

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.



Suriname

Population: 0.57 millions (#172 out of countries)

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Geography

Area: 163,820 square km. The smallest independent country in South America, Suriname occupies a small, tropical area along the Northern Atlantic Ocean coast between Guyana and French Guiana and north of Brazil. Most reside along coastal areas, preserving the rainforest of the interior. Rivers, lakes and rolling hills occupy the interior whereas swamps and plains are along the coast. Flooding is a natural hazard. Deforestation and pollution are the primary environmental issues. Border disputes continue over defining the boundary with Guyana. Suriname is divided into ten administrative districts.

Peoples

Hindustani: 27.4%

Maroon: 21.7%

Creole: 15.7%

Javanese: 13.7%

Mixed: 13.4%

Other: 7.6%

Unspecified: 0.5%

Hindustani, Javanese and Chinese arrived as workers during the colonial period. Maroons are descendants of black African slaves who escaped into the interior of the country during colonization. Creole inherited a mixed ancestry from African slaves and whites.

Population: 597,927 (July 2018)

Annual Growth Rate: 1.0% (2018)

Fertility Rate: 1.9 children born per woman (2018)

Life Expectancy: 70.3 male, 75.3 female (2018)

Languages: Dutch (50.0%), Sarnami Hindustani (13.5%), Sranan Tongo (12.4%), Suriname Javanese (6.5%), Guyanese Creole English (5.9%), Saramaccan (2.7%), other (9.0%). Dutch is most widely spoken and the official language. Two-thirds of the population speaks Sranan Tongo, an English-based Creole language, as a first or second language. There are less than 10,000 speakers of Amerindian languages.

Literacy: 95.6% (2015)

History

The Spanish first explored Suriname in the sixteenth century followed by British settlement in the seventeenth century. Suriname became a Dutch colony in 1667 and did not achieve independence until 1975. Slavery occurred until 1863. Workers were subsequently relocated to the colony from India and Indonesia. In 1980, a military regime took over the government and established a socialist government, which fell in the late 1980s. Political stability did not return until the early 1990s. A democratic government was instituted in 1991.

Culture

Suriname shares many cultural similarities with Caribbean nations with large Asian and black communities like Trinidad and Tobago. Due to the large number of Indians and Javanese, Hinduism and Islam have also shaped the culture and integrated cuisine from Asia into local foods. High ethnic diversity has not resulted in ethnic violence.

Economy

GDP per capita: $14,900 (2017) [24.9% of U.S.]

Human Development Index: 0.720 (2017)

Corruption Index: 43 (2018)

High inequality of wealth occurs in Suriname, which has a GDP per capita of $14,900, yet 70% of the population lives below the poverty line per the most recent estimate in 2002. The economy strongly relies on mineral wealth as oil and gold constitutes 85% of exports and 27% of government revenue. As a result, the economy is vulnerable to changes in price and demand for minerals. The unemployment rate was 8.9% in 2017. Services account for 57.4% of the GDP and employ 69.3% of the workforce. Primary industries include gold mining, oil extraction, lumber, food processing, and fishing. Agriculture produces 11.6% of the GDP and employs 11.2% of the workforce. Agriculture products include rice, bananas, shrimp, and palm kernels. Switzerland, the United States, Hong Kong, the Netherlands, Trinidad and Tobago, and Belgium are primary trade partners. Tourism has grown in recent years due to the large amount of biodiversity in the interior rainforest.

The level of perceived corruption in Suriname has improved in the past decade although corruption remains a significant problem. There is little anti-corruption legislation in place and corruption in customs is a concern. Little has been done to investigate allegations of fraud by government officials. Suriname is a transshipment point for drugs and arms.

Faiths

Christian: 48%

Hindu: 22%

Muslim: 14%

Other/unspecified: 16%

Christians

Denominations – Members – Congregations

Roman Catholic – 131,544

Evangelicals – 72,235

Seventh Day Adventists – 4,774 – 18

Jehovah's Witnesses – 3,133 – 56

Latter-day Saints – 1,578 – 5

Religion

Christianity has the most followers. Hindus and Muslims are sizable minorities who are predominantly from Asia. There is no relationship between socioeconomic class and religion with the possible exception of Amerindians who practice indigenous religions in poor, rural locations.

