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.

Tonga

Population: 0.11 millions (#197 out of countries)

By David Stewart and Matt Martinich

Geography

Area: 747 square km. Located in the South Pacific Ocean in Polynesia north of New Zealand, Tonga consists of 169 small islands, 36 of which are inhabited. Terrain varies by island from uplifted, flat coral islands to volcanic islands with a limestone base. Tropical climate prevails year round with warm (December to May) and cool (May to December) seasons. Cyclones, earthquakes, and volcanoes are natural hazards. Environmental issues include deforestation, coral reef damage, and overfishing. Tonga is divided into three administrative divisions.

Population: 122,580 (July 2010)

Annual Growth Rate: 1.282% (July 2010)

Fertility Rate: 2 children born per woman (2010)

Life Expectancy: 68.46 male, 73.73 female (2010)

Peoples

Tongan: 98%

other: 2%

The population is overwhelmingly Tongan. Other minority ethnic groups include Europeans, mixed European-Tongan, other Pacific Islanders, and Chinese.[1]

Languages: Tongan (97%), other (3%). Tongan and English are official languages.

Literacy: 98.9% (1999)

History

It is believed that Polynesian settlers first colonized the islands of present-day Tonga as early as 500 B.C. The Tongan

monarchy reached its peak in the thirteenth century but its power declined in the subsequent centuries following the emergence of three royal lines. Dutch explorers were the first Europeans to make contact with Tonga in the early seventeenth century but consistent European contact did not occur until the late eighteenth century. War between the three noble lines broke out in the early nineteenth century. The Wesleyan Missionary Society arrived in the mid-eighteenth century and again in the 1820s, spreading Christianity throughout Tonga. Progress accelerated after one member of Tongan royalty was converted, Taufa'ahau. During the mid-nineteenth century, Taua'ahau became King of Tonga and united all the Tongan islands and improved diplomatic relations with the United Kingdom. By 1900, Tonga came under protection of the United Kingdom but retained its autonomy and independence with the exception of managing foreign affairs and military defense. Tonga participated in World War II and was used by the Allies as a staging point for shipping. In 1970, Tongan sovereignty was officially recognized and total independence from the United Kingdom was granted. The monarchy remains in power, making Tonga the last kingdom of the South Pacific.[2]

Culture

Nicknamed the "Friendly Islands," Christianity and traditional customs heavily influence daily life in Tonga. Tonga's matriarchal society continues to be highly stratified with classes ranging from royalty to commoners. Social status was traditionally determined by lineage and occupation. Cuisine consists of fruit, taro, yams, coconut, seafood, and Western foods. Rugby is the most popular sport. The majority of the population is obese as a result of cultural emphasis on eating, consuming high-fat foods, and little social stigma for being overweight.[3] Consumed throughout much of Oceania, Kava has mild sedative properties and is drunk in social settings.[4] Alcohol and cigarette consumption rates are low compared to the worldwide average.

Economy

GDP per capita: $6,300 (2009) [13.6% of US]

Human Development Index: 0.677

Corruption Index: 3.0

Remittances from Tongan communities abroad, foreign aid, revenue from agricultural goods, and tourism stabilize the economy. Agricultural goods account for two-thirds of exports but Tonga relies on food imports for New Zealand to meet its food consumption needs. Infrastructure and social services in place by the government are well established. Reducing unemployment and inflation and increasing costs to manage the population are economic challenges. 24% of the population lives below the poverty line. Agriculture, industry, and services each roughly account for a third of the work force. Services generate 57% of the GDP whereas agriculture and industry generate 25% and 17% of the GDP, respectively. Major industries include tourism, construction, and fishing. Squash, coconuts, copra, fruit, vanilla beans, cocoa, coffee, ginger, and pepper are common crops. Primary trade partners include Fiji, the United States, New Zealand, and Hong Kong.

