



Reaching the Nations International Church Growth Almanac

Country reports on the LDS Church around the world from a landmark almanac. Includes detailed analysis of history, context, culture, needs, challenges and opportunities for church growth.



Bangladesh

Population: 166.28 millions (#9 out of countries)

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Geography

Area: 148,460 square km. Nearly completely surrounded by India, Bangladesh also borders Burma and the Bay of Bengal where the Ganges, Jamuna, and Meghna Rivers empty into the ocean. Bangladesh suffers from severe flooding due to monsoon rains that typically inundate a third of the country annually. The large population confined to a small geographic area prone to flooding creates vulnerability to loss of life and property. Mangroves line the coastal waters, and much of the interior was deforested to provide space for farming and animal husbandry. Intermittent water shortages occur in northern and central areas due to falling water tables. There are some hills to the southwest; otherwise low-lying plains dominate the terrain. No other country with over 10 million people has as high as a population density. Bangladesh is divided into six administrative divisions.

Peoples

Bengali: 98%

Other: 2%

Nearly the entire population is Bengali. Other ethnic groups include tribal groups and non-Bengali Muslims such as Burmese, Garo, Assamese, and Santhals. Many of the minority groups live on the borders of Bangladesh with India and Burma.

Population: 159,453,001 (July 2018)

Annual Growth Rate: 1.02% (2018)

Fertility Rate: 2.15 children born per woman (2018)

Life Expectancy: 71.5 male, 75.9 female (2018)

Languages: Bengali (79.8%), Chittagonian (8.0%), Rangpuri (6.1%), Sylheti (4.3%), other (1.8%). Bengali is the official language and English is spoken by the well-educated. Languages with over one million speakers include Bengali (130 million), Chittagonian (13 million), Rangpuri (10 million), and Sylheti (7 million).

Literacy: 72.9% (2017)

History

Various Indian empires periodically included Bangladesh before European exploration. In the sixteenth century, Europeans established trading posts in the region. The British East India Company took control of Bangladesh in the eighteenth century. In 1947, the United Kingdom divided the Indian subcontinent based on religious demography between Hindus and Muslims to create India and Pakistan, the latter including Bangladesh, known as East Bengal or East Pakistan. Due to geographic isolation from West Pakistan and marginalization of Bengalis by the government, East Pakistan seceded and declared independence under the name Bangladesh in 1971. Inefficient and corrupt government limited economic growth, resulting in the military backing a temporary regime takeover to eradicate corruption from government over the long-term in the late 2000s. Massive flooding from strong monsoon rains occurred in 1998 resulting in the deaths of thousands, tens of millions homeless, and widespread destruction of property. Significant improvements have been achieved in Bangladesh within the past couple decades in regards to reducing poverty and increasing standards of living.

Culture

Bangladesh shares many cultural similarities with the Indian state of West Bengal in regards to cuisine, food, and language. Men typically wear Western style clothing, whereas women wear traditional dress. Muslim and Hindu holidays are widely practiced. Cricket is the most popular sport. Polygamy is practiced by a few Hindus and Muslims but is not socially acceptable. Women have fewer rights than men in issues such as divorce.

Economy

GDP per capita: \$4,200 (2017) [7.0% of U.S.]

Human Development Index: 0.608 (2017)

Corruption Index: 26 (2018)

The Bangladeshi economy has steadily grown by approximately six percent annually since 2005. Significant changes have occurred during this time in regards to the distribution of the workforce by economic sector. Approximately half of the population lived below the poverty line in the late 2000s, whereas in the mid-2000s only one-quarter of the population lived below the poverty line. Agriculture employs 42.7% of the workforce and generates 14.2% of the GDP, whereas industry employs 20.5% of the workforce and generates 29.3% of the GDP. Primary agricultural goods include rice, jute, tea, and wheat, whereas primary industries process these goods or make textiles and clothing. The largest export partners include Germany, the United States, and the United Kingdom. Most imports arrive from China, India, and Singapore. Recently exploited natural gas reserves may fuel greater economic growth in the industrial sector. Government management has struggled to properly face the issues of a poor, small, very densely population country in developing the economy. Urban areas have driven most of the economic growth experienced since independence. Current utilities cannot meet the demands of the population, especially for electricity.

