



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.



Vanuatu

Population: 0.27 millions (#187 out of countries)

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Geography

Area: 12,189 square km. Vanuatu comprises over 80 islands in the South Pacific Ocean which are surrounded by the island nations of Fiji, New Caledonia, and the Solomon Islands. Tropical climate prevails year round with some fluctuations in rainfall. Most islands are mountainous with narrow coastal plains. Cyclones, volcanoes, earthquakes, and tsunamis are natural hazards. Environmental issues include deforestation and a lack of fresh water to sustain the population. Vanuatu is divided into six administrative provinces.

Population: 221,552 (July 2010)

Annual Growth Rate: 1.359% (2010)

Fertility Rate: 2.43 children born per woman (2010)

Life Expectancy: 62.7 male, 66.04 female (2010)

Peoples

Ni-Vanuatu: 98.5%

Other: 1.5%

Non-natives primarily come from other South Pacific island nations.

Languages: Indigenous languages (72.6%), Bislama (23.1%), English (1.9%), French (1.4%), other (0.3%), unspecified (0.7%). 106 native languages are spoken. Bislama, English, and French are national or official languages. Bislama is a pidgin language which draws its roots from English and French. Languages with over 10,000 speakers include Lenakel and dialects of Ambae, Efate, and Tanna.

Literacy: 74% (1999)

History

Known as the New Hebrides prior to 1980, the first inhabitants settled the islands as early as 2000 BC. Peoples throughout the South Pacific colonized the islands periodically around 1000 AD, resulting in a rich diversity of languages. In the 19th century, the British and French settled the New Hebrides and in 1906 established joint jurisdiction over the region. During years of European administration, the native population declined dramatically due to disease and relocation. The United States military arrived during World War II in its fight against the Japanese in the Pacific. Joint French-British rule continued until 1980 when independence was granted and the name was changed to Vanuatu.

Culture

A rich diversity in cultural traditions varies from island to island. Pigs are regarded as a symbol of wealth and often used as a means of payment. Many villages have areas which are segregated by gender and practice coming-of-age ceremonies. Cuisine includes foods common to South Pacific islander diets, such as fish, taro, yams, fruits, and vegetables. Most grow their own food in gardens and tend to have sufficient amounts of food.^[1] Alcohol and cigarette consumption rates are low.

Economy

GDP per capita: \$4,800 (2009) [10.3% of US]

Human Development Index: 0.674

Corruption Index: 3.2

Vanuatu possesses few natural resources and remains dependent on foreign aid and small-scale agriculture to support the economy. Efforts to develop the tourism industry have generated additional wealth. Agriculture accounts for 65% of the labor

force and produces 26% of the GDP. Primary agricultural products include copra, coconuts, cocoa, and coffee. Kava – a traditional drink made from the roots of the kava plant with possesses some psychoactive properties – is widely consumed. Services employ 30% of the workforce and generate 62% of the GDP. Food and wood processing are major industries. Over 80% of exports are destined to Thailand. Other primary trade partners include Australia, the United States, and Japan.

Faiths

Christian: 82.5%

Indigenous beliefs: 5.6%

Other: 9.6%

None: 1%

Unspecified: 1.3%

Christians

Denominations Members Congregations

Presbyterian 69,567

Anglican 29,688

Catholic 29,023

Seventh-Day Adventists 16,777 56

Latter-Day Saints 4,006 26

Jehovah's Witnesses 439 4

Religion

A wide variety of Christian denominations flourish in Vanuatu, together accounting for as much as 90% of the population. Presbyterian, Anglican, Catholic, and Seventh-day Adventist faiths are the most widespread. Although Western missionaries brought Christianity in the 19th and 20th centuries, 90% of the missionary force is indigenous. The John Frum movement is concentrated on the island of Tanna and claims five percent of the national population. The New Testament has been translated into three indigenous languages.[\[2\]](#)

Religious Freedom

Persecution Index:

The constitution protects religious freedom which is upheld by the government. There have been no recent reports of abuses of religious freedom. Religious discrimination is not tolerated. Some conflict has occurred when churches have been constructed in villages without the approval of the chief and the rest of the community. However, these instances have been minor and usually were peacefully resolved. Students which are middle school and high school aged are required to take religious classes in public school which are often aligned by denomination. Religious groups are required to obtain government registration, but this law is not well enforced. There are no restrictions on proselytism. Some foreign missionaries continue to serve in Vanuatu, but most missionaries are indigenous.[\[3\]](#)

Largest Cities

Urban: 25%

Port-Vila, Luganville, Norsup, **Port-Olry**, Isangel.

Cities and towns listed in bold have no nearby LDS congregation

Four of the five largest cities or villages have congregations within their boundaries or nearby. 25% of the national population lives in the five largest cities. Only Port-Vila and Luganville have over 5,000 inhabitants.

