in Albanian. Few Church materials are available in Macedonian.

Meetinghouses

Construction on the first Church built meetinghouse began in 2005 for the Durres Branch. At the time, all the branches met in rented spaces. A second meetinghouse was completed in Elbasan in 2009. In 2020, most congregations appeared to meet in rented or renovated facilities.

Humanitarian and Development Work

The Church has conducted extensive humanitarian and development work in Albania. As of 2019, 227 projects had been completed since the establishment of the Church nearly thirty years earlier. Most humanitarian and development work has been community projects, although there have been a small number of other projects such as emergency response, wheelchair donations, maternal and newborn care, refugee response, and vision care.^[4] Young women in Maryland made quilts for needy Albanians in the early 1990s, and 2,700 boxes of food for needy families were distributed in late 1994. Aid was provided with the assistance of missionaries to Kosovar refugees who fled to Albania in 1999, including 30,000 family hygiene kits and one million pounds of clothing. In 2002, members donated 1,000 quilts to the needy in Albania and Moldova. Humanitarian missionaries helped refurbish an ambulance that was donated to the city of Kamez. School supplies were provided for Romani children who attended a school that taught them the Albanian language. In 2008, the Church provided neonatal resuscitation training.

Opportunities, Challenges, and Prospects

Religious Freedom

The Church has benefited from the high degree of religious freedom offered by a former communist nation with a Muslim-majority population.

Cultural Issues

Albanians have been uniquely receptive to the Latter-day Saint gospel witness among countries in Southeastern Europe. However, nonreligiousness is a major issue that challenges the Church's growth. The summertime is seen as a time for vacationing and relaxation and a period when many members stop attending church. Active membership many vary by the hundreds depending by the season of the year according to some missionary estimates. Weekly church attendance and daily gospel living habits can be challenging as most Albanians have never actively participated in religion. Furthermore, Latter-day Saint missionaries are often mistaken as Jehovah's Witnesses. Local leaders have indicated that Orthodox Christians are the most intolerant of Latter-day Saints among major religious groups.

National Outreach

The Church has established a congregation in most of the largest cities. Cities with a congregation account for 46% of the

population, suggesting that approximately half the population is unreached. However, the Church operates at least one congregation in nine of the twelve administrative counties where 91% of the national population resides. The three administrative counties without a ward, branch, or member group are Dibër, Kukës, and Gjirokastër. The greatest potential for future outreach is in the most populous cities. Over 50 Albanian towns and villages have over 1,000 inhabitants and no congregations. The most newly opened cities to missionary work, such as Berat, Korçë, and Pogradec, have reported frequent convert baptisms and good convert retention, suggesting similar results may occur in additional cities once member groups and full-time missionaries are assigned. Furthermore, the Church in Albania has regularly opened additional cities to proselytism and organized more congregations in these locations which has helped the Church to maintain steady growth.

The open house for the newly completed Durrës Branch building provided strong media exposure as many government and civil leaders toured the building. In late 2009, the Church launched a country Internet site for Albania that included news, meetinghouse locations, and ecclesiastical materials in Albanian. The site can assist the mission with reaching individuals living in remote areas and supply self-referred investigators. The Tirana Albania Stake has utilized programs such as art and photography exhibits and musical performances to provide passive proselytism opportunities and help raise awareness of the Church.

Member Activity and Convert Retention

Low member activity rates are influenced by many converts who have no history of meaningful religious participation prior to baptism in the Church, nonreligious friends, and family pressure. Some congregations have seen a large drop in active membership over the past decade. The Fier Branch at one time had around seventy active members who, according to missionaries, nearly all fell into inactivity within one month. Inactivity problems continued to persist in the 2010s as evidenced by no additional branches becoming wards in the stake after the stake was organized in 2014.

One of the issues that may contribute to inactivity and retention problems is the large number of single adults and part-member families, as individuals have limited opportunities for socialization and support within small congregations and may face increased cultural pressures from family and peers. Many of the youth and single adults provide much of the strength of the Church and provide the greatest opportunity for long-term member activity. A senior missionary couple served in Tirana over the institute and young single adult outreach programs in 2010.

