

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.



Guyana

Population: 0.74 millions (#166 out of countries)

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Geography

Area: 214,969 square km. Located in northern South America but generally categorized as culturally part of the Caribbean, Guyana is geographically the largest of the Guianas and borders Suriname, Brazil, Venezuela, and the North Atlantic Ocean. Tropical climate occurs in most areas marked by two distinct rainy seasons in the summer and winter. A low coastal plain occupies northern areas whereas dense tropical rainforest and hilly terrain dominate the interior. There are some areas of savanna in the south in highland areas. Major rivers include the Essequibo, Courantyne, Berbice, and Demerara. Flash flooding is a natural hazard. Environmental issues include water pollution and deforestation. Guyana is divided into ten administrative regions. Large portions of the eastern and western interior are claimed by Suriname and Venezuela, respectively.

Peoples

East Indian: 39.8%

Black: 29.3%

Mixed: 19.9%

Amerindian: 10.5%

Other: 0.5%

Guyana supports one of the most diverse populations in the Western hemisphere with no ethnic group constituting a majority. East Indians constitute 39.8% of the population and initially were brought as indentured servants by the British, whereas blacks account for 29.3% of the population and descend from freed Africans brought to the colony prior to the abolition of slavery in the 1830s. East Indians and blacks reside in coastal areas, whereas Amerindians populate rural interior areas and account for 10.5% of the population. The remainder of the population consists of mixed or other ethnicities.

Population: 740,685 (July 2018)

Annual Growth Rate: 0.48% (2018)

Fertility Rate: 1.97 children born per woman (2018)

Life Expectancy: 65.9 male, 72.1 female (2018)

Languages: Guyanese Creole English and Standard English (88%), other and unknown (12%). English is the official language. No Amerindian languages appear to have more than 5,000 speakers.

Literacy: 88.5% (2015)

History

Denoting a “land of many waters” in Amerindian languages, present-day Guyana was initially settled by Arawak and Carib Amerindians. The Dutch were the first Europeans to colonize the region, but the British occupied the territory in 1796. Formal British sovereignty over the colonies in Guyana was implemented in 1815. The British cultivated sugarcane and staffed the plantations with African slaves until the abolition of slavery in the 1830s. Indentured servants, primarily from India, were relocated to Guyana to work on the plantations until 1917. After the price of sugar fell dramatically in the late 1800s, the economy transitioned to growing other crops and mining. Guyana gained independence from the United Kingdom in 1966. Autocratic president Forbes Burnham enacted socialist one-party policies and ruled until 1985. In the late 1970s, Guyana received international attention due to a mass suicide in Jonestown by American members of the Peoples Temple cult where over 900 people perished. Democratic institutions and government were established in the late 1980s and early 1990s.[1] Guyana has experienced population decline or stagnant population growth for nearly two decades due to ongoing emigration.

Culture

Guyanese culture reflects the eclectic demographics of the population as evidenced in cuisine, language, religion, customs and practices. Caribbean culture is a major contemporary influence on society. East Indian dishes are widely consumed among all ethnicities. With the exception of predominantly East Indian Hindus and black Rastafarians, all ethnic groups are found among the country’s major religious traditions. Creole is widely spoken and represents the fusion of ethnic groups. Notwithstanding the mixing of cultural traditions and practices, many ethnic groups retain their individual ethnic and cultural identities, particularly East Indians and Amerindians. Cigarette consumption rates are lower than the world average whereas alcohol consumption rates are slightly higher than the world average. Due to complexities and expenses surrounding legal marriage, many couples cohabitate and have children together but are not legally married.

Economy

GDP per capita: $8,100 (2017) [13.5% of U.S.]

Human Development Index: 0.654 (2017)

Corruption Index: 37 (2018)

Rice, sugar, timber, and mining dominate the Guyanese economy. Poor infrastructure and lack of educated and skilled individuals resulted in little economic growth for the past couple of decades. High amounts of public debt are also a concern. Socialistic policies followed during the first several decades after independence culminated in a lack of integration with the world economy. Currently, the government is focusing on mining, petroleum extraction, agriculture, and exporting raw materials. Services generate 69.3% of the GDP, whereas agriculture and industry each account for approximately 15% of the GDP. Primary trade partners include Canada, Trinidad and Tobago, the United States.