Bangladesh ranks among the most corrupt countries in the world with little indication of improvements in reducing corruption in the past decade.^[1] Corruption is still widespread and limits economic progress. Most regard the police as the most corrupt division of government, followed by customs.^[2] Many have to pay a bribe to secure employment. Government has done little to address corruption issues.

Faiths

Muslim: 89%

Hindu: 10%

Other: 1%

Christians

Denominations – Members – Congregations

Evangelicals – 633,467

Catholic – 350,000

Seventh Day Adventists – 32,533 – 406

Jehovah's Witnesses – 303 – 6

Latter-day Saints – 50 – 1

Religion

Government declares Islam as the state religion. Hindu, Christian, and Buddhist minorities also practice in Bangladesh. Many religious minorities are also ethnic minorities who live in the Chittagong Hill Tracts or northern districts. Some of these groups are predominantly Christian such as the Garo. Islam influences many aspects of society. Some tensions between Muslims and religious minority groups occur, especially Hindus. Most Christians are Catholic or Evangelical. Christian churches experience slow to modest growth.

Religious Freedom

Persecution Index: 48th (2019)

The constitution declares Bangladesh as an Islamic state. All religions have the right to identify, practice, and proselyte according to law and public order. Individual houses of worship are not required to register unless they receive foreign monetary assistance. Family law has separate provisions based on whether the individuals are Muslim, Hindu, Christian, or from mixed-faith families. Religious studies are compulsory in public government-accredited schools. Students receive instruction about their own religion if they are Muslim, Hindu, Christian, or Buddhist. Government has become more tolerant of religious minorities and protecting their rights to practice their religions. Hate crimes and persecution of violence directed at religious minorities has been more frequently prosecuted by government officials. The most significant incidents are often instigated by radical Islamist groups. Nevertheless, land ownership disputes and forced evictions of members from religious minority groups continue to occur and remain unresolved.[\[3\]](#)

Largest Cities

Urban: 36.6% (2018)

Dhaka, **Chittagong**, Gazipur, Narayanganj, Khulna, Rajshahi, Sylhet, **Bogra**, Comilla, Mymensingh, Barisal, Rangpur, Jessore, Cox's Bazar, Brahmanbaria, Dinajpur, Pabna, Chapai Nawabganj, Chandpur, Tangail, Sirajganj, Kaliakair, Feni, Tarabo, Naogaon, Jamalpur, Narsingdi, Chaumohoni, Noakhali, Saidpur, Chuadanga, Sripur, Faridpur, Bhairab, Satkhira, Jhenaidah, Kushtia, Kishoreganj, Ishwardi.

Cities in **bold** do not have congregations of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

One of the thirty-nine largest cities has a Church congregation. Eighteen percent (18%) of the national population lives in cities with over 100,000 inhabitants.

Church History

The first members living in Bangladesh were expatriates primarily from Canada on government assignment. One Canadian member family introduced the Church to their cook and his family, who later became the first Bangladeshis to join the Church in Bangladesh. In 1993, the first local members served as missionaries.[\[4\]](#) The Singapore Mission administered Bangladesh until the creation of the India New Delhi Mission in late 2007. The India New Delhi Mission president and his assistants traveled frequently to Bangladesh to meet with local leaders and perform baptisms in 2009. In 2019, the Church was not formally recognized by the government, and expatriate members still met and led the branch.

Membership Growth

Church Membership: ~50 (2018)

By mid-1993 there were about thirty members, increasing to forty later that year. Most members were expatriates.[\[5\]](#) There were 40-50 members in Bangladesh during the mid and late 1990s. Little local membership growth occurred in the 1990s and 2000s, possibly a result of many foreign members leaving Bangladesh. Local members began to join the Church again more regularly in late 2008, with three convert baptisms that year. Seven native Bangladeshis joined the Church in 2011. Church membership totaled forty-three in 2012.[\[6\]](#) There appeared to be approximately fifty members in 2018.

In 2018, one in 3.2 million was a member of the Church.

Congregational Growth

Branches: 1 (2019)

The Church organized its first group in the 1980s.[\[7\]](#) The first branch was created in March 1992.[\[8\]](#) The Dhaka Branch is directly supervised by the India New Delhi Mission.