Religious Freedom

The constitution protects religious freedom, which is generally supported by the government. The constitution allows its citizens to change religions if desired. Religious instruction may occur in school but is not mandatory.[1]

Largest Cities

Urban: 66.1% (2018)

Paramaribo, Koewarasan, De Nieuwe Grond, **Lelydorp, Houttuin, Kwatta, Nieuw Nickerie, Meerzorg, Moengo, Saramacca Polder.**

Cities listed in **bold** have no official congregation of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Three of the ten largest cities have a Church congregation. Seventy-two percent (72%) of the national population lives in the ten largest cities.

Church History

The first missionaries arrived in 1988, and the first converts joined the Church in 1988 and 1989.[2] Elder M. Russell Ballard dedicated Suriname for missionary work in February 1990.[3] Seminary and institute began in 1993 and 1994. Missionary work was first administered by the West Indies Mission, later the Trinidad and Tobago Mission, and again by the West Indies Mission. In 1998, Suriname was part of the North America Southeast Area.[4] In 2006, Suriname became part of the newly created Caribbean Area.

Membership Growth

LDS Membership: 1,578 (2017)

Eighty-five attended the dedication of Suriname in 1990. The largest group had twenty-five attending Sunday meetings at the time in Lelydorp.[5] Attendance reached one hundred in the Paramaribo Branch in late 1990.[6] In 1995, there were 300 members. By 2000, membership reached 438.

Membership grew more rapidly in the 2000s. In 2002, membership reached 518 and 584 in 2004. There were 687 members by 2006 and 847 members in 2007. Annual membership growth rates ranged between 4%–13% between 2001 and 2006, whereas annual membership growth rates reached over 23% in 2007 and 2008. Suriname experienced its largest numerical increase in

membership in 2008, growing by 210. However, membership typically increased between 50 and 150 annually during the 2000s. Annual membership growth rates generally varied from 2-5% in the 2010s. Church membership reached 1,057 in 2008, 1,261 in 2011, 1,430 in 2014, and 1,578 in 2017.

In 2017, one in 375 was a Latter-day Saint.

Congregational Growth

Branches: 5 (2018)

In early 1990, there was one branch, and members met in four different locations for Sunday meetings.[7] By late 1990, meetings were held in Paramaribo, Lelydorp, and Uitkijk. A second branch was created in 2002 in Wanika.

The Church organized the first district in Paramaribo in 2004. In 2007, four new branches were created in Nieuw Nickerie, Uitkijk, Tamenga, and Blauwgrond. A seventh branch was created in Koewarasan in 2008. In 2010, the Blauwgrond Branch was discontinued. The Church closed its sole branch in Nieuw Nickerie in 2016. In 2018, the Uitkijk Branch closed. However, the Church organized a member group in Commewijne in 2016. In 2018, the Church created a new branch in Nieuw Amsterdam. In early 2019, there were five branches in the Paramaribo Suriname District.

Activity and Retention

Many of the branches have a large number of inactive members and few active members. One branch in the Paramaribo area had only 40 of the 200 members attending Church meetings weekly in the early 2010s. The Nickerie Branch had approximately 30 attending meetings weekly in late 2009. The ratio of members to congregations has decreased from 438 in 2000 to 151 in 2008, but increased to 316 in 2017. Youth constitute a large portion of active membership. Seventy-four were enrolled in seminary during the 2007–2008 school year, and Suriname had one of the highest percentages of members attending seminary in the Caribbean (7%). As a whole, the West Indies Mission had 450 active Melchizedek Priesthood holders, 2,800 attending sacrament meeting, and 550 endowed members in the late 2000s. In the mid-2010s, returned missionaries reported eighty-five active members in the Wanica Branch, eighty active members in the Paramaribo Branch, sixty active members in the Tamenga Branch, twenty-five active members in the Koewarasan Branch, and fifteen active members in the Uitkijk Branch. Total active membership is estimated at no greater than 300, or 17-20% of total church-reported membership. Returned missionary estimates for convert retention rates one year after baptism significantly vary from as low as 15% to as high as 75%.

