

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.



Puerto Rico

Population: 3.62 millions (#130 out of countries)

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Geography

Area: 13,790 square km. Puerto Rico is a rectangular-shaped, medium-sized island in the Caribbean between the Virgin Islands and Hispaniola that borders the North Atlantic Ocean and the Caribbean Sea. Several small islands and islets pertain to Puerto Rico; the largest of which is Vieques. Mountains dominate the terrain with the exception of a coastal plain in the northwest. Tropical climate occurs year round with little seasonal variation in temperature; mountainous areas receive the most precipitation. Inland mountainous areas experience more mild climatic conditions due to distance from the ocean and higher elevation. Hurricanes and droughts are natural hazards. Environmental issues include erosion and fresh water shortages during drought. Puerto Rico is a commonwealth territory of the United States and has no first-order administrative divisions.

Population: 3,989,133 (July 2011)

Annual Growth Rate: 0.254% (2011)

Fertility Rate: 1.62 children born per woman (2011)

Life Expectancy: 75.31 male, 82.71 female (2011)

Peoples

white: 76.2%

black: 6.9%

Asian: 0.3%

Amerindian: 0.2%

mixed: 4.4%

other: 12%

Whites of Spanish descent comprise three-quarters of the Puerto Rican population. Those of mixed ancestry constitute the second largest ethnic group. Blacks primarily descended from freed African slaves during the colonial period. Most Asians are Chinese. Amerindians are a tiny minority and nearly all of which are of mixed ancestry. Other ethnic groups are generally from the Caribbean.

Languages: Spanish (95%), English (3%), other (2%). Spanish is spoken as a first language by all but approximately five percent of the population.

Literacy: 94.1% (2002)

History

Amerindian peoples, most notably an Arawak tribe named the Taino, populated Puerto Rico for centuries prior to the arrival of the Spanish in 1493. The Spanish colonized the island in the early sixteenth century and nearly the entire indigenous population disappeared by the mid-sixteenth century as a result of war, disease, and forced labor. African slaves were also introduced to provide forced labor in coastal communities. Puerto Rico was a major commercial and administrative center for Spain's early exploratory and colonial activities in the New World until the seventeenth century when colonial possessions in Central and South America became better established and more prosperous. Notwithstanding the rebellion and independence of most Spanish colonies in the Americas in the early nineteenth century, Puerto Rico remained under Spanish administration until ceded to the United States in 1898 during the Spanish-American War. During the twentieth century, the United States dictated and established political and legislative institutions and stationed military personnel.[1] Puerto Ricans became United States citizens in 1917 and governors began to be popularly-elected in 1948. Puerto Rico has been provided with several opportunities to seek independence but has consistently chosen to remain a commonwealth of the United States.

Culture

Puerto Rican culture has been most heavily influenced by Spanish, Caribbean, and African customs and practices. The Catholic Church has traditionally been a major societal influence. American culture has been a lesser contributor largely due to the development of a cultural identity prior to the annexation of Puerto Rico by the United States in the late nineteenth century. The relationship with the United States remains complicated, many oppose stronger American influence, and the political destiny of Puerto Rico remains undetermined. Millions of Puerto Ricans have emigrated to the continental United States over the past century. There is a proud, rich legacy of literature. Cuisine shares many similarities with other Caribbean nations. Alcohol consumption rates are slightly lower than the world average. Divorce rates are high and illicit drug use is higher than many Latin American and Caribbean nations.

Economy

GDP per capita: $16,300 (2010) [34.4% of US]

Human Development Index: 0.894

Corruption Index: 5.8

Puerto Rico possesses one of the most advanced economies in the Caribbean largely due to close economic ties with the United States as many large American companies and firms have operated for decades. Dairy production, livestock, and tourism are the primary drivers of the economy. Copper, nickel, and petroleum are natural resources. Services employ 79% of the labor force and generate 54% of the GDP whereas industry employs 19% of the labor force and generates 45% of the GDP. Pharmaceuticals, electronics, clothing, agricultural goods, and tourism are major industries. Agriculture accounts for less than five percent of the GDP and labor force. Common agricultural products include sugar, coffee, fruit, livestock, and chicken. Trade primary occurs with the United States.

Puerto Rico is perceived as one of the least corrupt nations in the Caribbean. The illegal immigration of Dominicans across the Mona Passage is a major issue.

Faiths

Christian: 97%

nonreligious: 2%

other: 1%

Christians

Denominations Members Congregations

Catholic 3,000,000

Seventh Day Adventists 36,705 301

Jehovah's Witnesses 26,293 323

Latter-day Saints 20,386 41

Religion

Approximately 75% of Puerto Ricans are Catholic. Protestants and other Christian groups account for nearly one-quarter of the population. There are small numbers of Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists.