Activity and Retention

Local members are responsible for finding and fellowshipping new converts who are taught and baptized by the mission president and his assistants. The branch has a small number of members who attend. In 2011, there were approximately two

dozen Bangladeshi members and investigators in the Dhaka Branch who met with the mission president. Current active membership is likely around thirty, or 60% of total church membership.

Language Materials

Languages with Latter-day Saint Scripture: English, Bengali.

A translation of the Book of Mormon selections in Bengali was published in 1985 in New Delhi, India. The Church increased emphasis on translating materials into Bengali in 1993 by storing the Bengali script in computers at Church headquarters.^[9] The full Book of Mormon is still unavailable in Bengali, but additional language materials have been translated, including the old version of Gospel Principles, The Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith, and the Articles of Faith.

Meetinghouses

The Dhaka Branch received its first permanent building in May 2009. In 2019, the branch continued to meet in a rented space in the Tejgaon area.

Health and Safety

Health issues include threats typical of poorer, tropical nations such as hepatitis, typhoid, malaria, and rabies. HIV/AIDS is estimated to infect less than 0.1% of Bangladeshis. Violence directed towards religious minorities from intolerant Muslims may pose safety threats to missionaries and converts.

Humanitarian and Development Work

The Church has conducted at least thirty-nine humanitarian and development projects in Bangladesh since 1985. Most recently, these projects have focused on refugee response, particularly among the Rohingya.^[10] The Church provided aid during flooding caused by a cyclone in 1991.^[11] Latter-day Saint charities operated literacy programs in the late 1990s.^[12] German members collected 7,500 Euros to donate to impoverished Bangladeshi children.^[13] Following the destruction of Cyclone Sidr in 2007, the Church sent additional aid.^[14]

Opportunities, Challenges, and Prospects

Religious Freedom

The Church has yet to take greater advantage of the degree of religious freedom offered by a predominantly Muslim country to religious minorities. Rarely do Islamic states offer rights to Christians that include proselytism. Conditions for religious minorities have appeared to improve during the past decade in regards to government protection and prosecution of religious hate crimes. Other nations with more restrictions on religious freedom and proselytism have an established Church missionary presence. Rampant corruption, especially with law enforcement, may be a concern that has limited missionary outreach. Historical difficulties in obtaining foreign missionary visas may challenge future outreach prospects.

Cultural Issues

Cultural barriers between Bangladesh and Church teachings do not appear to have limited the Church's growth and

development. The treatment and position of women in society may create some cultural challenges in Bangladeshi members understanding Church teachings on the roles and treatment of men and women. Islamic and Hindu holidays may interrupt future proselytism as in India and other nations, where Christians become a frequent target of persecution and violence. Development of self-reliance and economic skills among members and the population is challenging due to poor living conditions and low literacy levels. Humanitarian projects aiming to address these challenges may assist in a greater establishment of the Church in the long term through establishing a positive reputation and providing service.

National Outreach

The entire population of Bangladesh is unreached by the Church with the exception of the few individuals who have been brought into the Church by local members in Dhaka. The Church faces logistical challenges in opening the eighth most populous nation in the world to proselytism. If the Church had mission outreach for the entire population of the Dhaka metropolitan area, 88% of the national population would still remain unreached.

Limited mission outreach has resulted from the jurisdiction resting under the Singapore Mission prior to late 2007. Since the creation of the India New Delhi Mission, increased mission outreach and recurring visits of leaders and missionaries have occurred. Nevertheless, no proselytizing missionaries have been assigned and outreach among Bangladeshis remains essentially nonexistent. The India New Delhi Mission has one of the largest populations of any mission in the Church with 1.37 billion inhabitants. Only 12% of the mission's inhabitants living in Bangladesh. Thus, Bangladesh is likely less of a priority for mission outreach given the immense size of the mission.

Tremendous fulltime missionary manpower would be required to open most of the country to missionary work using fulltime missionaries. The Philippines and Mexico have twenty-three and thirty-two missions, respectively, with much smaller populations. Member-missionaries participating among local members and recruitment of native missionaries have the most realistic prospects for future outreach into unreached cities and rural areas; vision and mentoring will be needed to achieve these purposes.

Member Activity and Convert Retention

Convert retention and member activity appear moderate to high, despite limited mission outreach. Activity appears high at least in part due to growth mediated primarily by local members, lengthy periods of preparation of prospective converts, and the lack of pressure for converts to be baptized quickly by foreign missionaries. Foreign members and periodic missionary visits help to regulate the Church and provide training.

