

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.

Poland



Population: 38.35 millions (#35 out of countries)

By David Stewart and Matt Martinich

Geography

Area: 312,685 square km. Located in Central Europe, Poland borders Russia, Lithuania, Belarus, Ukraine, Slovakia, Czechia, Germany, and the Baltic Sea. Flat plains with farmland or temperate forest occupy most the terrain with some mountains in the south. Most areas experience temperate climate marked by cold, wet winters and mild summers with frequent precipitation. Thousands of lakes dot the landscape. Two large rivers, the Oder and Vistula, flow toward the Baltic Sea, with the Vistula traveling through Warsaw. Flooding is a natural hazard. Environmental conditions have improved as a result of declining heavy industry after the fall of communism, but persistent environmental issues include air pollution, acid rain, water pollution, and the proper disposal of hazardous waste. Poland is divided into sixteen administrative provinces.

Peoples

Polish: 96.9%

Silesian: 1.1%

German: 0.2%

Ukrainian: 0.1%

Other/unspecified: 1.7%

The population is highly homogenous. Non-Polish ethnic groups like Germans and Ukrainians tend to reside in border regions or in the largest cities. Other and unspecified ethnicities include immigrants from Asia and Eastern Europe.

Population: 38,420,687 (July 2018)

Annual Growth Rate: -0.16% (2018)

Fertility Rate: 1.36 children born per woman (2018)

Life Expectancy: 74.1 male, 82.0 female (2018)

Languages: Polish (98.2%), Silesian (1.4%), other/unspecified (0.4%). Polish is the official language and only language with over one million speakers (37.7 million). Silesian, English, and German are the most spoken minority languages.

Literacy: 99.8% (2015)

History

Germanic and Slavic tribes populated Poland prior to the establishment of a Polish state, which officially adopted Christianity as the state religion in the tenth century AD. The Jagiellonian dynasty led Poland to its height of power and influence starting in the fourteenth century by forming a union with the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Poland began to decline in power over the subsequent centuries and by 1795 was partitioned among Prussia, Russia, and Austria. Poland became an independent state following World War I but was divided between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union in World War II. Six million Poles perished in the war, and 2.5 million were relocated to Germany for forced labor. The Jewish population of around three million was reduced to 100,000 due to the organized eradication of the Jews by Nazi Germany. Poland regained independence following the war but came under communist control by 1947. Periods of political instability and fluctuating economic growth and recession occurred up until the late 1980s when noncommunists took command of the government, leading to democratic elections in 1990.[1] Economic growth has occurred for many years over the past two decades. Poland became a NATO member in 1999, joined the European Union in 2004, and today is a major power in the region.

Culture

Poland has produced many well-known individuals who have significantly contributed to science, music, and religion, such as Nicolaus Copernicus, Frederick Chopin, and Pope John Paul II. A rich tradition of literature traces its roots from the Middle Ages. Many Polish scientists have contributed to technological advances over the past two centuries. Education is highly valued. Alcohol and cigarette consumption rates rank higher than most nations. The Catholic Church remains a strong influence on society despite over forty years of communist rule and has historically been seen as a defender of the Polish nationality through the many years of foreign occupation and oppression. Poland has one of the most pro-life attitudes toward abortion, as the government bans abortion as a means of birth control.

Economy

GDP per capita: $29,600 (2017) [49.5% of U.S.]

Human Development Index: 0.865 (2017)

Corruption Index: 60 (2017)

Poland successfully transitioned from a centralized state-controlled economy to a free market economy since the end of communist rule. Growth and development have mirrored that experienced by many other post-communist states in Central Europe and the Baltic States. Some obstacles continue to slow economic growth, such as outdated transportation infrastructure and some government controls, labor regulations, and taxes. Steady economic growth has occurred in recent years. Natural resources include coal, sulfur, copper, natural gas, silver, lead, salt, and amber. Services employ 57.6% of the labor force and generate 57.4% of the GDP, whereas industry employs 30.4% of the workforce and generates 40.2% of the GDP. Primary industries include machine building, iron and steel, coal mining, shipbuilding, textiles, food processing, and glass. Agriculture employs 11.5% of the workforce and accounts for 2.4% of the GDP. Potatoes, fruits, vegetables, wheat, eggs, poultry, dairy, and pork are common agricultural products. Primary trade partners include Germany, several other EU member states, and China.

