

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.



Venezuela

Population: 28.87 millions (#46 out of countries)

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Geography

Area: 912,050 square km. Located in northern South America, Venezuela borders Guyana, Brazil, Colombia, and the Caribbean Sea. Terrain varies from plains and basins in the central, southwest, and extreme south to large mountain ranges in the southeast (Guiana Highlands) and northwest. Lake Maracaibo is a large brackish lake in the northwest with surrounding lowlands and large oil deposits. Hot, humid conditions occur throughout the country with the exception of mountainous areas where there are more temperate conditions. Tropical rainforest covers many interior areas. Floods, mudslides, and droughts are natural hazards. Environmental issues include pollution, improper sewage disposal, deforestation, declining soil quality, and threat of rainforest coverage loss. Venezuela is administratively divided into 23 states, one capital district, and one federal dependency.

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Population: 27,223,228 (July 2010)

Annual Growth Rate: 1.515% (2010)

Fertility Rate: 2.45 children born per woman (2010)

Life Expectancy: 70.69 male, 77 female (2010)

Peoples

Venezuelan (Spanish-speaking): 97%

other: 3%

Languages: Spanish (97%), Chinese (1.5%), Portuguese (1%), other (0.5%). Spanish is the official language and only language spoken by over one million people (26.4 million). Spoken primarily in extreme northwest Venezuela on the Guajira Peninsula, Wayuu has 177,000 speakers and is the only Amerindian language with over 50,000 speakers.

Literacy: 93% (2001)

History

Amerindian tribes populated Venezuela and practiced hunter-gatherer and agriculturist lifestyles prior to Spanish discovery and colonization. In 1522, Spain founded its first permanent settlement in South America in Venezuela, named Nuevo Toledo, but the area experienced little development and progress for the next two centuries. Resistance against Spanish rule began to intensify in the late seventeenth century and in 1821, Venezuela became independent, joining the Republic of Gran Colombia with Colombia, Panama, and Ecuador. In 1830, Venezuela withdrew from the republic and became its own independent nation. Political instability and dictatorships marked much of Venezuela's history for the rest of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. Following the removal of General Marcos Perez Jimenez from power in the late 1950s, Venezuela experience democratic rule and peace for the following three decades. In the late 1980s, riots in Caracas erupted over government economic policies. In 1992, a failed coup lead by Hugo Chavez resulted in the imprisonment of Chavez until 1994. Hugo Chavez won the 1998 presidential election and began reforming the constitution. Political instability returned in the early 2000s, followed by a greater push by Chavez to implement socialism.[1] In recent years, Venezuela has strained its relations with the United States and strengthen ties with other socialist-leaning nations like Bolivia and Cuba.

Culture

Spanish colonialism has strongly shaped Venezuelan culture, leaving a legacy of language, Catholicism, and cuisine. The Catholic Church remains a strong social influence, which has led the government to attempt to limit its political power. Local art, music, and literature tend to be less known internationally than many other nations in the region. Popular local dishes or food staples include pastries like cachapas and empanadas, arepas (cornmeal biscuits with filling), plantains, beans, rice, eggs, and meat.[2] Alcohol and cigarette consumption rates rank near the worldwide average, but are higher than many other Latin American nations.

Economy

GDP per capita: $13,000 (2009) [28% of US]

Human Development Index: 0.844

Corruption Index: 1.9

Oil profits fuel economic growth and development, which account for 90% of export earnings and 30% of the GDP. In 2009, the worldwide financial crisis brought Venezuela into recession after several years of strong economic growth. The government continues to nationalize all major sectors of the economy. Little diversification in the economy has occurred in recent years. Services employ 64% of the work force and generate 59% of the GDP whereas industry accounts for 23% of the work force and generates 37% of the GDP. Major industries include petroleum, construction materials, food processing, clothing, and mining. Agriculture employs 13% of the work force and generates 4% of the GDP. Primary crops and agricultural products include corn, sorghum, sugarcane, rice, fruit, vegetables, coffee, meat, and poultry. The United States remains Venezuela's primary trade partner despite souring political relations. Colombia, Brazil, and China are additional major trade partners.