Religious Freedom

Persecution Index:

The United States' constitution protects religious freedom and is upheld by national and local laws. There have been no reported instances of societal abuse of religious freedom.

Largest Cities

Urban: 99%

San Juan, Bayamón, Carolina, Ponce, Caguas, Guaynabo, Mayagüez, Trujillo Alto, Arecibo, Fajardo.

All ten of the largest cities have an LDS congregation. 32% of the population resides in the ten most populous cities.

LDS History

Two LDS missionaries were sent to Puerto Rico briefly in 1940. In 1955, the first branch was organized in San Juan and in the early 1970s the Florida South Mission administered Puerto Rico.[2] The first convert baptisms occurred in 1964 and the first Spanish-speaking congregation was organized in 1970.[3] Seminary and institute were both operating by 1982. In 1998, Puerto Rico was assigned to the North America Southeast Area.[4] President Hinckley visited in 2000 and met with members at a special meeting at Robert Clemente Coliseum in San Juan.[5] In 2006, Puerto Rico was reassigned to the Caribbean Area.[6] Together with a realignment of the West Indies Mission, the Puerto Rico San Juan Mission was divided into the Puerto Rico San Juan East and Puerto Rico San Juan West Missions in 2007.[7] The two missions were consolidated as the Puerto Rico San Juan Mission in 2010.

Membership Growth

LDS Membership: 20,785 (2010)

By 1987, there were 13,000 members. Membership growth slowed during the 1990s due to the emigration of American military personnel. Membership increased to 19,000 in 1993 and 21,000 in 1997. By year-end 2000, there were 23,261 members.

Membership decline characterized most of the 2000s as membership decreased to 22,974 in 2002, 20,683 in 2004, and 19,609 in 2006. Membership began to increase in the late 2000s to 20,064 in 2008 and 20,785 in 2010. Annual membership growth

rates during the 2000s ranged from a low of -8.3% in 2004 to a high of 1.6% in 2009. In 2010, one in 191 was nominally LDS.

Congregational Growth

Wards: 27 Branches: 14

There were four branches in 1974 - an English-speaking branch and a Spanish-speaking branch in San Juan, a branch in Caguas, and a branch for the Ramey Air Force Base.[8] There were 47 congregations in 1987, including 23 wards. The number of total congregations increased from 50 in 1993 to 53 in 1997 and declined to 52 in 2000, 46 in 2002, 45 in 2004, and 42 in 2006. The number of congregations increased to 43 in 2007 and declined to 41 in 2010. Since the reestablishment of stakes in the late 1990s, the number of wards has increased from 16 in 1997 to 21 in 2000, 22 in 2004, and 27 in 2006. Congregations discontinued in the late 1990s and 2000s included the Arecibo 2nd, Caguas 2nd, Ceiba, Humacao 2nd, Jayuya, Lajas, Sabana Grande, and Salinas Branches and the Bayamon 2nd, Ponce 3rd, Santurce, and Toa Baja 2nd Wards. In the 2000s, only one new congregation was organized, the Vieques Branch.

The first LDS stake was organized in 1980 in San Juan. Additional stakes were organized in Ponce (1982), Carolina (1984), and Mayaguez (1985). Due to the emigration of American military personnel, low member activity rates, and inadequate numbers of active priesthood holders, all four stakes were discontinued in late 1993 and reorganized into eight member districts headquartered in Arecibo, Caguas, Guayama, Fajardo, Mayaguez, Ponce, San Juan, and Toa Baja. Stakes were reorganized in Mayaguez (1996), Ponce (1996), and San Juan (1997). A fourth stake was created in Toa Baja in 1998. In 2006, the Caguas Puerto Rico Stake was organized from the Caguas and Guayama Puerto Rico Districts. In 2010, districts in Arecibo and Fajardo were consolidated with neighboring stakes. There were five stakes and no districts in early 2011.

Activity and Retention

In 1996, 389 members from the Toa Baja Puerto Rico District attended a temple trip to the Orlando Florida Temple.[9] 130 members from the Arecibo Puerto Rico District participated in a Latter-day Saint pioneer reenactment in 2005.[10] 487 were enrolled in seminary and institute during the 2009-2010 school year. Most wards appear to have between 50 and 100 active members whereas most branches generally have fewer than 50 active members. Total active membership is estimated at 3,500, or 17-20% of church membership.

Language Materials

Languages with LDS Scripture: Spanish, English

All LDS scriptures and most church materials are available in Spanish, including an LDS-edition of the Bible complete with footnotes, topical guide, and Bible dictionary.