The high involvement of foreign leadership in managing the affairs of the Church may have negatively impacted member activity and retention. Albanian members have grown dependent on foreign missionaries to run the Church, which is still perceived as an American institution rather than as an indigenous faith. Increasing the number of Albanian youth serving missions and returning to their home country may be the best method to reduce reliance on foreign missionaries and improve member activity. Some Albanian converts have been rushed into baptism by full-time missionaries prior to developing habits of regular church attendance, daily scripture reading, and developing a strong testimony, fostering patterns of low convert retention and high member turnover.

Ethnic Issues and Integration

The Church has experienced few ethnic issues, as the regions in which the Church is established have few minorities. Shkoder has seen some difficulty with proselytism and fellowshipping investigators and new converts due to the polarization of the city between Catholics and Muslims. Regions in the south and along the Macedonian border may experience some issues integrating differing ethnic groups into the same congregation, particularly with Greeks, Macedonians, and Vlach.

Language Issues

The widespread use of Albanian simplifies the Church's efforts in establishing itself throughout the country. The large amount of materials in Serbian provides opportunity to reach the largest linguistic minority. Opportunities to reach native speakers of

Serbian, Macedonian, and Greek have not come to fruition.

Missionary Service

In mid-2009, there were around thirty-five missionaries serving in Albania. Church leadership requested that no more than four missionaries be assigned to each branch in the late 2000s. By early 2010, twenty missionaries served in Tirana or Shkoder. One of the factors limiting local leadership development is the few numbers of Albanian missionaries. Several Albanian missionaries serving in Albania did not complete their missions. The first Albanian missionary to complete his mission and serve in Albania was Elder Erind Çoçoli in 2008. At the time, seven additional Albanian missionaries were serving missions, three of whom were in Albania. The remaining four were serving in the United States, Russia, Scotland, and Italy. By the 2010s, Albanian young adults regularly served in sizable numbers (as many as thirty at one time). Local leaders reported that requiring prospective Albanian full-time missionaries to personally earn and save money for their missions was one of the main catalysts that resulted in a significant augmentation of the number of Albanian members who successfully completed full-time missions.

Leadership

Prior to 2010, the Church saw success in having Albanians serve as leaders but only in the larger branches. In the 1990s and 2000s, larger branches also faced challenges in keeping leaders and Melchizedek Priesthood holders active. Branches organized in the 2000s struggled to develop local leadership to produce a local branch president. For example, in late 2009 missionaries served as branch presidents for all the branches created after 2000 including Shkoder, Fier, Lushnjë, and Vlorë. In late 2009, the Tirana 2nd Branch had the most active Melchizedek Priesthood holders in Albania with around one dozen. At this time, there were seventy-eight total Melchizedek Priesthood holders in the Tirana 2nd Branch, indicating that activity rates for Melchizedek Priesthood holders were lower than for total membership (15% versus 22%).

In the 2010s, the Church in Albania experienced significant progress with local leadership development as evidenced by the creation of the first stake in 2014 and all congregations in Albania having a native branch president or bishop by mid-2020. This has been a significant accomplishment after little progress occurred during the first two decades of the Church's operations. Sizable numbers of Albanian young adults who successfully complete full-time missions appears to be a good source of leadership for many of the congregations. Even more impressive, the Church had local branch presidents for all three of the newest branches (Berat, Korçë, and Pogradec) in mid-2020 even though essentially all of the members in these congregations had joined the Church within the past five years. Even though considerable progress has been achieved, the Church has continued to heavily relied on Church employees to staff its highest leadership positions. For example, two of the three members in the original Tirana Albania Stake Presidency were Church employees.[\[5\]](#)

Temple

Albania is assigned to the Rome Italy Temple. The first Albanian family to get sealed in the temple occurred in 2000 in the Frankfurt Germany Temple. Tirana appears a likely location for a future small temple given its distance from the nearest temple. However, prospects for a temple in Albania will be much more likely once there are at least two stakes.