Corruption s present in all areas of society, including mainstream churches, and there is no civil code. Criminal offenses are generally prosecuted. It is often difficult to differentiate between traditional gifts and bribes. The small size of the population has led to strong sense of national community, which creates challenges for the population to report corruption.[5]

Faiths

Christian: 95%

other: 5%

Christians

Denominations Members Congregations

Latter-Day Saints 55,173 165

Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga 45,722

Free Church of Tonga 19,122

Catholic 13,852

Seventh Day Adventists 2,472 12

Jehovah's Witnesses 232 5

Religion

Tonga is a homogenous Christian country with the largest denominations as indicated by the 2006 census including the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga, the LDS Church, the Free Church of Tonga, and the Catholic Church. 14% of the population follows the Tokaikolo Church, the Seventh Day Adventist Church, Assemblies of God, and the Anglican Church. Baha'is, Jehovah's Witnesses, Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists collectively constitute four percent of the population.[6]

Religious Freedom

Persecution Index:

The constitution protects religious freedom which is upheld by the government. Registration with the government is suggested for tax purposes but is not required. With the exception of hotels and tourist resorts, the constitution mandates that all business close on Sunday to keep the Sabbath Day holy. Major Christian holidays are recognized by the government. Foreign missionaries may operate freely.[7]

Largest Cities

Urban: 25%

Nuku'alofa , Neiafu, Haveluloto, Tofoa-Koloua, Vaini, Pangai-Hihifo, Pea, Ha'ateiho , Lapaha, Fua'amotu.

All of the ten largest cities and villages and all villages with over 1,000 inhabitants have an LDS congregation. 48% of the national population resides in the ten most populous urban areas. 90% of the population resides on the islands of Tongatapu and Vava'u.

LDS History

Under the direction of the Samoan Mission, Latter-day Saint missionaries first arrived in Nuku'alofa in 1891.[8] Receptivity to the LDS Church was low during the close of the nineteenth century as full-time missionaries converted only fifteen Tongans between 1891 and 1897 and LDS missionaries were removed from the islands. Most of the first members were not retained.[9] Missionaries were not reassigned until ten years later in 1907 and began LDS mission outreach in Vava'u.[10] The Church created the Tongan Mission in 1916. LDS schools closed and several branches were consolidated in 1922 as a result of the government banning LDS missionaries. Missionaries were permitted to reenter starting in 1924. Tongans constituted the entire full-time missionary force with the exception of a few foreign missionaries for the following decades. American Church leaders left islands during World War II. In 1946, the Church published the Tongan translation of the Book of Mormon. A returned North American missionary performed most of the translation work. The government restricted foreign missionaries again following World War II, which resulted in the calling of local couple missionaries to carry out missionary work. Local couples served regularly as full-time missionaries until supplanted in 1963 by graduates of the Church's Liahona High School.[11]

Seminary began in 1969 whereas institute commenced in 1979. Liahona High School was instrumental in the establishment of the Church in Kiribati along with the Church's school in Kiribati operating today, Moroni High School.[12] The first member of the royal family, Princess 'Elisiva Fusipala Vaha'i joined the LDS Church in 1989.[13] Elder Russell M. Nelson visited King Taufa'ahau Tupou IV in 1991 and invited the king to the Church's centennial celebration.[14] The king attended the festivities, declared August 19th a public holiday, and two stamps commemorating the event were issued by the post office.[15] Members of other faiths supported the Church during the festivities.[16] Later that year, the Queen of Tonga visited Church headquarters in Salt Lake City.[17] The King of Tonga visited with the First Presidency in Salt Lake City in 1996.[18] The Pacific Area administered Tonga prior to 1998 at which time the Pacific Islands Area was created and administered Tonga.[19] Having served a full-time mission in Tonga in the 1950s, Elder John H. Groberg wrote the book In the Eye of the Storm on his experiences that was published in 1993. The book was made into a major Hollywood film called "The Other Side of Heaven" that was released in late 2001.[20] In 2002, the Church installed its first satellite dish in Tonga to allow members to view worldwide broadcasts.[21] Area Seventy Elder Pita Ranchod Vamanrav died in 2005 from cancer while serving in the New Zealand/Pacific Islands Area.[22] In 2006, a Latter-day Saint was appointed for the first time as a government minister.[23] The King of Tonga played an integral role in the rededication of the Nuku'alofa Tonga Temple by addressing some 200 dignitaries and celebrating the remodeling on the temple.[24] In 2010, Tonga pertained to the Pacific Area.

