

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.



Tuvalu

Population: 0.01 millions (#229 out of countries)

By David Stewart and Matt Martinich

Geography

Area: 26 square km. Comprising nine low-laying, narrow coral atolls in the South Pacific Ocean, Tuvalu is located in Polynesia between Hawaii and Australia. Tropical climate occurs year round modified by a rainy season from November to March. Rises in sea level and tropical storms are natural hazards. Environmental issues include inadequate fresh water supplies, beach erosion, damage to forest undergrowth, and coral reef damage. Tuvalu is administratively divided into seven island councils and one town council (Funafuti).

Peoples

Tuvaluan: 86.8%

Tuvaluan/I-Kiribati: 5.6%

Tuvaluan/other: 6.7%

Other: 0.9%

Tuvaluans populate eight of the nine atolls and are a Polynesian ethnic group. The island of Nui is populated by Kiribati, who are of Micronesian ethnic stock.

Population: 11,147 (July 2018)

Annual Growth Rate: 0.86% (2018)

Fertility Rate: 2.93 children born per woman (2018)

Life Expectancy: 65.0 male, 69.5 female (2018)

Languages: Tuvaluan (99%), Kiribati (1%). Tuvaluan and English are official languages.

Literacy: 95% (2004)

History

Polynesians are believed to have first settled Tuvalu as early as 1000 BC. Spanish explorers were the first Europeans to sight the islands in the sixteenth century. Greater interaction with Europeans occurred in the nineteenth century, who named Tuvalu the Ellice Islands. Hundreds of islanders were kidnapped in 1863 to labor in guano mines in Peru. The British began administering Tuvalu in the late nineteenth century as a protectorate and as part of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands colony between 1916 and 1974. United States military utilized the islands for airbases during World War II for the Pacific campaign against Imperial Japan. Initiated mainly by ethnic differences, Tuvalu voted to become a separate dependency of the United Kingdom from the Gilbert Islands (Kiribati) in 1974 and achieved independence in 1978. Tuvalu gained four additional islets previously claimed by the United States in 1979 through a friendship treaty.[1] Concerned about increasing sea levels, the government appealed in 2000 to New Zealand and Australia to accept the islands' population if the islands become uninhabitable.

Culture

The Church of Tuvalu is the dominant social and cultural influence. Families are assigned specific skills or tasks to perform for the community, and island elder councils dictate many aspects of village life. Traditional foods include seafood, coconut, fruit, pork, and a swamp crop similar to taro called pulaka. Soccer, volleyball, and rugby are the most common sports.[2] Alcohol consumption rates are very low.

Economy

GDP per capita: $3,800 (2017) [6.4% of U.S.]

Human Development Index: N/A

Corruption Index: N/A

The economy relies on remittances, fishing, and international aid to operate due to the islands' tiny population, remote location, poor soil, and lack of natural resources. Nearly all food and fuel is imported. Fishing and exploitation of the sea and reefs employ nearly the entire workforce. Services generate approximately 70% of the GDP, whereas industry and agriculture generate 5.6% and 24.5% of the GDP, respectively. Coconuts and fish are agricultural products. There have been some allegations of corruption among government officials.

Faiths

Christian: 99%

Baha'i: 1%

Christians

Denominations – Members – Congregations

Congregational Christian Church of Tuvalu – 10,813

Seventh Day Adventists – 344 – 3

Latter-day Saints – 268 – 1

Jehovah's Witnesses – 88 – 1

Religion

Nearly the entire population is Christian. Ninety-seven percent (97%) of Tuvaluans adhere to the Congregational Christian Church of Tuvalu, a denomination with historic ties to the Congregational Church in Samoa. The traditional chiefs of all nine

island groups are members of the Church of Tuvalu. Other prominent Christian denominations include Seventh Day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Catholics. Nanumea Island supports a Baha'i community.[3]

Religious Freedom

The constitution protects religious freedom, which is upheld by the government. The Church of Tuvalu is the state church, but the constitution provides for separation of church and state. A new religious group whose adult members constitute at least two percent of the population must register or may be prosecuted. Missionaries may proselyte on some islands. Traditional island elder councils on some islands have formally and informally banned proselytism by religious groups not already operating on their respective island, such as Jehovah's Witnesses. The Church of Tuvalu heavily influences social and political conditions.[4]

Largest Villages

Urban: 62.4%

Senala, Fakaifou, Alapi, Tekavatoetoe, Vaiaku, Lofeagai, Teone, **Motufoua, Teava, Aulotu.**

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

One of the ten largest villages has a Church congregation. Sixty-seven (67%) of the national population resides in the ten largest villages.

Church History and Background

The first known Tuvaluan converts joined the Church while attending Liahona High School in Tonga and Moroni High School in Fiji. By the mid-1980s, there were approximately two dozen members living in Funafuti. The president of the Micronesia-Guam Mission visited in 1984 and organized the first congregation the following year. The Church gained legal recognition and performed the first baptisms in Tuvalu by the end of 1985.[5] The Fiji Suva Mission began administering Tuvalu in the 1990s. Elder L. Tom Perry collectively dedicated Tuvalu with several other islands in the Fiji Suva Mission in 1996.[6] Church membership grew slowly in the 1990s and 2000s from ninety-one in 2000 to 100 in 2005 and 134 in 2009. Full-time missionaries were removed from Tuvalu in the mid-2000s and were reassigned in September 2010. Sixty-seven were attending church services in September 2010, which included several nonmembers. Nearly one hundred were attending church meetings in late 2010 and by early 2011 approximately two dozen new converts had been baptized. Membership growth accelerated in the 2010s, reaching 200 in 2012, 222 in 2015, and 268 in 2018. However, there were only fifty attending meetings in the mid-2010s albeit eleven young adults were serving full-time missions at the same time. In 2013, missionaries reported that the branch president had served in this position for the past twenty-six years.[7] One in forty-two was a member of the Church on church records as of 2018, or 2.4% of the population.