Corruption is perceived as a major issue that has detracted foreign investment and has limited economic growth. However, perceived corruption has improved in recent years. The government established an anti-corruption central office, which has seen some positive results. Economic freedoms and regulations have assisted in recent economic growth.[2]

Faiths

Christian: 94.2%

Unaffiliated: 3.0%

Unspecified: 1.8%

Other: 1.0%

Christians

Denominations – Members – Congregations

Roman Catholics – 35,654,398

Polish Orthodox – 500,000

Jehovah's Witnesses – 118,036 – 1,294

Lutherans – 77,500

Greek Catholics – 53,000

Old Catholic Mariavits – 23,568

Pentecostals – 21,303

Polish Catholics – 18,804

Seventh Day Adventists – 5,739 – 143

New Apostolic Church – 4,853

Baptists – 4,818

Methodists – 4,481

Reformed Lutherans – 3,510

Church of Christ – 2,425

Catholic Mariavits – 2,153

Latter-day Saints – 1,983 – 12

Religion

Poland has one of the most religiously active populations among member nations of the European Union, as 75% of nominal Catholics were practicing in the late 2000s. Some estimates indicate that as many as 94% of the population identifies as Catholic. However, religious attitudes among young adults have significantly changed in the past decade due to rapid secularization. In the late 2010s, Poland was the country with the largest split (twenty-three percentage points) between young adults and older adults in regards to self-reported importance of religion in everyday life.[3] Traditional Christian minority groups like Orthodox Christians are among the largest non-Catholic groups. Jehovah's Witnesses constitute the dominant proselytizing nontraditional Christian denomination. Many Protestant Christian groups operate and have comparatively few members. Jews and Muslims together number fewer than 50,000.[4]

Religious Freedom

The constitution protects religious freedom, which is upheld by the government. The government permits religious groups to organize, train clergy, publish literature, and assemble. Foreign missionaries may enter and proselyte without government restrictions. Religious groups are not required to register with the Ministry of the Interior, but registered religious groups receive reduced taxes and other economic benefits. To register, a religious group must have over one hundred members. There have

been some recent instances of societal abuses of religious freedom, but civic leaders contributed to the establishment of greater understanding and tolerance between differing religious traditions. Societal abuses of religious freedom primarily target Jews and Muslims.[5]

Largest Cities

Urban: 60.1% (2018)

Warsaw, Krakow, Lodz, Wroclaw, Poznan, Gdansk, Szczecin, Bydgoszcz, Lublin, **Bialystok,** Katowice, **Gdynia, Czestochowa, Radom, Sosnowiec, Torun,** Kielce, **Rzeszow, Gliwice, Zabrze, Olsztyn, Bielsko-Biala, Bytom, Zielona Gora, Rybnik, Ruda Slaska, Tychy, Opole, Gorzow Wielkopolski, Dabrowa Gornicza, Elblag, Plock, Walbrzych, Wloclawek, Tarnow, Chorzów, Koszalin, Kalisz, Legnica.**

Cities listed in **bold** have do official congregation of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Eleven of the thirty-nine cities with over 100,000 inhabitants have a Church congregation. Twenty-eight percent (28%) of the national population resides in the thirty-nine largest cities.

Church History

Latter-day Saint missionaries first established the Church in the territory of modern-day Poland in 1892. The Wroclaw Branch was organized in 1909 and divided into three congregations by 1921. The city was known as Breslau at the time and was the sixth largest city in the German Empire. Zelwagi, located in East Prussia, became another Church center and had a small community of Latter-day Saints who endured World War II. Most members were ethnic Germans; these territories were annexed to Poland following the war.

The Church officially registered with the Polish government in 1961, but by 1971 the last operating branch was discontinued due to the heavy emigration of members. Several Poles joined the Church in Germany and returned to Poland in the late 1970s, helping to reestablish the Church.[6] Church President Spencer W. Kimball dedicated Poland for missionary work in 1977. Senior missionary couples began serving in 1977, and the first young missionaries were assigned in 1988.[7] The Church broke ground on the first meetinghouse in mid-1989.[8] Missionary work occurred under the Austria Vienna East Mission prior to 1990.[9] In 1990, the Church created the Poland Warsaw Mission.[10]

Seminary and institute began in 1995. The mission president and a Polish Latter-day Saint who was a member of the Church's National Public Affairs Council met with the first lady in 2000.[11] Poland was assigned to the Europe Central Area in 2000[12] and in the late 2000s was transferred to the Europe Area. In 2007, the Church participated in the World Congress of Families convention in which Elder Bruce C. Haven of the Seventy spoke, and full-time missionaries conducted proselytism activity.[13]

President Dieter F. Uchtdorf visited members and missionaries in Warsaw in 2014.[14] Elder Uchtdorf visited Gdansk in 2018.