LDS History

In the 1950s, a few Tongan Church member families moved to Port Vila. The Church received official recognition in 1973 and the Port Vila Branch was organized.[\[4\]](#) In 1975, the first two missionaries were assigned to Vanuatu on Efate.[\[5\]](#) The government banned foreign missionaries in the 1980s, resulting in Vanuatu depending on local members to staff its full-time missionary force.[\[6\]](#) In 1987, two Vanuatu members began their missions and were the only missionaries assigned to their native country for their two-year service. During that time period, they baptized 33 converts, including family members.[\[7\]](#) Seminary and institute began in the early 1990s. In 1996, Elder L. Tom Perry collectively dedicated seven island groups within the boundaries of the Fiji Suva Mission which included Vanuatu.[\[8\]](#) When President Hinckley visited in 2003, many members living on Espiritu Santo and Malekula went to great lengths and sacrifice to make it to Port Vila to attend a member meeting.[\[9\]](#)

Membership Growth

LDS Membership: 4,006 (2009)

By 1997, there were 200 LDS members.[\[10\]](#) Membership increased to 1,352 by year-end 2000 and more than doubled to 2,822 by the end of 2004. There were 3,330 members in 2006. Annual membership growth rates were typically over 10% prior to 2004 and have since ranged from five to nine percent with annual membership increases ranging from 200 to 300.

In 2009, one out of 55 people was LDS.

Congregational Growth

Branches: 26

There were nine congregations at year-end 2000. Congregational growth remained steady for the 2000s as congregations reached 12 in 2002, 19 in 2004, and 24 in 2008.

In late 2001, four branches functioned on Efate, including three in Port Vila. The Port Vila District had five total branches, with the fifth located on Tafea at White Sands. The Luganville Vanuatu District had four branches during this time period – one in Luganville, two on Ambae, and one of Malakula. Missionaries were assigned for the first time to Mere Lava in early 2003.[\[11\]](#)

In May 2010, there were approximately 17 units in the Luganville Vanuatu District including six on Malakula, four on Espiritu

Santo, five on Ambae, and one on Mere Lava. Nine branches belonged to the Port Vila Vanuatu District: Five branches on Efate and four on Tanna.

Activity and Retention

Vanuatu experiences one of the highest activity rates in the Church. The average number of members per congregation increased from 150 to 167 between 2000 and 2009 as the number of Church members tripled. In 2003, 2,212 attended a meeting held with President Hinckley, a number greater than total national Church membership at the time which did not include 400 members living on Tanna who were unable to attend.^[12] In 2004, about a quarter of members living in the Port Vila Vanuatu District had been to the temple.^[13] Over 300 young adults from the Luganville Vanuatu District met for a conference in 2005.^[14] The same year 123 attended the first seminary and institute graduation on the island of Ambae.^[15] During the 2008-2009 school year, 486 members were enrolled in seminary or institute.

In May 2010, both the Port Vila 1st and Port Vila 2nd Branches each had about 130 attending weekly. Most congregations appear to have 100 to 150 active members. Total active membership may be as high as 3,300, or 80% of total membership.

Language Materials

Languages with LDS Scripture: English, French, Bislama

A wide range of Church materials are available in French. Church materials translated in Bislama include some unit, temple, Priesthood, Relief Society, Sunday School, Young Women, audio/visual, Primary, missionary, hymns, children's songs, and family history resources.

Meetinghouses

Church services are generally held in meetinghouses built in the small villages of local members.

Health and Safety

Most areas of the country have poor access to health care.

Humanitarian and Development Work

In 2003, missionaries provided some humanitarian aid and assistance following a severe earthquake in Mere Lava.^[16] The Church donated 75 water tanks to the northern island of West Ambae, Santo, Malekula, Banks, Pentecost, and Ambrym in 2005.^[17] Local members have participated in service projects, such as in 2005, 45 youth from the two Port Vila branches helped clean the waterfront.^[18] The Church has continued to donate and provide assistance to improve living conditions in recent years.^[19]

Opportunities, Challenges and Prospects

Religious Freedom

The Church faces no restrictions and missionaries may proselyte openly. Local government decisions are often made by the community as a whole, which can result in some restrictions and friction between villages and the Church if consent is not given by the chief and the community for missionary visits and Church activity.

Cultural Issues

Low levels of cigarette and alcohol use are a positive cultural characteristic which may facilitate LDS Church growth. Kava consumption as relating to the Word of Wisdom remains a subject of debate among some members. Church leaders have counseled for members to keep free of habit-forming substances which some apply to recreational kava use. The strong sense of community present in most villages can both help and hinder missionary work.