Corruption is perceived as the second most widespread in the Western Hemisphere after Haiti according to Transparency International. Illicit drug cultivation is not as prevalent as other South American countries, but Venezuela serves as a major transshipment point for cocaine and heroin. Judicial corruption and money laundering are also concerns.[3] Human trafficking of children for forced labor and commercial sexual exploitation remain major problems despite some government efforts to address the situation.

Faiths

Christian: 98%

other: 2%

Christians

Denominations Members Congregations

Catholic 26,134,299

Seventh Day Adventists 213,199 780

Latter-Day Saints 146,987 274

Jehovah's Witnesses 113,002 1,399

Religion

The government estimates that Catholics nominally account for 92% of the population, with the remaining 8% primarily consisting of Protestants. Other estimates indicate that as many as 10% of Venezuelans are Protestant. Muslims number over 100,000, comprise principally of Lebanese and Syrian immigrants and their descendents, and are concentrated in Caracas and Nueva Esparta State. There are approximately 13,000 Jews that reside mainly in Caracas.[4]

Religious Freedom

Persecution Index:

The constitution protects religious freedom on condition that the practice of religious freedom does not interfere with public order, decency, and public morality. Overall most religious groups freely operate and assemble, but the government has intentionally restricted the practice of religious freedom of denominations or geographic regions which have tended to criticize the government. The government has taken steps to limit the political influence of the Roman Catholic Church and allegedly participated in the establishment of the Reformist Catholic Church of Venezuela in mid-2008. Religious groups may establish schools and perform social develop programs. The government has assisted many religious groups with their community service. Foreign missionaries must obtain a special religious visa to enter the country, which can be a lengthy process. Areas populated by indigenous Amerindian groups are off limits to foreign missionary groups.[5]

Largest Cities

Urban: 93%

Caracas, Maracaibo, Valencia, Barquisimeto, Ciudad Guayana, Maracay, Barcelona, Petare, Maturín, Ciudad Bolívar, Turmero, Cumaná, Barinas, San Cristóbal, Cabimas, Baruta, Puerto La Cruz, Guarenas, Los Teques, Mérida, Coro, El Tigre, Puerto Cabello, Guacara, Acarigua, Punto Fijo, Guatire, Santa Teresa, Cabudare, Carúpano, Ciudad Ojeda, Guanare, Valera, Catia La Mar, Ocumare del Tuy, Calabozo, La Victoria, Cúa , San Fernando de Apure, Cagua, Anaco, San Juan de los Morros, Santa Lucía, Mariara, Araure, El Limón, Valle de la Pascua.

All 47 cities with over 100,000 inhabitants have an LDS congregation. 58% of the national population resides in the 47 largest cities.

LDS History

The Church created its first congregation in Caracas in 1966 with membership primarily comprised of American expatriates. That same year, four full-time missionaries were assigned from the Central American Mission[6] and Elder Marion G. Romney dedicated Venezuela for missionary work.[7] Seminary and institute began in 1972. In late 2005, full-time missionaries from the United States serving in Venezuela were removed and reassigned elsewhere due to visa issues.[8] In 2010, the South America Northwest Area administered Venezuela.

Missions

The Church created in the Colombia-Venezuela Mission in 1968. In 1971, the Church organized the Venezuela Mission in Caracas from the Colombia-Venezuela Mission. The Venezuela Maracaibo Mission was created in 1979, followed by the Venezuela Caracas West Mission in 1991 which was relocated to Valencia in 1994. In 1994, a fourth mission was created in Barcelona.

Membership Growth

LDS Membership: 150,017 (2010)

In 1971, there were 1,259 Latter-day Saints and by 1986, there were 23,000.[9] Church membership increased to 48,000 in 1991 and 73,000 in 1997. By year-end 2000, membership stood at 96,710.

During the early 2000s, rapid membership growth occurred as membership numbered 113,652 in 2002 and 128,874 in 2004. Membership growth began to slow in the mid-2000s and declined dramatically in the late 2000s. There were 138,676 members in 2006 and 144,089 in 2008. Annual membership growth rates decreased from over seven percent from 2001 to 2003 to 4.4% in 2005 and hit a low of 1.8% in 2008. In 2009, membership grew by two percent. In 2009, one in 185 was nominally LDS.