Corruption is perceived as widespread. There has been little improvement in reducing the level of perceived corruption in recent years. Guyana is a transshipment point for illicit drugs produced in South America destined for Europe and North America. Human trafficking for the purposes of forced labor and commercial sexual exploitation is a major concern, as many are placed in forced labor in mining camps in remote, interior areas. Women and girls are trafficked with neighboring countries for sexual exploitation.

Faiths

Christian: 64%

Hindu: 25%

Muslim: 7%

Other: 1%

None: 3%

Christians

Denominations – Members – Congregations

Pentecostals – 170,358

Roman Catholics – 51,848

Anglicans – 37,034

Methodists – 7,407

Seventh Day Adventists – 63,982 – 212

Latter-day Saints – 5,840 – 11

Jehovah's Witnesses – 3,121 – 48

Religion

Two-thirds of Guyanese are Christian. Pentecostals are the largest Christian group and constitute 27% of the population. Other major Christian groups include Seventh-Day Adventists (9%), Catholics (8%), and Anglicans (5%). Hindus account for 25% of the population, whereas Muslims account for 7%; both religious groups are concentrated among East Indians.[2] There are small numbers of Rastafarians concentrated among black Guyanese.

Religious Freedom

The constitution protects religious freedom, which is upheld by the government. The government is secular, and there are no restrictions on individuals changing their religious affiliation. All religious groups worship freely. There is no formal procedure for government registration. However, religious groups must register places of worship through the deeds registry. Religious groups also must obtain the permission of local village councils to operate in areas populated predominantly by Amerindians. There have been no instances of societal abuse of religious freedom reported.[3]

Largest Towns

Urban: 26.6% (2018)

Georgetown, Linden, New Amsterdam, **Anna Regina**, Corriverton, **Bartica**, **Parika**, Rose Hall, Rosignol, **Mahdia**

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

Six of the ten most populous cities have a Church congregation. Fourteen percent (14%) of the population resides in the ten most populous cities.

Church History

The first missionaries entered Guyana in 1988 and consisted of a single senior missionary couple serving under the West Indies Mission. The first sacrament meeting occurred in September 1988, and a branch was organized in March 1989. Twenty-three members attended meetings when the branch was officially organized. In February 1989, the Church received official government recognition. Guyana was assigned to the newly-organized Trinidad and Tobago Mission in 1991 and was reassigned to the West Indies Mission upon the closure of the Trinidad and Tobago Mission in 1994. During this period, greater numbers of missionaries were assigned to Guyana. Seminary and institute commenced in the mid-1990s. In 2000, the first

branch outside of Georgetown was organized in New Amsterdam, and in 2009 Linden became the first city in the interior to open for missionary work. The number of full-time missionaries assigned to Guyana steadily increased in the 2000s due to high receptivity.

In September 2009, the Guyanese government requested the Church to remove foreign missionaries who were claimed to have expired missionary visas. Missionaries reported that they were incarcerated for one day due to alleged visa violations. The Guyanese government enforced a new limit on the number of foreign missionaries able to serve in Guyana to around twenty. Later that month, the Church withdrew about forty of the sixty missionaries serving in Guyana. Local members were provided with the opportunity to serve as full-time missionary companions in order to keep proselyting areas open, but this approach was not sustained. Government officials expressed concerns that the Church had a larger missionary force than most Christian churches in Guyana notwithstanding the comparatively small number of Latter-day Saints in the country. In 2016, Elder Dale G. Renlund attended a district conference in Georgetown.[4] In 2019, Guyana was assigned to the Trinidad Port of Spain Mission.