Ethnic Issues and Integration

Few challenges face the Church with ethnic integration due to the homogeneity of the population. Minority ethnic groups with higher percentages of Christians may be more receptive to the Church albeit these minority groups live far from Dhaka. Challenges may arise in meeting the needs of converts with differing religious and cultural backgrounds in the same congregation.

Language Issues

The majority of the population speaks Bengali, which only has limited scripture and Church materials translated. Additional materials will likely become available as membership continues to grow. Gospel materials are likely to be translated into Chittagonian, Rangpuri, and Sylheti only when significant membership growth occurs where these minority languages are spoken. The Church will likely favor English use in proselytism and Church meetings given current policies in India that discourage use of languages native to the Indian subcontinent. These policies appear driven to simplify administration and foster unity among differing ethnic groups.

Leadership

The Church appears to struggle in developing self-sustaining Bangladeshi leadership. In May 2009, the branch president of the

Dhaka Branch was an expatriate from Sweden. The same branch president appeared to lead the branch in the late 2010s. Bangladeshi leaders will be crucial to opening additional large cities and introducing the Church to rural communities. Little progress will likely occur until a greater number of men join the Church, remain active, and faithfully hold leadership positions.

Missionary Service

Although the first Bangladeshi missionary served in the early 1990s, very few local members have served missions. Initial missionary outreach will likely depend on missionaries from India or elsewhere.

Temple

Bangladesh pertains to the Hong Kong China Temple District. Temple trips likely do not occur from the Dhaka Branch, as the branch has a small membership, travel to the temple is difficult, and seasoned members are few. Bangladesh will likely be assigned to the Bengaluru India Temple district once the temple is dedicated.

Comparative Growth

Bangladesh is the second most populous sovereign nation without a Church mission headquartered within it as even China has a mission headquartered in Hong Kong. Bangladesh is the most populous country in the world with only one Latter-day Saint congregation. Nations separated by large distances from mission headquarters that have a small Church membership relative to their population sizes have often experienced greater membership growth than Bangladesh. The Church in Laos had its first congregation organized in the early 2000s and had around seventy-five active members in late 2009. By the late 2010s, there were two branches and perhaps as many as 200 active members. The Church in Pakistan had more than 4,000 members in three districts and thirteen branches by the late 2010s, whereas there were approximately 800 members and six branches in 2000. However, other nations in the region distant from mission headquarters have reported minimal progress in the past decade. For example, the Church in Nepal had its first congregation organized around the same time as Bangladesh, yet had fewer than fifty active members in one branch in the late 2010s.

Other Christian denominations have taken advantage of the religious freedom and proselytism. Many Protestant churches add thousands of converts a year and also have outreach outside of the largest cities. Nevertheless, Christians struggle with increasing national outreach. Seventh-Day Adventists have addressed some of these concerns through opening church schools and providing humanitarian relief. Adventists report more than 30,000 members in Bangladesh albeit there has been little change in the number of members in the past decade. Jehovah's Witnesses reported that membership and the number of congregations has doubled in the past decade albeit although membership stood at only 303 in 2018. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints may experience greater growth through the opening of schools, hospitals, and humanitarian relief.

Future Prospects

The lack of local leadership among the handful of Bangladeshi members in Dhaka continues to delay greater progress with the establishment of the Church. Additionally, no full-time missionaries have been assigned to the country, which appears out of concern of the Church's legal status in the country and the influence of Islam on local culture. Given security and cultural concerns, only South Asian members appear likely to serve proselytizing missions in Bangladesh. Moreover, missionary activity would likely rely on member referral rather than traditional missionary finding tactics if full-time missionaries are assigned one day. The Church's growth and progress in nearby Pakistan suggests similar results may be achieved in Bangladesh if the proper vision and consistent outreach is maintained that specifically focuses on the development of local leadership and helping greater numbers of young single adults serve full-time missions so one day there can be a native full-time missionary force capable of meeting local proselytism needs. Bangladeshi members who join the Church in other nations may return to their homeland and help build up the Church. A senior missionary couple from the India New Delhi Mission assisting with leadership development and humanitarian appears likely in the foreseeable future.

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