Language Materials

Languages with Latter-day Saint Scripture: English, Dutch, Hindi.

All Latter-day Saint scriptures and most Church materials are available in Dutch, including a wide selection of institute manuals and audio/visual materials. The Book of Mormon and limited materials are translated into Hindi. Only The Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith is available in Sranan Tongo.

Meetinghouses

The Paramaribo Branch meets in a Church-built meetinghouse. Other congregations appear to meet in renovated buildings or rented spaces.

Humanitarian and Development Work

The Church has conducted twenty-one humanitarian and development projects since 1985, including thirteen community projects, six wheelchair donation events, and two emergency response initiatives.[8] The Church donated wheelchairs in 2006.[9]

Opportunities, Challenges, and Prospects

Religious Freedom

The Church enjoys full religious freedom to proselyte. Foreign full-time missionaries have historically had challenges obtaining

visas. Missionaries have the unique opportunity to openly teach Hindus and Muslims.

Cultural Issues

The greatest cultural challenge for the Church is the wide variety of religious and cultural traditions in Suriname. Missionaries report that many are receptive to the Latter-day Saint gospel witness, but they have a casual attitude about religion and commitment. Converts come from a wide range of cultural backgrounds. High religious tolerance of differing religions appears to have allowed the Church greater acceptance in the community.

National Outreach

Four of the Church's five branches function in the two most populous and smallest administrative districts of Suriname, Paramaribo and Wanica, which account for two-thirds of the national population. Approximately one-third of the national population resides in districts without congregations. Some districts bordering Paramaribo and Wanica, such as Para and Saramacca, have some towns and villages close to congregations and account for approximately eight percent of the population. There are good opportunities to organize member groups in lesser-reached communities nearby Paramaribo due to good accessibility and larger populations than in other areas of the country. The Church has not not appeared to extend outreach in Nickerie since the branch closed in 2016.

Unreached districts present challenges to the Church due to language issues, remote location and sparse population. The Sipaliwini District is larger than the other nine districts combined, has a population of 37,000 and many Amerindians. Mission outreach to Sipalwini and other districts will likely most effectively occur through local members in Paramaribo sharing the gospel with friends and family residing in these locations.

Member Activity and Convert Retention

Convert retention challenges have persisted for the past decade during years with slow and rapid membership growth. Many converts were retained during periods of increased membership growth in the late 2000s, but the percentage of active members has significantly decreased. Nevertheless, historically low member activity is apparent by only one congregation with almost 500 members living Suriname in the early 2000s. However, the increase of branches from two to seven in two years points toward maturing local leadership capable of leading congregations of retained converts. Missionaries report that many of the branches in the early 2010s had an inadequate number of active members to fill all the basic branch callings. As a result, most of the smaller branches have closed.

Ethnic Issues and Integration

Congregations include members from all the different ethnic groups. Leaders and missionaries face the challenge of bringing converts from Hindustani, Javanese, Maroon, Creole, Chinese, Amerindian, and white backgrounds, each of which vary in religious affiliation and political views. Commonalities between individuals from differing ethnic groups appear to have been found and sustained in congregations, but differences in culture and language complicate ethnic integration.

Language Issues

Most missionaries become proficient in Dutch, and some can converse in Sranan Tongo. Language is a major obstacle for missionaries in outreach among Hindustani and Javanese areas where many do not speak Dutch fluently. An increase in local full-time missionaries fluent in these languages and assigned to serve in Suriname will provide the greatest means to reach these isolated populations as the Church lacks members and missionaries who speak either of these languages. Javanese is the language with the most speakers without Church materials worldwide, with some 68.3 million speakers.

Missionary Service

White, foreign members overwhelmingly constitute the full-time missionary manpower in Suriname. Returned missionaries report that the lack of non-White missionaries assigned to the country has posed challenges for receptivity among some. In mid-2009, sixteen missionaries served in Suriname. Missionaries typically do not transfer to other nations in the West Indies Mission as they learn to speak Dutch and visas are difficult to obtain. Stressing missionary preparation to youth and young adults attending seminary and institute may help improve local missionary self-sufficiency.