Membership Growth

LDS Membership: 55,173 (2009)

In 1926, there were approximately 1,000 Latter-day Saints. There were 2,422 Latter-day Saints by 1946,[25] increasing to 10,000 by 1968.[26] Membership reached 27,400 in 1985 and 35,227 in 1990.[27] There were approximately 150 members living in Niuas in 1990.[28] There were 40,000 members in 1995 and by year-end 2000 membership stood at 46,623.

Annual membership growth rates during the 2000s averaged around one to two percent and ranged from a low of 0.7% in 2008 to a high of 4.6% in 2001. Membership totaled 49,719 in 2002, 52,421 in 2005, and 55,126 in 2008.

The Tongan census has provided valuable insights into the membership growth of the LDS Church as indicated by self-reporting religious affiliation. The census reported 11,270 self-identified Latter-day Saints in 1986, 13,225 in 1996, and 17,109 in 2006. Latter-day Saints have steadily increased in their percentage of the Tongan population on the national census from 12.1% in 1986 to 13.8% in 1996, to 16.8% in 2006.[29]

20% of the population was LDS in 1971.[30] By 1991, the percentage of Latter-day Saints increased to 32%.[31] In 2009, 45% of the population was nominally LDS.

Stake and District Growth

In mid-1968, there were ten districts.[32] The first stake was created in the fall of 1968 in Nuku'alofa. In the 1970s, four additional stakes were organized, three on Nuku'alofa and one on Neiafu Vava'u. In the 1980s, five new stakes were created in Nuku'alofa Liahona (1980), Neiafu Vava'u North (1980), Ha'apai (1983), Nuku'alofa Vaini (1983), and Nuku'alofa North (1983). By 1990, there were ten stakes. Six additional stakes were created during the 1990s in Nuku'alofa Central (1994), Nuku'alofa Halaliku (1995), Neiafu Vava'u West (1995), 'Eua (1996), Nuku'alofa Ha'akame (1996), and Nuku'alofa Mu'a (1996). In the 2000s, only one new stake was created, the Nuku'alofa Tonga Harbour Stake (2008). There were 17 stakes and two districts by year-end 2010. Districts functioning at that time were headquartered in Ha'apai Lulunga (1992) and Niua (1998).

Congregational Growth

Wards: 129 Branches: 36

There were three branches by 1912.[33] Prior to the creation of the first stake in 1968 there were 50 branches.[34] By 1990, there were 117 congregations (including 63 wards) increasing to 138 congregations by 1995.

In 2000, there were 149 congregations, including 103 wards. The number of congregations steadily increased in the 2000s to 156 in 2002, 161 in 2005, and 165 in 2008. The number of wards increased during this period to 112 in 2002, 121 in 2005, and 126 in 2008 whereas the number of branches has slightly declined as a result of many branches maturing into wards.