Congregational Growth

Wards: 205 Branches: 78

There were 98 LDS congregations in 1998 and by 1995 there were 211. In 2000, there were 221 congregations (114 wards and 107 branches). By 2002, there were 232 congregations and by 2004 there were 254 congregations. In 2006, there were 270 congregations. After 2006, congregational growth slowed and in 2009 there were 273 congregations, including 187 wards. Congregational growth slightly increased in the early 2000s as the number of units increased from 273 in 2009 to 283 in 2011.

Stake and District Growth

The Church created its first Venezuelan stake in 1977 in Caracas, followed by a second stake in Valencia (1979) and a third Maracaibo (1980). During the 1980s, four additional stakes were organized including Maracaibo South (1983), Guayana (1986), Barcelona (1989), and Caracas Urdaneta (1989). In the 1990s, nine new stakes were created in Maracay (1990), Ciudad Ojeda (1991), Maracaibo Centro (1992), Puerto La Cruz (1992), Caracas Palo Verde (1992), Barquisimeto (1994), San Cristobal (1995), Valencia Candelaria (1995), and Merida (1997). By 2000, there were 16 stakes.

During the 2000s, 11 new stakes were created, most from districts. Stakes created in this period were in Guarenas (2001), Maturin (2002), Ciudad Bolivar (2002), Barquisimeto Obelisco (2003), El Tigre (2003), Ocumare del Tuy (2004), Caracas Los Teques (2005), Barinas (2005), Maracaibo West (2006), Guacara (2007), and Punto Fijo (2009). In the 2010s, additional stakes were organized in San Félix (2010), San Francisco (2010), Cumaná (2011), Cagua (2011), San Cristóbal Pirineos (2011), and Cabimas (2011). By late 2011, there were 33 stakes.

There were 13 districts at year-end 2000, several of which became stakes within the next decade. In 2010, there were eight districts operating in La Pascua (1986), Los Llanos (1991), Valera (1991), Porlamar (1992), El Rosario (1997), La Fria (1999), Carupano (2001), and Calabozo (2005).

Activity and Retention

27,806 attended the Caracas Venezuela Temple open house and 5,973 attended the dedicatory sessions in 2000.[10] The average number of members per congregation increased from 438 in 2000 to 538 in 2009. 6,341 were enrolled in seminary or institute during the 2008-2009 school year, almost half the 11,903 enrolled during the 2007-2008 school year. Most wards appear to have over 100 active members whereas most branches have around 75 active members. Total active membership is estimated at 25,000, or 17% of nationwide membership.

Language Materials

Languages with LDS Scripture: Spanish, Chinese, Portuguese

All LDS scriptures and most Church materials are available in Spanish, including an LDS edition of the Bible complete with full LDS footnotes, bible dictionary, and topical guide. All LDS scriptures and most Church materials are available in Portuguese and Chinese (traditional characters) whereas more limited numbers of materials are translated into simplified Chinese characters.

Meetinghouses

There were over 130 LDS meetinghouses in 2010, most of which were church-built meetinghouses.

Health and Safety

Venezuela suffers from high crime rates and has one of the highest homicide rates worldwide.

Humanitarian and Development Work

In 1999, the Church provided food, clothing, and medical supplies for of flood and mudslide victims.[11] Nearly half a million pounds of supplies were donated to survivors in early 2000.[12] Additional humanitarian or development projects include donating mattresses for prisoners and providing neonatal resuscitation training in Maracaibo and Punto Fijo.[13]

Opportunities, Challenges and Prospect

Religious Freedom

In October 2005, the LDS Church withdrew 219 American missionaries due to difficulties receiving religious visas and perceived safety concerns as many worked in high-crime, poor communities. There were reports in the mid-2000s that LDS missionaries were harassed in poor areas.[14] As of late 2010, the Church did not have any known North American missionaries serving in the country.