Membership Growth

LDS Membership: 1,983 (2017)

Two hundred thirty converts were baptized from 1985 to 1990.[15] Membership more than doubled in less than two years in the late 1980s and early 1990s from less than 100 to over 200 in four cities.[16] There were 500 members by year-end 1993, increasing to 900 by year-end 1997. There were approximately sixty convert baptisms in 1999. Membership stood at 1,173 at year-end 2000.

Membership grew slowly in the 2000s, reaching 1,385 in 2003, 1,525 in 2006, and 1,552 in 2008. Annual membership growth rates ranged from 3-7% between 2001 and 2005 but declined to –0.4% to 1.6% for years between 2006 and 2008. Returned missionaries reported that many active members emigrated out of Poland after Poland joined the EU. Annual membership growth rates rebounded in 2009 to 4.5% due to an increase of seventy members. There were forty-two convert baptisms in 2007, almost twice as many from the year before. By mid-September 2008, there had been thirty-five convert baptisms for 2008.

Annual membership growth rates ranged from 0-4% during the 2010s. Church membership increased to 1,716 in 2011, 1,861 in 2015, and 1,983 in 2017. There have historically been very few Polish Latter-day Saint families. In 2005, the Warsaw Poland District President stated that 60-70% of the 500 members in the district were single.[17] In 2018, there were fifty Latter-day Saints in Gdansk.[18]

In 2017, one in 19,403 was a Latter-day Saint.

Congregational Growth

Wards: 0 Branches: 12 Groups: 3? (2018)

The Church established a branch in Warsaw in 1977 and a branch in Poznan in 1980. The Warsaw Poland District was organized in 1979 but was discontinued by the mid-1990s. At the end of 1991, there were five branches. In 2000, there were eighteen branches, and in mid-2001, there were seventeen branches and five groups.[19] In September 2002, fifteen branches operated in Warsaw (2), Bialystok, Bydgoszcz, Bytom, Dabrowa Gornicza, Gdansk, Grudziadz, Katowice, Krakow, Legionowo, Lodz, Walbrzych, and Zabrze, and eight member groups functioned in Brzeg/Opole, Glogow, Gorzow Wielkopolski, Jelenia Gora, Legnica, Lublin, Poznan, and Szczecin.

The number of branches declined to thirteen by year-end 2002 and twelve in 2003. In 2002, the Church reestablished the Warsaw Poland District, which consisted of four branches.[20] In 2004, the Church organized the Katowice Poland District. In 2009, the number of branches increased to thirteen as a result of the creation of the Szczecin Branch. In 2012, the Kielce Group became a branch.

Missionaries were assigned to additional cities in the mid to late 2000s, including Szczecin, Zgorzelec, Kielce, Zamosc, and Torun. In late 2010, missionaries were no longer assigned to a few of these cities, such as Torun. The two branches in Warsaw were consolidated into a single branch in 2017. In late 2018, branches operated in eleven cities: Bydgoszcz, Gdansk, Katowice, Kielce, Kraków, Lublin, Lodz, Poznan, Szczecin, Warsaw, and Wroclaw. In the late 2010s, member groups appeared to operate in four additional cities: Bialystok, Legnica, Mielec, and Zgorzelec.

Activity and Retention

There were four active members in 1985.[21] 200 attended the groundbreaking of the first meetinghouse in 1989, many of which were government officials and invited non-member guests.[22] 400 attended the dedication of the meetinghouse in 1991.[23] Twenty-one young adults, including seven Polish returned missionaries, attended the first institute class in 1995.[24] In 2000, thirty-seven youth attended a nationwide youth conference in Warsaw.[25] In 2001, 500 members, dignitaries, media representatives, missionaries, and investigators attended a nationwide church conference held in Warsaw. Prior to the conference, sixty converts baptized in the past year met for a special new member meeting.[26]