Membership Growth

Church Membership: 5,840 (2017)

There were 300 members in 1993 and 700 in 1997. By 2000, membership totaled 1,036. Moderate rates of membership growth occurred for the first half of the 2000s, whereas rapid membership growth occurred during the latter-half of the 2000s. Membership increased to 1,251 in 2002, 1,607 in 2004, 2,072 in 2006, 3,935 in 2008, and 5,016 in 2010. During 2008 and 2009, there were over one hundred convert baptisms a month in Guyana. Annual membership growth rates in the 2000s ranged from a high of 53% in 2008 to a low of 3.5% in 2010 but generally varied between 7% and 20%. However, slow membership growth occurred in the 2010s as annual membership growth rates generally ranged from 0.5-4.0%. Church membership totaled 5,415 in 2012, 5,648 in 2015, and 5,840 in 2017.

In 2017, one in 126, or 0.79% of the population, was nominally a Latter-day Saint.

Congregational Growth

Wards: 0 Branches: 11 (2018)

There was one branch in 1993. By the end of 1994, a second branch was organized in Garden Park, a suburb of Georgetown. A third branch was organized in 1996 in Patentia. By 2000, there were four branches. The number of branches increased to five in 2003, six in 2004, eight in 2005, eleven in 2006, twelve in 2007, and sixteen in 2008. However, the number of branches declined to fifteen in 2009, thirteen in early 2011, and eleven in 2017. During the 2000s, most new branches were organized in the Georgetown and New Amsterdam areas, and districts were established in each city in 2003 and 2005, respectively. A third district briefly operated in Diamond during the mid-2000s. In the late 2000s, branches were organized for the first time in Crabwood Creek, Bushlot, Parika, and Linden. In the late 2000s and early 2010s, branches that were discontinued included the Parika, Georgetown 2nd, Georgetown 3rd, and New Amsterdam 2nd Branches. In the late 2000s, groups also functioned in East Linden and in Skeldon. In the early 2010s, the Crabwood Creek Branch was consolidated with the Skeldon Group to create the Corriverton Branch and the Patentia Branch was renamed the La Grange Branch. In early 2011, the New Amsterdam Guyana District was discontinued and branches were placed under the West Indies Mission. Groups no longer appeared to operate in Parika or East Linden by 2012. In 2017, the Vreed en Hoop Branch and the Bushlot Branch were discontinued. However, that same year the Church reinstated a district to service five branches in coastal areas of eastern Guyana called the Berbice Guyana District.

Activity and Retention

Guyana experienced moderate rates of convert retention and member activity until the late 2000s as many of the thousands of converts who joined the Church between 2007 and 2009 were not retained due to minimal pre-baptismal teaching and poor new convert fellowshipping support. The apostasy of some members appears to have also significantly impacted overall activity rates, especially in New Amsterdam. Member activity rates appear to be higher in Georgetown than in New Amsterdam as quick-baptism tactics were more pervasive in New Amsterdam. The average number of members per congregation increased from 259 in 2000 to 334 in 2010 and 531 in 2017, reflecting low convert retention. The number of members enrolled in seminary and institute increased from 127 during the 2007–2008 school year to 296 during the 2009–2010 school year. In the mid-2010s, the approximate number of active members by branch per reports from returned missionaries or local members was as follows: Garden Park (70), New Amsterdam (70), Linden (30), and East Canje (50). In the late 2010s, the number of active members by branch per reports from returned missionaries or local members was as follows: Georgetown (90), Diamond (85), Rosignol (70), Linden (55), Garden Park (50), and Corriverton (20). Most other branches appear to have between fifty and one hundred active members. Nationwide active membership is estimated at 800, or 14% of total church membership.

In the mid and late 2010s, estimated member activity rates for individual congregations ranged from 20-60%, whereas estimated convert retention rates one year after baptism significantly varied from less than 10% to as high as 89% per reports from local members. Furthermore, the number of convert baptisms per year per congregation also widely varies from as few as less than five to more than forty. Returned missionaries in the late 2010s indicated that approximately two-thirds of new converts remain

active one year after baptism.

Language Materials

Languages with Latter-day Saint Scripture: English.