Cultural Issues

Nominalism in the Catholic Church is a cultural obstacle for LDS missionaries to baptize and retain new converts. Instilling habits of regular church attendance and daily scripture reading in investigators, new converts, and inactive members has been difficult for missionaries and church leaders to accomplish, both because of culture and mission policies that have often emphasized quick baptism rather than gospel habits. Past political conflict has threatened the unity of LDS congregations,[15] and the Church has urged members to leave political issues outside of church. Violent crime is a major concern which partially prompted international Church leaders to remove North American missionaries in 2005. Some observer reports indicate that the Church has experienced greatest receptivity in poorer neighborhoods in the past, but LDS congregations operate in a wide range of socio-economic conditions and communities nationwide. Corruption creates economic and political challenges for local members and missionaries to function in society and follow LDS teachings.

National Outreach

67% of the national population resides in a city with over 20,000 inhabitants with an LDS congregation. All cities over 100,000 inhabitants have an LDS mission outreach center. 37 of the 61 cities with populations between 20,000 and 100,000 receive LDS mission outreach. The 24 unreached cities with over 20,000 inhabitants account for 4.8% of the national population. Latter-day Saints have a presence in every administrative area except for Delta Amacuro State, which is the second least populated Venezuelan state, and the Dependencias Federales, populated by less than 2,000. Four of the 23 states have LDS mission outreach centers in two or fewer locations (Portuguesa, Apure, Yaracuy, and Cojedes).

The percentage of Latter-day Saints widely varies by state. The Church does not publish a state-by-state membership breakdown, but the ratio of state population to LDS congregations provides insight into LDS percentages in the general population and the extent of mission outreach by state. States with likely the highest percentage of Latter-day Saints (less than 80,000 people per LDS congregation) are concentrated southeast of Caracas and in the far west and include Guarico, Anzoategui, Nueva Esparta, Zulia, and Tachira whereas states with the smallest percentages of Latter-day Saints (more than 200,000 people per LDS congregation) are clustered in the southwest interior and include Cojedes, Yaracuy, Apure, and Portuguesa. Some states which appear to have the highest percentages of Latter-day Saints experienced significant membership increases during the first half of the 2000s as indicated by congregational growth that outpaced most other areas of Venezuela. For example, Guarico State had five branches in early 2002 and by late 2010 had one ward and ten branches. States with the lowest percentages of Latter-day Saints have experienced slow or stagnant congregational growth rates over the past decade, such as Cojedes State in which only one LDS congregation operates.

The expansion of national outreach dramatically halted after 2005 as a result of the Church removing North American full-time missionaries, leaving an inadequate number of local missionaries to staff Venezuela's four full-time missions. Receptivity among the inhabitants of unreached cities and towns toward Latter-day Saint mission efforts appears to be high, but additional congregations will likely not be organized in these areas until greater numbers of Latin American full-time missionaries are available to be assigned to Venezuelan missions or active members move to these areas and help to establish the Church. In late 2009, the Church organized two mission branches for the Caracas and Barcelona Venezuela Missions, which may indicate a renewed effort by these missions to begin organizing active or less-active members into groups in unreached, remote areas. However, as of late 2010 it had been several years since the Church had established a new independent branch in a previously unreached city, largely due to a lack of self-reliant local members to meet the responsibilities of expanding national outreach.

Government restrictions ban proselytism by foreign religious groups among Amerindian tribes which tend to populate large, sparsely populated areas in the interior or some coastal areas. It is unclear whether the Church has a presence among any Amerindians in Venezuela, but it has not historically pursued mission outreach in these areas.

The Church operates an Internet site for the South America Northwest Area at http://www.iglesiadejesucristo.org.co/. The website offers Spanish information regarding church doctrines, news, temples, and missionary contact information. Use of the

website by local members and missionaries can assist proselytizing efforts both in reached and unreached areas.

Member Activity and Convert Retention

Quick-baptize tactics were widely practiced by full-time missionaries prior to the removal of North American missionaries in 2005. Many converts experienced minimal gospel teaching and pre-baptismal preparation and consequently were not retained. Poor convert retention during the early 2000s is manifest by the average number of members per congregation increasing from 438 to 514 between 2000 and 2005. Convert retention rates appeared to improve during the latter half of the 2000s as membership growth became more compatible with congregational growth, indicated by smaller increases in the average number of members per congregation between 2005 and 2009 from 514 to 538. Increased convert retention rates may be attributed to the staffing of Venezuelan missions principally by local members with a vested interest in creating strong indigenous congregations compared to itinerant foreign missionaries, and better implementation of higher teaching and baptism preparation standards for new converts such as developing habitual church attendance. Seminary and institute enrollment rates have fluctuated year to year from average to high for the region, providing an unclear picture of activity rates among youth and young adults.