Leadership

Suriname has demonstrated some local leadership development. The organization of a district with only two branches indicated that local leadership was sufficient to staff both the district and branch presidencies in the early 2000s. All branches appeared to

have local branch presidents in early 2019. However, the greatest difficulties have been with leadership development in smaller branches that have since been discontinued such as in Blauwgrond, Nickerie, and Uitkijk. For example, in early 2010 a missionary had to fill one of the positions in the branch presidency in one of the branches because the former native branch president was released for disciplinary action. In early 2010, five of the seven branches had native branch presidents. The small size of local leadership limits possibilities of opening new congregations in lesser-reached areas.

Temple

Suriname pertains to the Santo Domingo Dominican Republic Temple district. Temple trips to the temple in Caracas or Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic likely do not occur frequently due to distance, money, and time constraints. There are no foreseeable prospects of a temple closer to Suriname due to few members and low activity rates in the region.

Comparative Growth

Suriname has experienced moderate increases in membership and congregational growth since 2000 but with low retention. Guyana has experienced similar results. Guyana Church membership doubled between 2006 and 2009, and Surinamese membership doubled between 2002 and 2008. Growth has occurred more rapidly than in most Caribbean nations over the past decade, such as Trinidad and Tobago, and French Guiana. The percentage of Latter-day Saints in the population is among the lowest in South America and the Caribbean.

Many Christian denominations experience comparable membership growth with the Church, but these groups report significantly higher convert retention and member activity rates. Both Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh-Day Adventists reported between 100 and 200 baptisms in 2008. However, both Witnesses and Adventists have reported increases in membership by only a few hundred since 2010. Evangelical churches have reported steady and moderate growth over the past several decades. Christian groups also struggle with preaching to Hindustani and Javanese in addition to reaching isolated, sparsely populated regions.

Future Prospects

The outlook for continued membership growth appears mixed. Few additional congregations will likely be organized until greater convert retention, local leadership development, and increases in the numbers of active members in operating congregations occurs. The Church in Suriname displays several characteristics that demonstrate that the foundation has been laid for a stake to be established in more distant future as the majority of membership is concentrated in Paramaribo and surrounding communities. There are enough congregations for a stake to be organized, and the greatest strength is found among Surinamese youth who, if retained and serve full-time missions, could lead to long-term growth and self-sufficiency. However, the Church will need to improve convert retention and member activity rates in order for a stake to be likely within the foreseeable future as four-fifths of Church-reported membership do not attend Church on a regular basis.

[1] "Suriname." International Religious Freedom Report for 2019. 16 March 2019. https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2017&dlid=281102#wrapper

[2] Wells, Elayne. "Work flourishing among a people 'without guile,'" LDS Church News, 1 December 1990. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/20206/Work-flourishing-among-a-people-without-guile.html

[3] "Services in 3 South American nations and island republic," LDS Church News, 10 March 1990. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/20438/Services-in-3-South-American-nations-and-island-republic.html

[4] "5 new areas announced worldwide," LDS Church News, 4 July 1998. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/31389/5-new-areas-announced-worldwide.html

[5] "Services in 3 South American nations and island republic," LDS Church News, 10 March 1990. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/20438/Services-in-3-South-American-nations-and-island-republic.html

[6] Wells, Elayne. "Work flourishing among a people 'without guile,'" LDS Church News, 1 December 1990. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/20206/Work-flourishing-among-a-people-without-guile.html

[7] "Services in 3 South American nations and island republic," LDS Church News, 10 March 1990. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/20438/Services-in-3-South-American-nations-and-island-republic.html

[8] "Where We Work," LDS Charities. Accessed 16 March 2019. https://www.ldscharities.org/where-we-work

[9] "Wheelchair distribution," LDS Church Newsroom, retrieved 25 February 2010. http://newsroom.lds.org/ldsnewsroom/eng/background-information/wheelchair-distribution