All Latter-day Saint scriptures and materials are available in English.

Meetinghouses

The first meetinghouse in Guyana was dedicated in 2003. By early 2011, there were approximately eleven meetinghouses, most of which consisted of renovated buildings and rented spaces.

Health and Safety

The risk for infectious disease is high, particularly for leptospirosis, dengue fever, malaria, typhoid fever, hepatitis A, and bacterial and protozoal diarrhea. HIV/AIDs infects 1.7% of the adult population.

Humanitarian and Development Work

The Church has conducted 170 humanitarian and development projects in Guyana since 1985. Most of these projects have been community projects although emergency response, maternal and newborn care, refugee response, vision care, and wheelchair donations have been provided.[5] In 2011, a senior missionary couple was assigned to Georgetown to help the unemployed find sustainable employment.

Opportunities, Challenges, and Prospects

Religious Freedom

The Church benefits from full religious freedom for its members to meet, proselyte, and worship without societal or government interference. Past visa challenges with foreign missionaries have limited the number of North American full-time missionaries that can be assigned.

Cultural Issues

High receptivity to Christianity, few ethnic tensions, moderately high literacy rates, and shared language contributed to rapid membership and congregational growth for the Church in Guyana during the 2000s. Guyana provides a unique opportunity to extend outreach to Hindus and Muslims with no legal restrictions and develop culturally-tailored proselytism approaches that can be utilized among Hindus and Muslims elsewhere. However, returned missionaries report that Christians are the most receptive to the Church. A strong sense of community in many areas can foster sustainability of local congregations if a sizeable following of members is maintained. Low standards of living, low levels of commitment to a particular Christian denomination, and community opposition are cultural challenges that impede greater church growth. The complex religious background of many Guyanese merits missionary approaches that are flexible and varied. Although the poverty of many of the people in Guyana likely has made them more receptive to the gospel message, many struggle with unemployment, low living standards, and few financial resources. The Church has sought to meet economic and humanitarian needs through a variety of projects and opportunities for additional aid continue to abound. The lack of legal marriages for many couples presents challenges for outreach and can result in some potential converts losing interest if they are unable to get legally married. Missionaries have played a crucial role in preparing and arranging marriage ceremonies for potential converts.

National Outreach

Notwithstanding Guyana’s small urban population, 63% of the national population resides in cities, towns, and villages within reasonable access to a Church congregation. This relatively high degree of national outreach has been achieved only within the past 15 years as a result of the organization of congregations on the outskirts of Georgetown and New Amsterdam and the expansion of missionary activity into several of the most populous, previously-unreached cities in coastal areas and Linden. Five of the ten administrative regions have a congregation and account for 83% of the population. Ninety percent (90%) of the national population resides in coastal areas.[6]

Opportunities for expanding national outreach appear most favorable in the most populous, lesser-reached or unreached towns in coastal areas such as Skeldon, Charity, and Bartica as these towns are within close proximity of branches and have sizeable populations. Holding cottage meetings to ascertain local receptivity and church growth potential in these and other locations can facilitate national outreach expansion through the smart allocation of limited missionary resources. The Church in the recent past has been flexible and dynamic in surveying growth opportunities, as evidenced by the establishment of a second home group in Linden before the organization of the first independent branch and the regular opening of groups and dependent branches in the late 2000s when foreign full-time missionaries were plentiful. Government-set caps on the number of foreign full-time missionaries permitted to serve in Guyana pose a major setback in expanding outreach. Local member and leadership capabilities are insufficient in meeting their own administrative and ecclesiastical needs and require mission support. This results in delays in expanding outreach into unreached and lesser-reached communities to plant new congregations. Reliance on full-time missionaries and low member activity rates and local leader sustainability are chiefly responsible for congregation consolidations in the late 2000s and the 2010s, which, left unchecked, may continue in the coming years and limit national outreach.