Noticing slower church growth in Venezuela compared to other South American nations, President Hinckley challenged members to work harder to grow the Church in 1999.[16] The majority of church growth in the past has been attributed to the combined efforts of local and foreign full-time missionaries. With the removal of North American full-time missionaries in 2005, convert baptismal rates have dropped substantially. However, Venezuela avoided the massive unit consolidations of other Latin American nations in the early 2000s. Continued, if slow, increase in congregational numbers as well as membership attests that notwithstanding challenges, the LDS Church in Venezuela benefits from a stable, strong, and largely self-sufficient local membership base..

Ethnic Issues and Integration

The greatest integration challenges for Latter-day Saints appear politically and socioeconomicrather than ethnic. The Church has gained many converts in recent years among poor neighborhoods, which can challenge their integration into congregations with wealthier members. Tensions among members can lead to lower member activity, convert baptism, and convert retention rates if not properly addressed. . The Church in the past has made an effort for members to avoid political conversation at church as it can offend some members and divide rather than unify.

Language Issues

LDS materials are translated into the first language of as many as 99.5% of the population. There have been no reported challenges at church regarding language issues at present. Wayuu appears the only Amerindian language with potential for future LDS material translations as other languages have too few speakers to justify the translation of church materials. However there has been no known mission outreach directed toward speakers of Wayuu. Government bans on proselytizing Amerindian groups restricts the Church's efforts to reach speakers of these languages.

Missionary Service

Local members have become self-sufficient in maintaining the missionary forces of the four Venezuelan missions, but continue to lack the needed numbers to expand national outreach and increase the number of converts. In 1988, around 20 local youth served mini-missions for 30 to 60 days with a full-time missionary companion during their school vacation in the Venezuela Caracas Mission.[17] In 1992, the Church opened a missionary training center in Bogota, Colombia which trained new missionaries from Colombia, Ecuador, and Venezuela.[18] Following the removal of over 200 North American missionaries in 2005, the Church experienced a steady decline in convert baptisms and no expansion of missionary activity into unreached areas. There are some reports that the shortage of full-time missionaries was so great, the Church lowered the minimum age for full-time missionaries to serve to 18. Emphasis on missionary preparation for LDS youth can help reverse the trend of stagnant numbers of full-time missionaries serving in Venezuela.

Leadership

Mature local priesthood leaders have served in many regional or international positions as mission presidents, temple presidents, regional representatives, Area Authorities, and General Authorities. Teodoro Hoffmann I. from Valencia was called as a mission president in 1990[19] over the Venezuela Caracas Mission. In 1992, Victor R. Villasmil from Maracaibo was called as the president of the Peru Lima South Mission.[20] In 1993, Jose M. Jimenez from Caracas was called as a mission president.[21] In 1997, Omar A. Alvarez from Caracas was called to preside over the Venezuela Valencia Mission.[22] In 1997, Javier Ibanez L. from San Cristobal was called as the Venezuela Barcelona Mission president.[23] In 1999, Rafael Eduardo Pino G. from Caracas was called to preside over the Argentina Rosario Mission and Brazil native Fernando A. Silva from Caracas was called to preside over the Brazil Salvador Mission.[24] In 2003, Gamaliel de Jesus Osorno from Valencia began presiding over the Venezuela Barcelona Mission.[25] In 2004, Julio Ramon Davila Duran from Barquismeto was called to preside over the Colombia Barranquilla Mission.[26] In 2005, Danilo Augusto Paredes Onate from Caracas was called as a mission president[27] over the Venezuela Caracas Mission. In 2006, Fidel Alberto Coello from Barquisimeto began presiding

over the Venezuela Maracaibo Mission, Alexander Trinidad Mestre from Maracaibo was called to preside over the Venezuela Barcelona Mission, and Abraham Eulogio Quero from Caracas was called to preside over the Venezuela Valencia Mission.[28] In 2010, Javier R. Montalti from Guayana was called to preside over the Ecuador Guayaquil South Mission.[29]