Activity and Retention

Member activity rates do not appear to have fluctuated much over the past several decades as the percentage of Latter-day Saints that self-identify on the census has remained relatively constant at approximately one in three. The LDS Church claimed 52,421 members in Tonga at year-end 2005, whereas only 17,109 Tongans identified the LDS Church as their faith of preference on the 2006 national census (32.6% of official membership claims). Large church meetings have been well attended. LDS Church President Spencer W. Kimball spoke to 10,600 members in an area conference in Nuku'alofa in 1976.[35] 7,000 attended a meeting with Elder Russell M. Nelson at Liahona High School during the celebration of the 100th anniversary of the Church in Tonga.[36] In 1991, local leaders reported that member activity and convert retention rates in Tonga were among the highest worldwide for the LDS Church.[37] In 1991, nearly 1,000 Tongan members in Hawaii attended a special meeting commemorating the 100th anniversary of the LDS Church's establishment in Tonga.[38] Tongans constituted the majority of the 4,500 in attendance of a similar meeting held in Salt Lake City.[39] In 1997, there were 400 temple recommend holders in the Nuku'alofa Tonga Liahona Stake.[40] 5,000 attended the 50th anniversary of Liahona High School's founding in 1997.[41] In 1997, 11,400 attended a special meeting with President Hinckley at Liahona, Nuku'alofa and 2,240 attended another meeting with President Hinckley at Saineha, Vava'u.[42] Over 4,000 members viewed the broadcast of the dedication of the Nauvoo Illinois Temple in 2002.[43] In 2003, 21,108 attended a nationwide conference that was telecast throughout the country.[44] Over 40,000 attended the Nuku'alofa Tonga Temple open house in 2007.[45] 2,400 youth participated in the cultural festivities held the night before the rededication of the temple in 2007.[46] 1,935 were enrolled in seminary and institute during the 2008-2009 school year. The average number of Latter-day Saints per congregation increased from 313 in 2000 to 334 in 2009. Most wards appear to have between 100 and 150 active members whereas branches on average have approximately 50 active members. Nationwide active and semi-active membership is estimated to number between 18,000 and 20,000, or approximately 30-35%.

Language Materials

Languages with LDS Scripture: Tongan, English

All LDS scriptures and most church materials are translated into Tongan. General Conference addresses have been translated into Tongan for many years.

Meetinghouses

In late 2007, there were 117 LDS meetinghouses in Tonga, nearly all of which were constructed by the Church or local members.[47]

Health and Safety

There is limited access to healthcare and emergency care outside of Tongatapu.

Humanitarian and Development Work

The LDS Church opened a primary school in Mu'a in the late nineteenth century, but it struggled and was closed. Missionaries opened a school upon their return in 1907 in Vava'u. There were three Church schools by 1912.[48] The Church purchased land for Liahona High School in 1947 but the school did not officially open until 1952. There were 1,070 students in 1997.[49] The Church operated eight schools in Tongan in 2001, six of which were middle schools. In 2001, 99% of students attending Liahona High School were LDS.[50] Liahona High School has influenced the development of the Church in other countries in the region, such as Papua New Guinea.

In 1991, the LDS Church donated medical equipment and supplies.[51] In 1996, the Church donated 731 medical items to the Vaiola General Hospital.[52] In 2001, the Church helped the government with earthquake research by permitting three of the six scientific instruments to collect data to be placed on Church property.[53] In early 2002, the Church donated emergency supplies to victims of Cyclone Waka in Vava'u.[54] In partnership with the Wheelchair Foundation, the Church donated 500 wheelchairs in 2004.[55] Latter-day Saints under the name of "Mormon Helping Hands" were among some 13,200 citizens that performed service throughout the Tongan islands in 2007.[56] The Church completed a clean water project to serve Niuatoputapu in the 2000s.[57]

Opportunities, Challenges and Prospects

Religious Freedom

The LDS Church enjoys full religious freedom in Tonga and maintains positive relations with the government. Missionaries freely proselyte and local members face no restrictions regarding assembly and worship.

Cultural Issues

The cultural emphasis and regular practice of religious habits like praying, scripture reading, and church attendance has benefited LDS mission outreach efforts. Despite the strong ethno-religious ties with Christianity, Tonga has created a remarkably pluralistic society in which differing denominations deal peacefully and respectfully with one another. Several aspects of Tongan culture and society have made Tongans more receptive than other peoples to LDS teachings. LDS Church leaders have suggested that Book of Mormon peoples are among the ancestors of Tongans[58] and that this connection may explain some of their high dedication and receptivity to the gospel message. Kava consumption as relating to the Word of Wisdom remains a subject of debate among some members. Church leaders have counseled members to keep free of habit-forming substances, which some consider to include recreational kava use.