There have been no concentrated efforts to extend outreach among Amerindian groups or in the sparsely populated interior largely due to the unfeasibility of assigning full-time missionaries to villages difficult to access and with few inhabitants. Expanding outreach to these areas will require dedication and effort on the part of senior missionary couples and local members and leaders. Furthermore, future efforts to reach Amerindian communities will require careful planning in accordance to national laws governing proselytism in these areas.

Member Activity and Convert Retention

Many obstacles for member activity and convert retention rates include low long-term commitment of converts baptized during the periods of most rapid membership growth who received minimal teaching prior to baptism, the large number of children and youth baptized with no parental or congregational support, few capable leaders who are reliable and knowledgeable in church administration, the lack of native returned missionaries, counter-proselytism efforts by other denominations, and transportation challenges to attend church meetings. Transportation in Guyana is difficult and expensive. Often members will be picked up in trucks or wagons, especially for conferences. Frequent rain can dramatically lower the number of members who attend Church on a given Sunday.

Distance from mission headquarters in Trinidad has likely reduced missionary accountability for baptizing converts and has exacerbated convert attrition issues. Less emphasis was placed on the quality and quantity of teaching for investigators who were baptized in the late 2000s. Sacrament meeting attendance is poor in places such as New Amsterdam, where many branches have historically relied on the full-time missionaries to function properly and has been a major contributor to the consolidation of congregations in recent years. The mass exodus of full-time missionaries in 2009 and the inability of local members to sufficiently compensate for their loss is reflected in ongoing administrative challenges that included the dissolution of the New Amsterdam Guyana District in 2011 and delays in the reinstatement of the district in 2017. Senior missionary couples have assisted in convert retention through organizing seminary and institute programs and young-single adult activities. Seminary and institute classes commenced in Linden within months of the assignment of the first full-time missionaries and may curtail inactivity through solidifying convert testimonies and provide socialization opportunities with fellow members. Increasing attendance in seminary and institute in the late 2000s is a positive development indicating that active youth membership has likely increased despite convert retention problems. In 2009, mission policies regarding convert baptismal standards were revised in an effort to improve retention resulting in a major slowdown to membership growth rates in 2010. Although retention rates have recently appeared to significantly improve for new converts within the first year after baptism, the number of new converts remains too small to noticeably change national member activity rates. Member reactivation efforts have also born little fruit.

Ethnic Issues and Integration

Full-time missionaries and local members report that there have been no major ethnic integration issues at church, notwithstanding the ethnic diversity of the Guyanese population. Common usage of Guyanese Creole English has facilitated ethnic integration despite differing cultural practices and attitudes among differing ethnicities. The demographics of most Latter-day Saint congregations appear representative of the national demographics of the Guyanese population.

Language Issues

There are no Latter-day Saint materials in Guyanese Creole English, but many are able to utilize standard-English scriptures and materials for personal study and gospel instruction. Literacy rates are moderately high notwithstanding low living standards. Translations of basic outreach materials such as proselytism tracts into Guyanese Creole English may be warranted for culturally-effective outreach.

Missionary Service

Few local members serve full-time missions but the number of local members serving missions appears to have increased in recent years as a result of increasing emphasis on missionary preparation for youth. In 2010, the Church in Guyana appeared to supply between one-third to one-half of the full-time missionary force in the country. The disruption of foreign full-time

missionary service severely affected the Church in Guyana and demonstrates the reliance of many leaders and members on foreign missionary support. Efforts to have local youth serve “mini-missions” with a full-time missionary companion appear to have yielded few long-term effects and low sustainability after the removal of two-thirds of the missionary force in late 2009. Carefully-organized, consistent programs for local members to assist in missionary efforts could yield greater long-term results. The Church in Guyana will need to have enough members who serve full-time missions to equal the number of full-time missionaries assigned to the country in order to improve local self-sufficiency.