In 1993, Carlos D. Vargas from Valencia[30] and Francisco G. Gimenez from Caracas were called as regional representatives.[31] Alejandro Portal from Maracaibo served as a missionary training center president starting in 1993.[32] In 1995, Carlos D. Vargas became an area authority[33] and in 1996, Francisco G. Gimenez became an area authority.[34] In 2003, Rafael E. Pino from Miranda was called as an Area Authority Seventy.[35] In 2006, Javier Ibanez from San Cristobal was called as an Area Seventy.[36] In 2007, Gamaliel Osorno was called as an Area Seventy.[37] In 2007, Teodoro Hoffmann Ilica from Caracas became the Caracas Venezuela Temple president.[38] In 2008, Rafael E. Pino was called to the First Quorum of the Seventy.[39] In 2010, Alexander Mestre was called as an Area Seventy.[40] In 2010, Luis Manuel Petit from Maracaibo was called as the Caracas Venezuela Temple president.[41]

Local church leadership appears self reliant in many areas, but continue to fall short of numbers needed to justify the creation of additional stakes or congregations. Some stakes have had CES employees serve in the stake presidency, but the Church does not appear to rely on its employees to staff ecclesiastical duties.

Temple

President Hinckley noted the possibility of a temple in Venezuela in late 1995.[42] Construction began on the Caracas Venezuela Temple in 1999 and the dedication occurred in 2000. Temple attendance appears low and inconsistent. In 2010, there were two to five endowment sessions scheduled Tuesdays through Fridays, with five to eight sessions held on Saturdays. The temple also serves members in the southern Caribbean, the Guianas, and the Brazilian Amazon Basin, but only members from Brazil appear to use the temple in appreciable numbers. LDS populations in other regions in Venezuela are large enough to support additional temples over the medium term, but the Church will likely not construct more temples until higher rates of temple attendance occur. President Hinckley predicted that a temple would one day be built in Maracaibo, but stressed the need for consistent temple attendance to the temple in Caracas; an eight hour journey each way.[43] In October 2011, the Church indicated that the newly announced Barranquilla Colombia Temple would service some members living in western Venezuela.[44]

Comparative Growth

Venezuela experienced the most rapid annual membership growth rates among Spanish-speaking South American countries during the early 2000s but in 2009 experienced one of the slowest rates in Latin America as only Uruguay, Puerto Rico, Chile, and Costa Rica reported slower membership growth. Unlike most Latin American nations, Venezuela did not once experience a decline in the number of congregations from year to year during the 2000s whereas the number of congregations in some Latin American nations like Chile and Peru declined by the hundreds. Venezuela ranked seventh among countries worldwide for the most congregations created (52) between 2000 and 2009. The percentage of Latter-day Saints in Venezuela is the second lowest among Spanish-speaking South American nations after Colombia. Although Peru and Venezuela have similarly sized populations, Peru has nine LDS missions and Venezuela has four. In 2010, Venezuela was the country with the fourth most members with only one temple.

Missionary-oriented Christian groups have experienced steady, strong church growth in Venezuela for decades. Seventh Day Adventists organize 50 new congregations a year and have experienced increases in the number of convert baptisms, reaching over 20,000 in 2008. Jehovah's Witnesses also report strong growth. These and other groups have developed self-sustaining leadership and consistent expansion of national outreach through the creation of new congregations.

Future Prospects

Venezuela remains one of the least reached nations for Latter-day Saints in South America, yet membership and strength are still substantial. Rapid membership and congregational growth in the early and mid-2000s indicate that the population has been recently receptive to the Church. Government regulations regarding the service of foreign missionaries has delayed church growth since 2005 but presents opportunities for local membership to grow more self-sufficient . Latin American full-time missionaries have sustained the four full-time missions, but no expansion in national outreach has occurred for several years. Greater emphasis on establishing firm gospel habits before baptism, preparing local youth to serve full-time missions, and stronger local priesthood leader involvement in missionary activity are needed to augment church growth in coming years.

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