Double Affiliation

Strong interest in Christianity but moderate levels of allegiance to a given denomination has created additional cultural challenges for Latter-day Saints and other Christians regarding the double affiliation of their members. Most nominal Latter-day Saints that no longer attend LDS Church services appear actively involved in or identify with other Christian traditions. Doubly affiliated Latter-day Saints that actively engage in another Christian denomination are challenging to reactivate due to their current social and religious connections outside the Church, but nonetheless do not present an insurmountable obstacle as they can switch-back to the LDS Church. LDS missionaries, leaders, and members also need to emphasize unique doctrinal

teachings and theological positions to help curb against the loss of some Latter-day Saints to other Christian denominations and safeguard against convert attrition.

National Outreach

LDS mission outreach in Tonga is excellent as every village with over 1,000 inhabitants has an LDS congregation, amounting to 60% of the national population. 95% of the national population is estimated to reside within a kilometer of an LDS congregation as the Church maintains dozens of congregations in villages with populations less than 1,000. The percentage of Latter-day Saints varies by island group as indicated by the ratio of the general population to LDS congregations. Ha'apai likely has the highest percentage of Latter-day Saints (one LDS congregation per 360 people) whereas 'Eua appears to have the lowest (one LDS congregation per 868 people). There is one congregation per 555 people in Niuas, one per 735 in Tongatapu, and one per 431 in Vava'u. As a whole, Tonga has a nationwide average of one LDS congregation per 622 inhabitants.

In late 2010, there were at least 18 villages that had no LDS mission outreach centers in Tonga (seven in Vava'u [Kapa, Lape, Makave, Olo'ua, Ovaka, Taunga, Utulei], six on Nuku'alofa [Ha'akili, Ha'atafu, Ha'avakatolo, Haveluliku, Kala'au, Sia'atoutai], three in Ha'apai [Fonoifua, Holopeka, Nukunamo], one on Niuafo'ou [Kolofo ou], and one on Niuatoputapu [Falehau]). Five of the six unreached villages on Nuku'alofa are located on the western portion of the island. Nearly all of the 18 villages without LDS congregations are within three kilometers of an LDS congregation. Reasons for why these villages lack LDS congregations may include poor member activity rates, inadequate numbers of Latter-day Saints, few mission outreach resources dedicated to these villages, lower receptivity, and lack of vision by local church leaders to create additional congregations in these villages. The creation of dependent branches or groups in these locations may facilitate the development of a permanent LDS presence headquartered in each of these lesser-reached villages.

LDS mission outreach directed towards Tongans occurs internationally as there were 91 Tongan-language LDS congregations outside of Tonga in late 2010 operating in the United States (73), New Zealand (12), Australia (4), and American Samoa (2) providing outreach to the 80,000 some Tongan-speakers abroad. Of Tongan-speaking congregations abroad, five are designated for young single adults (YSA). The percentage of Latter-day Saints among Tongan populations appears relatively constant both within Tonga and abroad as the ratio of LDS congregations to Tongans was one per 879 internationally, close to the ratio for Tonga of one LDS congregation per 622 people. Tongan language LDS materials are available online at lds.org, including LDS scriptures. Use of online language materials facilitates member activity rates and outreach potential among Tongan-speakers abroad.

Member Activity and Convert Retention

Several factors have facilitated higher member activity and convert retention rates than other nations such as the early establishment of Church-run schools, widespread chapel construction and congregation planting following World War II, government restrictions limiting the number of foreign missionaries, complete self-sufficiency in the staffing of the full-time missionary force, the calling of couple missionaries in the mid-twentieth century, culturally high rates of church attendance in the general population, and the societal promotion of churches. The average number of Latter-day Saints per congregation increased by 21 in the 2000s (a seven percent increase) as a result of fairly commensurate membership and congregational growth rates, indicating that convert retention has been modest and member activity rates have held constant during this period. The slight increase this statistic may also been attributed to the maturation of a couple dozen branches into wards in the 2000s as a result of increases in the number of members in these units. The average number of members per congregation at present in Tonga is one of the lowest worldwide among nations in which the majority of LDS congregations are wards. Inactivity remains a problem in many areas, primarily among doubly affiliated members.