Leadership

The Church in Guyana has faced consistent frustrations in developing and increasing the number of self-sufficient priesthood holders to lead congregations and maintain the organization of districts as indicated by the consolidation of two of the three districts by 2011. In 2011, nearly all the branches appeared to be led by local members notwithstanding these challenges. Mission leadership has worked to establish the first stake in Guyana in Georgetown since 2008, but as of 2011 these efforts had not come to fruition due to leadership sustainability and member activity issues. An application was sent to Church headquarters for a stake to be organized in 2008 but was not approved. One of the obstacles that prevented a stake organization was a lack of full-member families in Georgetown. A senior couple was sent to Georgetown and given the specific task to prepare the district for becoming a stake in the spring of 2009. President Gamiette of the West Indies Mission began his tenure in mid-2009 and immediately turned full-time missionaries’ focus towards the reactivation of lost new converts and strengthening leadership. All branches appeared led by a local member as of early 2019. However, no stake has been organized in the country as of early 2019.

Temple

Guyana is assigned to the Caracas Venezuela Temple district, but due to political conditions in Venezuela many members attend the Santo Domingo Dominican Republic Temple. Organized temple trips occur regularly for members, but travel costs and distance limit the frequency members may attend the temple. Prospects for a temple closer to members in Guyana may be forthcoming for a temple in Trinidad and Tobago one day, but few members in the region and low member activity rates have thus far prevented a temple announcement.

Comparative Growth

The Church in Guyana experienced some of the most rapid membership and congregational growth rates among nations with fewer than 10,000 members in the 2000s but also appears to have exhibited one of the lowest convert retention rates. Member activity rates are among the lowest in the Caribbean and are comparable to rates in many Latin American nations. The percentage of members in the population is lower than most Latin American nations but higher than most Caribbean nations. In 2019, Guyana was the country with the third most members without a stake.

Other Christian churches and organizations with a strong missionary focus have seen modest to exceptional growth in Guyana. The Seventh-Day Adventists have experienced great growth in Guyana, numbering 64,000 members in over 210 congregations in 2016. Adventists rank among the largest denominations in the country. Jehovah’s Witnesses have seen more modest growth. Witnesses reported an increase in membership of approximately 30%. With Adventists and Witnesses periodically organize new congregations. These and other missionary-minded Christian groups appear to have much higher convert retention rates than The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as greater emphasis is placed on member-missionary work and pre-baptismal preparation.

Future Prospects

Ongoing member inactivity and local leadership challenges continue to frustrate church growth potential for the Church in Guyana, notwithstanding high rates of receptivity. Improved standards for convert baptisms and efforts directed toward reactivation and strengthening congregations and leaders may yield more lasting church growth results. However, little progress has occurred in the 2010s even though mission and district leaders have appeared to consistently maintain this focus. Pending steady improvement and greater consistency in convert retention and member activity, the district in Georgetown may become a stake within the next decade. Increasing numbers of youth and young adults serving missions may lay a foundation for greater, more experienced local leaders who can reduce the administrative burden on mission leadership. The creation of a separate mission to administer Guyana, Suriname, and French Guiana is warranted in order to improve interaction between local and mission leaders, reduce the administrative burden on mission leaders in the Trinidad Port of Spain Mission, and improve accountability over the long term for convert baptisms in the Guianas. Visa restrictions on the number of foreign missionaries deters the Church from opening additional areas of proselytism but may improve leadership development by demanding greater self-sufficiency.

[1] “Background Note: Guyana,” Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, 4 April 2011. http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/1984.htm

[2] “Guyana.” International Religious Freedom Report for 2017. Accessed 18 March 2019. http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2010/148760.htm

[3] “Guyana,” International Religious Freedom Report 2010, 17 November 2010. http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2010/148760.htm

[4] Weaver, Sarah Jane. “Inside the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles: What it’s like to be a prophet, seer and revelator.” LDS Church News. 21 June 2018. https://www.thechurchnews.com/leaders-and-ministry/2018-06-22/inside-the-quorum-of-the-twelve-apostles-personal-experiences-r

[5] “Where We Work,” LDS Charities. Accessed 18 March 2019. https://www.ldscharities.org/where-we-work

[6] “Background Note: Guyana,” Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, 4 April 2011. http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/1984.htm