Meetinghouses

In early 2011, there were nearly 40 LDS meetinghouses in Puerto Rico. Church-built meetinghouses appear to constitute most LDS meetinghouses. Some smaller branches may meet in rented spaces or renovated buildings.

Humanitarian and Development Work

There have been no major LDS humanitarian or development projects in Puerto Rico. Service activities comprise of projects organized by full-time missionaries and local members.

Opportunities, Challenges and Prospects

Religious Freedom

The LDS Church benefits from full religious freedom in Puerto Rico. LDS members and missionaries may freely proselyte, worship, and assemble.

Cultural Issues

The strong ethno-religious ties of many Puerto Ricans to the Catholic Church is a major barrier for LDS missionaries to face in teaching, baptizing, and retaining new converts. Other Christian groups do not appear to have faced major challenges with traditional ties to Catholicism as evangelicals have experienced strong, steady growth for decades. Instilling personal religious habits for Latter-day Saint converts is a major challenge which has contributed to low member activity rates and local administration challenges. Many active members are able to overcome these cultural challenges and have provided valuable international leadership for the LDS Church. Emigration to the continental United States is a major obstacle for maintaining stability in local leadership and active membership.

National Outreach

41% of the population resides in cities and towns with LDS congregations. All cities with over 14,000 inhabitants have an LDS congregation. As many as 85% of the national population may reside within five kilometers of an LDS meetinghouse. Two towns have fewer than 5,000 inhabitants and an LDS congregation (Lares and Adjuntas). There are seven cities and towns over 10,000 inhabitants without an LDS congregation which include Manati, Dorado, Hormigueros, Coamo, Vega Alta, Corozal, and Pajaros.

Notwithstanding the closure of nearly a dozen congregations over the past decade, the extent of LDS national outreach in Puerto Rico remains virtually unchanged as most congregations consolidated were in cities that had two or more congregations. The extent of mission outreach in many of the largest cities remains minimal as only one LDS congregation operates in most locations. Opportunities for expanding national outreach appear most favorable in communities and cities in the San Juan metropolitan area and its surroundings, especially to the west within the boundaries of the Toa Baja Puerto Rico Stake. Utilizing approaches which reduce full-time missionary involvement appear the most self-sustaining and beneficial for long-term growth, such as holding cottage meetings in lesser-reached locations, enlisting greater numbers of local members as ward or branch missionaries, and creative, innovative finding methods such as service projects and musical performances. The Church has dedicated limited mission resources to areas with small populations in Puerto Rico. For example, in early 2011 a senior missionary couple was stationed on Vieques to provide support to the branch on the island of less than 10,000. Although isolation, few active members, and fledging leadership likely prompted the assignment, smart allocation of limited mission resources is required to maximize national outreach without making new converts and seasoned members dependent on full-time missionaries for finding and fellowshipping investigators and new converts.

The Church has no country website for Puerto Rico. Launching an internet site with culturally-adapted explanations of church teachings, information on local church news, and links to other online Spanish-language resources may facilitate greater member involvement in missionary work and expand national outreach.

Member Activity and Convert Retention

The LDS Church in Puerto Rico has experienced chronic member activity and convert retention issues due to quick-baptism tactics aimed at reaching arbitrary baptismal goals, poor member-missionary participation, and cultural attitudes which encourage casual religious observance and traditional ties to the Catholic Church. Teaching and proselytism approaches have not been tailored to cultural conditions. The emigration of stalwart members to the continental United States and the exodus of most American military personnel has been an ongoing challenge in meeting local administrative and leadership needs. There is a need for greater emphasis on church attendance, living church teachings, and participating in daily personal scripture study and prayer for investigators, new converts, and less-active members. The operation of a second mission between 2007 and 2010 appears to have been partially focused on rectifying inactivity and poor retention issues that had accumulated for decades due to past inconsistencies in mission policies regarding reactivation efforts, prebaptismal teaching, and standards for convert baptisms. Increasing seminary and institute enrollment from 412 during the 2007-2008 school year to 487 during the 2009-2010 school year is an encouraging development that may indicate that convert retention rates have improved and some reactivation efforts have been successful. Continuing increases in seminary and institute enrollment and a reversal of the trend of congregation consolidations will indicate significant progress toward improving member activity and convert retention rates.

Ethnic Issues and Integration

LDS missionaries report no major ethnic integration issues largely due to the widespread use of Spanish and the shared cultural identity of Puerto Ricans despite ethnic diversity.

Language Issues

Widespread use of Spanish, an ample supply of translated church materials, and high literacy rates have resulted in few language issues for the LDS Church in Puerto Rico. One non-Spanish-speaking congregation administers English speakers in San Juan. There is some potential for the organization of additional English-speaking congregations for non-Spanish speakers.