Ethnic Issues and Integration

The homogeneity of the Tongan population reduces ethnic integration challenges and has contributed to rapid LDS Church growth trends during the last half of the twentieth century. English is commonly spoken as a second languages and improves outreach and integration potential at church for the few non-Tongan residents and visitors.

Language Issues

Nearly the entire population has LDS materials translated into their native language. The abundance of Tongan-language church materials has encouraged growth and doctrinal understanding, thereby contributing to the high dedication and devotion of many Tongan Latter-day Saints. Frequent use of English as a second language also allows many to utilize English-language LDS materials if they are unavailable in Tongan.

Missionary Service

Tonga experiences excellent levels of missionary service among local members that is unparalleled in most countries with an LDS presence. A missionary training center in Tonga operated from as early as the 1980s,[59] but the Tonga Missionary Training Center was decommissioned sometime in the early 2000s as in 2001, the New Zealand Missionary Training Center

was expanded to train missionaries in their native languages from Tonga, Samoa, and Tahiti.[60] In 1988, 93% of the full-time missionary force was Tongan.[61] In 1991, Tonga had the highest percentage of members serving full-time missions worldwide.[62] 80-90% of male graduates of Liahona High School served full-time missions in the late 1990s.[63] In 2001, there were approximately 160 full-time missionaries in the Tonga Nuku'alofa Mission.[64] In late 2007, there were 149 full-time missionaries serving in Tonga, 135 of which were native members.[65] The abundance of missionary manpower in Tonga has resulted in Tongan missionaries frequently serving elsewhere in Oceania, North America, and Africa. Papua New Guinea and the United States have been particularly common nations to which Tongan full-time missionaries are assigned. With a strong membership base that is more member-missionary motivated than many other nations, Tonga will continue to supply the international Church with a surplus of missionaries for the foreseeable future.

Leadership

Local Tongan members have accounted for the majority of Church leadership since as early as the late 1960s.[66] Self-sufficiency and dedication of local members and leaders came largely as a result of the sacrifice and service of Tongan couple missionaries in the 1950s and early 1960s.[67] Tongan members have regularly served as regional representatives, area authorities, mission presidents, and temple presidents for decades. In 1991, there were two Tongan regional representatives: Tevita Ka'ili and Vaikalafi Lutui.[68] In 1992, Pita F. Hopoate from Nuku'alofa was called as a regional representative.[69] In 1995, Pita Hopoate was called as an area authority.[70] In 2003, Pita R. Vamanrav from Nuku'alofa was called as an Area Authority Seventy.[71] In 2005, Sione M. Fineanganofo from Nuku'alofa was called as an area Seventy.[72]

In 1992, Samisoni Uasila'a from Nuku'alofa became serving as the Tonga Nuku'alofa Mission president.[73] In 1997, Mosese F. Naeata from Nuku'alofa was called to preside over the Papua New Guinea Port Moresby Mission.[74] In 1998, Taniela Kelikupa Kivalu from Nuku'alofa was called as the Nuku'alofa Tonga Mission president.[75] In 2000, Sosaia Lehonitai Mateaki from Nuku'alofa was called as the mission president[76] of the Papua New Guinea Port Moresby Mission.[77] In 2006, Tevita Hualela'lmoana Funaki from Nuku'alofa was called to preside over the Papua New Guinea Port Moresby Mission.[78] In 2009, Meliula M. Fata was called to preside over the Port Moresby Papua New Guinea Mission.[79] In 2010, 'Aisake K. Tukuafu from Nuku'alofa was called to preside over the Tonga Nuku'alofa Mission.[80]