Comparative Growth

The Church in Albania stands out as a significant outlier among countries in Southeastern Europe for several reasons. No other country in the region has as many members on Church records as Albania. Albania has the highest percentage of nominal Latter-day Saints in the population of any former communist country in Southeastern Europe or Eastern Europe. No other country in Southeast Europe has as high of a percentage of the population that lives in a city with a Latter-day Saint congregation. Furthermore, Albania is also the only country in the region where essentially all large and medium-sized cities (30,000 or more people) have a Church presence. Also, the Church in Albania has experienced steady arithmetic membership growth rates for nearly thirty years whereas the Church in most Southeast European countries reported rapid membership growth followed by stagnant or extremely slow membership growth since approximately 2010. Excluding countries with a Church presence established after 2010, Albania is the only country in the region where the Church has never discontinued a branch or closed its only ward or branch in a city. The only stake in Southeast Europe is located in Albania. Albania also

appears to have the highest number of local members who serve full-time missions among countries in the region. Member activity rates in Albania appear higher than most countries in the region as well.

Other Christian denominations struggle to develop local membership and leadership. Jehovah's Witnesses also established a presence in Albania at approximately the same time as Latter-day Saints,^[6] and this denomination has experienced the greatest success with approaching 6,000 active members and eighty-seven congregations. All large and medium-sized cities have a Witness congregation, and many small cities and villages have a Witness congregation or meeting group. Jehovah's Witnesses have also extended coordinated outreach among Albanians abroad and heavily emphasize member-missionary work and pre-baptismal preparation. Consequently, they have developed sustainable local leadership and indigenously staffed missionary programs. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Albania remains dependent on foreign missionary manpower and funds, in contrast to the Jehovah's Witnesses who have placed consistent emphasis on developing self-sustaining local congregations, building strong member-missionary programs, aggressive outreach expansion efforts, and requiring lengthier periods of convert preparation before baptism to ensure long-term commitment.

Future Prospects

The Church in Albania has achieved significant growth and progress within the past decade at a time in Europe when the Church in most countries has experienced stagnation or slight decline. Local leaders have been optimistic that a second stake may be organized in Albania within the next decade given historically consistent membership growth rates and recent progress with leadership development and outreach expansion. However, the Church in Albania continues to struggle with its ability for branches to mature into wards in additional cities—a requirement for any realistic prospects for a second stake to be created anytime soon. The organization of a district to service branches in southern Albania appears a more likely prospect given historical growth trends. Furthermore, prospects for future EU membership for Albania may pose a significant setback for Church growth given the Church's experience in other former communist nations where EU membership is achieved as many local Latter-day Saints often emigrate and leave significant voids in leadership. Nevertheless, there are good opportunities for additional growth that appear time sensitive before populations become less receptive to the Church. Member groups that currently operate, particularly in Kamez and Kombinat, may become branches in the coming months and years if warranted by stable and increasing numbers of active members and if there is adequate leadership available. Additional cities may open to proselytism and have member groups or branches organized, such as Kavajë or cities in southern Albania. Lastly, Tirana appears a likely candidate for a small temple within the next 1-2 decades given distance to the nearest temple in Rome, Italy, the operation of a stake, and the relatively high percentage of Latter-day Saints in the population.

[1] "2019 Report on International Religious Freedom: Albania." U.S. Department of State. Accessed 20 June 2020. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/albania/>

[2] "2019 Report on International Religious Freedom: Albania." U.S. Department of State. Accessed 20 June 2020. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/albania/>

[3] Mema, Medlir. "The Mormon Experience in Post-Religious Europe." Towards Global Mormon Studies Conference 2018. 9 March 2018. Claremont, California.

[4] "Where We Work." Latter-day Saint Charities. Accessed 20 June 2020. <https://web.archive.org/web/20200111150925/latterdaysaintcharities.org/where-we-work>

[5] "New stake presidents." LDS Church News. 29 March 2014. <https://www.thechurchnews.com/archives/2014-03-29/new-stake-presidents-163-41171>

[6] Martinich, Matthew. "Comparing the Growth of Latter-day Saints and Jehovah's Witnesses in Albania." www.cumorah.com. 20 October 2012. https://cumorah.com/index.php?target=view_case_studies&story_id=314&cat_id=5