National Outreach

All six administrative provinces have a Church outreach center. Islands which have a congregation account for approximately 75% of the national population. 40% of the unreached population resides on Pentecost and Ambrym, whereas the remaining 60% live on islands with fewer than 5,000 inhabitants. The Church will face the challenge of maintaining many outreach centers in order to reach a small population residing on scores of islands spread over a large area of ocean.

Ambae is the island which has the most penetrating mission outreach, as five congregations serve the island's less than 10,000 inhabitants. Islands with the largest populations – Efate and Espiritu Santo – provide the greatest opportunities for growth as there are fewer than six congregations on each island and both have large geographic areas near outreach centers which are more densely populated than other locations. Expanding outreach to the 25% of the population living on unreached islands will most likely occur by members from these islands moving to locations with a Church presence, joining the Church, and later returning to their home islands to share the gospel with their communities. This process brought the Church to additional islands during the 1990s and 2000s.

Vanuatu's remoteness and isolation from the Fiji Suva Mission's headquarters leads to limited missionary visits and resources. It appears that this has likely facilitated rather than reduced growth as it has required greater self-sufficiency and independence with local members holding Church callings, serving missions, and standing on their own with some periodic mentoring.

Member Activity and Convert Retention

Very few problems have been encountered regarding member activity and convert retention. The lack of inactivity and poor convert retention issues in Vanuatu indicate that it is possible to retain most converts over the long term.

Ethnic Issues and Integration

The lack of ethnic diversity has nearly eliminated potential ethnic integration issues. The Church has experienced some challenges in establishing branches in small villages in which it was not welcomed. In the past decade, both a member who invited full-time missionaries to his village and the missionaries themselves were fined by the village chiefs because prior approval was not granted.^[20]

Language Issues

Providing Church materials in each of the 100-plus indigenous languages appears infeasible due to the few books translated into these languages and the small number of speakers. Other Christian groups appear to have come to this same conclusion, as only three indigenous languages have the New Testament translated despite 80-90% of the population adhering to Christianity. English and French are widely taught in schools and provide a means of conveying the gospel to the population with fewer language barriers. The translation of many Church materials into Bislama has facilitated growth and understanding of Church doctrine and beliefs. Translations of Church materials may occur for languages with over 10,000 speakers which have a significant number of members, but forthcoming translations in the near future appear unlikely.

Missionary Service

Most missionaries serving in Vanuatu are natives or are from other Pacific islands. Vanuatu appears fairly self-sufficient in its missionary force. Some senior couple missionaries serve on remote islands – like Tanna – and provide mentoring and leadership assistance.

Leadership

Mentoring by senior missionary couples and mission leadership has assisted in the development and training of local leadership. Local Church leaders are willing to serve and still require great care and guidance due to their limited experience in Church administration. Returned missionaries provide valuable manpower for long-term growth and local leadership.

Temple

Vanuatu belongs to the Suva Fiji Temple district. In 1987, the first two families from Vanuatu attended the temple in New Zealand.^[21] Members have gone to great lengths to pay the needed fare to attend the temple in Fiji or New Zealand despite low salaries and high cost of living.^[22] Prospects for a temple in Vanuatu appear unlikely until several stakes are organized on Efate.

Comparative Growth

Vanuatu has been one of the most successful nations for LDS growth over the past decade with rapid membership growth and high convert retention. The Church in Vanuatu has one of the lowest ratios of members to congregations and one of the highest member activity and convert retention rates worldwide. During the 2008-2009 school year, Vanuatu had the highest percentage of Church members enrolled in seminary or institute in the South Pacific (12%).

Other Christian denominations have experienced mixed results. Seventh-day Adventists have achieved consistent growth and claim approximately eight percent of the population, whereas Jehovah's Witnesses had fewer than 500 active members in 2009. Denominations which have assimilated with the local culture, developed larger membership communities, possess sufficient leadership, and have member-missionary participation appear most successful.

Future Prospects

Steady, sustainable growth has occurred over the past decade and prospects appear favorable for continued growth. Additional districts will likely be created in the near future on the islands of Malekula, Ambae, and Tanna as each of these islands have a sufficient number of congregations. The creation of a stake does not appear likely for several more years as none of the islands have enough members to support a stake, and stakes will likely not stretch over several islands due to travel and communication challenges. Vanuatu appears likely to reproduce the strong membership growth experienced in other South Pacific nations over the past fifty years due to favorable mission outreach conditions. Vanuatu could one day support its own LDS mission despite its small population due to its remoteness, self sufficiency in Church administration, receptivity to mission outreach, and humanitarian needs.

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- [6] Hart, John L. "Strengthened families strengthen Church," LDS Church News, 31 January 2004. <http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/45030/Strengthened-families-strengthen-Church.html>
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- [11] "Work thrives in earthquake's wake," LDS Church News, 1 February 2003. <http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/43159/Work-thrives-in-earthquakes-wake.html>
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