In 1992, Tevita Ka'ili from Nuku'alofa was called as the Nuku'alofa Tonga Temple president.[81] In 1998, Sione Moala Fineanganofo was called as the Nuku'alofa Tonga Temple president.[82] In 2001, Mosese Veuki Kaumatule from Nuku'alofa was called as the Nuku'alofa Temple president.[83] In 2010, Pita Foliaki Hopoate from Nuku'alofa was called as the Nuku'alofa Temple president.[84]

Temple

Tonga pertains to the Nuku'alofa Tonga Temple district. Prior to the dedication of the Nuku'alofa Tonga Temple in 1983, Tongan members attended the Hamilton New Zealand Temple.[85] The Church announced a temple for Tonga in 1980. In the late 1980s, members residing on Vava'u traveled by boat for 24 hours to the Nuku'alofa Tonga Temple twice a year in May and August. Temple excursions from Vava'u usually included over 100 members and lasted for two or three weeks. In 1986, members from Vava'u completed 6,000 endowments.[86] In December 1996, the Nuku'alofa Tonga Liahona Stake held special endowment sessions in the temple that occurred hourly throughout the night on Fridays to commemorate the Mormon pioneer's arrival in the Salt Lake Valley in 1847.[87] The temple was remodeled from June 2006 to November 2007, expanded by 5,282 square feet, and rededicated in late 2007.[88] In 2010, the temple appeared among the busiest in the LDS Church outside of North America as endowment sessions were scheduled hourly from 5 AM to 7 PM Tuesdays through Saturdays. Only Vava'u appears as a possible candidate for an additional LDS temple in Tonga. A potential temple in Vava'u would be a small temple and serve four large stakes and two districts.

Comparative Growth

Tonga presents a valuable lesson for Latter-day Saints regarding the importance of maintaining a church presence in countries that at currently do not demonstrate favorable church growth conditions. The LDS Church struggled for the first half-century it operated in Tonga and did not experienced noticeable growth until the late 1950s and early 1960s.[89] Today Tonga has the highest percentage of Latter-day Saints of any nation worldwide and ranks among the top 30 countries with the most stakes, members, and congregations despite ranking 189th by population. In 1988, Nuku'alofa was the city outside the United States with the eighth most LDS stakes (seven).[90] During the 2000s, member activity rates and membership growth trends have compared to most nations in Polynesia. Tonga is one of the few nations that has multiple Church-run schools.

Since as early as the 1980s, the LDS Church has been the only church among denominations that account for over three percent of the population which has increased its percentage in the general population as the Free Wesleyan Church, Catholic Church, Free Church of Tonga, Church of Tonga, Tokaikolo, Anglical Church, and Seventh Day Adventist Church all reported no increase or a decline in the percentage of their members in the general population since 1986. The only denomination that had over 1,000 members reported on the census in 2006 that have experienced more rapid growth than Latter-day Saints was the Assemblies of God, which increased in membership from 565 in 1986 to 2,350 in 2006. The Free Wesleyan Church and Tokaikolo are the only major denominations that have experienced steady declines in reported members on the census since 1986.[91] Seventh Day Adventists generally baptize 50 to100 new converts annually and had fewer congregations in 2009 than in 1998. Jehovah's Witnesses report slow growth. Only the Assemblies of God has been successful in achieving rapid church

growth in recent years among missionary-minded, non-traditional Christian groups in Tonga, likely due to their charismatic approaches to proselytism and emphasis on member-missionary activity.

Future Prospects

The outlook for LDS Church growth in Tonga appears favorable as manifest by consistent membership and congregational increases sustained for several decades, the maturation of branches into wards, steady increases in the percentage of Tongans who self-report as Latter-day Saints on the census, the operation of eight Church schools, a supportive international LDS Tongan community, and an abundance of local missionary manpower. Over a dozen villages remain without their own LDS congregations and offer opportunities for future growth. Several additional stakes will likely be organized in the coming years. Double affiliation will remain a challenge to accurately ascertain the size of the Latter-day Saint population in Tonga and presents an obstacle to reactive inactive members.

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