Missionary Service

Puerto Rico remains dependent on non-native missionaries to staff its local missionary needs. A single full-time missionary

companionship is often assigned to one or two congregations at present, although in the past several missionary companionships appear to have been assigned to a single church unit. The current missionary complement for Puerto Rico appears adequate for its needs and potential as congregations are not overstaffed with full-time missionaries. Careful coordination with mission and stake leaders on the allocation of full-time missionaries to lesser-reached communities to organize dependent branches and groups may facilitate an end to the ongoing trend of congregation consolidations. Emphasis on seminary and institute attendance for youth and young adults may increase the number of local members serving missions.

Leadership

Few active priesthood holders and dependence on full-time missionaries for administrative tasks in smaller congregations and finding new investigators in larger congregations has created significant leadership challenges that merited the discontinuation of all Puerto Rican stakes in the early 1990s and steady congregation consolidations for over a decade. The LDS Church in Puerto Rico has supplied the international church with several leaders despite low member activity and local leadership challenges. Several Puerto Ricans living abroad have served in international church leadership positions such as mission presidents. Originally from Arizona but residing San Juan, Franklin Hyrum Talley was called as a regional representative in 1988.[11] In 1991, Jesus Nieves from Carolina and Guillermo Mario Petrotti from Guaynabo were called as regional representatives.[12] In 1994, Justo P. Casablanca from Trujillo Alto was called as a regional representative.[13] In 1995, Jesus Nieves was called to preside over the Puerto Rico San Juan Mission.[14] In 1997, Dane E. Miller from Humacao was called to the Second Quorum of the Seventy.[15] In 2004, Jorge M. Alvarado from Toa Alta was called as an Area Authority Seventy.[16] In 2005, Hugo Edgardo Martinez Morales from Arecibo[17] was called to preside over the Guatemala Guatemala City Central Mission. In 2010, Jorge Miguel Alvarado from Caparra was called to preside over the Puerto Rico San Juan Mission.[18] In 2011, Heriberto Hernandez Vera from Cabo Rojo was called to preside over the Dominican Republic Santo Domingo East Mission.[19]

Temple

Puerto Rico is assigned to the Santo Domingo Dominican Republic Temple district. Prior to the completion of the temple in 2000, Puerto Rico was assigned to the Orlando Florida Temple distract. Travel to the temple is costly and inconvenient, often exacting approximately $500 a person per trip. Prospects for a future temple in Puerto Rico are favorable over the medium term and will depend on increasing active, temple recommend-holding members, greater self-sustainability in each of the five stakes, and a reverse in congregation consolidations.

Comparative Growth

Puerto Rico has the second highest percentage of Latter-day Saints in the general population among Caribbean nations, but the percentage of members is lower than all Spanish-speaking countries in Latin America with the exception of Colombia. LDS Church growth in the neighboring Dominican Republic has greatly outpaced Puerto Rico as in early 2011 there were approximately 120,000 members, 18 stakes, 10 districts, and 201 congregations despite the Church performing concentrated missionary activity in Puerto Rico for a decade longer than in the Dominican Republic. Puerto Rico was the only country in the world which experienced consistent and significant LDS membership decline during the first half of the 2000s. The percentage decline in the number of congregations was among the highest worldwide during the 2000s. Member activity rates are slightly lower than most of Latin America whereas the percentage of members enrolled in seminary and institute is among the lowest worldwide. LDS Puerto Rican membership has provided the international church with a greater number of mission presidents that most Latin American countries with fewer than 100,000 members indicating that a small, strong local priesthood leadership force exists is some areas.

Other outreached-oriented Christian groups have reported strong church growth in Puerto Rico over the past several decades. Evangelicals have been the most successful group and claim nearly all non-Catholic Christians, amounting to more than 10% of the population. The Seventh Day Adventist Church has consistently baptized over 1,500 converts annually for nearly a decade and have increased the number of their congregations by 39 to 299 in 2009.[20] Jehovah's Witnesses baptize smaller numbers of converts than Adventists, but operated 323 congregations in 2010. These other Christian groups have been successful in mitigating emigration and cultural issues which have been consistent challenges for Latter-day Saints.

Future Prospects

Low member activity rates, the continuing trend of congregation consolidations, inconsistent mission policies regarding convert baptismal standards, emigration, and a lack of missionary approaches tailored to traditional Catholics generate a mediocre outlook for future growth for the LDS Church. Opening new congregations, increasing the number of local members serving missions, and greater stress on seminary and institute attendance may help overcome these issues and increase the likelihood of the construction of a future LDS temple in San Juan.

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