Nationwide active membership is currently estimated at one hundred, or 37% of total church membership. Local members utilize Samoan translations of scriptures; Tuvaluan translations of a few basic church materials are available. The Funafuti Tuvalu Branch meets in a renovated building in the village of Teone located in northern Funafuti. Two full-time missionaries were assigned to the branch in early 2011. It appeared that two missionary companionships served in Tuvalu in the mid-2010s. Tuvalu is assigned to the Fiji Suva Temple district. The Church has conducted five humanitarian and development projects in Tuvalu since 1985, including two clean water initiatives and three community projects.[8]

Opportunities

Latter-day Saints benefit from religious freedom on Funafuti Atoll, allowing for mission outreach to occur among 55% of the national population. The highly political and socially intertwined Church of Tuvalu has reduced receptivity to other Christian denominations and presents a challenge for mission efforts to address, but full-time missionaries reported no major challenges teaching, finding, baptizing, and retaining new converts on Funafuti during the 2010s due to these issues. Moreover, recent success with a significant number of young adults serving full-time missions provides opportunities for leadership development and growth if these missionaries stay active and remain in the country after they finish missionary service. Isolation from mission leadership has fostered self-sufficiency as a local member served as branch president in early 2011 and also in mid-2019. Developing habitual church attendance before baptism has resulted in moderate levels of member activity and convert retention. Latter-day Saints have yet to explore humanitarian and development projects in Tuvalu to address low standards of living and to improve the awareness and the public image of the Church. The Articles of Faith and the Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith are the only materials translated into Tuvaluan. There are also opportunities for Tuvaluans to join the Church abroad or to reach Tuvaluan members who live abroad. For example, the 2006 New Zealand census, for example, reported fifty-seven Tuvaluan Latter-day Saints in the country; 51% of nominal membership for the country of Tuvalu at the time.[9]

Challenges

Expanding national outreach to some islands may face opposition from traditional island elder councils that forbid nonlocal religious groups from proselytism. Allocation of mission resources on additional islands is currently unfeasible due to limited numbers of full-time missionaries and, with the exception of Vaitupu Atoll, other atolls have fewer than 1,000 inhabitants. Full-time missionaries report that local members' understanding of materials in Samoan is limited. With approximately 10,000 speakers and few qualified translators, prospects for future scriptures appear unlikely whereas future translations of other materials into Tuvalu are possible in the coming years. Local leadership manpower has been historically limited as indicated by the same man who served as branch president for one-quarter of a century. The introduction of the seminary and institute programs may increase the number of members serving full-time missions and facilitate understanding of Church teachings and strengthen testimonies. Other missionary-minded Christian groups report significant church growth challenges on Tuvalu largely due to the impact of the Church of Tuvalu on receptivity, specifically Jehovah's Witnesses. Witnesses continue to report fewer than one hundred active members and only one congregation for the country. However, Seventh-Day Adventists have experienced significant growth in the past decade as the number of Adventists increased by 199% between 2006 and 2016.

Prospects

Moderate membership growth since the late 2000s and a significant increase in the number of young adults who serve full-time missions are positive developments that may indicate a breakthrough reaching the Tuvaluan population. Time will tell whether new converts and returned missionaries will remain active, increased membership growth will be sustained, and additional congregations will be organized as greater numbers of local priesthood leaders are trained. Restricting the number of full-time missionaries to a single companionship may be in the best interests of maintaining local member involvement in missionary work and leadership until additional congregations are organized.

[1] "Background Note: Tuvalu," Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, 31 August 2010. http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/16479.htm

[2] "Tuvalu," Wikipedia.org, retrieved 24 February 2011. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tuvalu

[3] "Tuvalu." International Religious Freedom Report for 2017. 8 May 2019. https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2017/eap/280868.htm

[4] "Tuvalu." International Religious Freedom Report for 2017. 8 May 2019. https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2017/eap/280868.htm

[5] "Tuvalu," Country Profile, 10 June 2010. http://newsroom.lds.org/country/tuvalu

[6] Orden, Dell Van. "Elder Perry creates first Kiribati stake, dedicates islands," LDS Church News, 21 September 1996. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/27921/Elder-Perry-creates-first-Kiribati-stake-dedicates-islands.html

[7] "Recent Missionary Successes in Tuvalu." Case Studies on Recent LDS Missionary and Church Growth Successes – Cumorah.com. 12 December 2013. https://cumorah.com/index.php?target=view_case_studies&story_id=204&cat_id=4

[8] "Where We Work." LDS Charities. Accessed 17 May 2019. https://www.ldscharities.org/where-we-work

[9] "Religion," Statistics New Zealand, retrieved 1 July 2010. http://www.stats.govt.nz/Census/2006CensusHomePage/QuickStats/quickstats-about-a-subject/pacific-peoples/religion.aspx