The average number of members per congregation increased from sixty-five in 2000 to 125 in 2009 and 165 in 2017. Thirty-eight were enrolled in seminary or institute during the 2008–2009 school year. In mid-2008, there were forty active members in Lodz. In mid-2009, one of the Warsaw branches had fewer than forty active members and the group in Kielce had fewer than ten active members. In 2010, there were fewer than twenty active members in Gdansk and Lublin. Missionaries reported in the late 2000s that there were no more than 300 active members nationwide. Approximately 700 met in Warsaw for a combined district conference in 2012.[27] In the mid-2010s, returned missionaries reported fifty active members in Legnica and Wroclaw, 30-40 active members in each of the Warsaw branches, 20-30 active members in Lodz, twenty-six active members in Bydgoszcz, fifteen active members in Gdansk, 10-15 active members in Krakow, and six active members in Lublin. At the time, returned missionaries estimated that only 30-50% of converts remained active one year after baptism. Furthermore, individuals who struggle with mental illness appeared to constitute a disproportionately large number of convert baptisms in the mid-2010s.

Active membership is estimated at 300-350, or 15-20% of total church membership.

Language Materials

Languages with Church Scripture: Polish, German.

All Church scriptures and a large number of church materials are translated in Polish and German, including several institute manuals. The Liahona magazine has twelve German and four Polish issues a year.

Meetinghouses

There are at least eleven church meetinghouses in Poland. The chapel in Warsaw was the first church-built meetinghouse in Eastern Europe. Most congregations meet in rented spaces or renovated buildings. Historically, sacrament meeting attendance must be over eighty regularly attending members or investigators in order for the Church to build a chapel in a given area.

Humanitarian and Development Work

The Church has conducted twenty humanitarian and development projects in Poland since 1985.[28] In the early 1990s, the Church provided education and development assistance to Polish farmers marketing their products for distribution and sale.[29] In 1999, Latter-day Saints in Germany donated quilts, puppets, clothing, and hygiene items to an orphanage in Krakow.[30] German members sent 250 hygiene kits to Polish orphans in 2004.[31]

Opportunities, Challenges, and Prospects

Religious Freedom

In 1989, Elder Russell M. Nelson reported that Latter-day Saints had a positive relationship with the government at the time.[32] There are no restrictions regarding proselytism or holding church meetings. Foreign missionaries serve freely in the country.

Cultural Issues

The strong correlation of Polish identity with Catholicism is a major traditional cultural obstacle for mission outreach. Many are polite to missionaries and church members, but express little interest in learning about the Church. Many have negative views of the Church which hampers missionary efforts. Full-time missionaries often become confused with Jehovah's Witnesses. High alcohol and cigarette consumption rates challenge missionary efforts. Polish society and culture exhibit many attributes that fall in line with Church teachings, but the Church has experienced less church growth compared to surrounding nations with greater social problems and challenges. Many have a background and basic understanding of Christianity and the Bible, which offers a foundation of faith for Latter-day Saints to build upon. The Jehovah's Witness faith has established itself as the dominant alternative to Catholicism. Secularism has a strong hold on most of the nonreligious population. Polish-descendent Latter-day Saints in the United States and other countries appear to greatly outnumber total church membership in Poland and have frequently been called to serve as full-time missionaries in Poland. Large numbers of converts with Polish ancestry in other countries indicates that receptivity and potential for growth can be realized once cultural obstacles are overcome. Low numbers of convert baptisms since the opening of the Poland Warsaw Mission in 1990 may be due to the uniqueness of a staunchly Catholic nation subjugated to communist rule for four decades. Most Poles feel that Catholicism offers the essential principles and ordinances of Christianity and see no need to investigate other Christian faiths. Poland's overwhelming ethnic and religious homogeneity following post-World War II boundary changes contributes to cultural challenges. Poland lacks the religious plurality and integration of many other European nations; without such plurality, there is little sentiment that other faiths are culturally acceptable. The situation of mission outreach in Poland is perhaps more similar to that of other highly ethnically and religiously homogenous nations where religion and cultural identity are intertwined, such as Greece and Ireland, than to its more diverse and pluralistic neighbors.

National Outreach

Mission outreach centers operate in cities populated by 18% of the national population. There are 180 cities with between 20,000 and 100,000 inhabitants that constitute 19% of the national population who are unreached by Latter-day Saints. Twelve of the sixteen administrative provinces have a mission outreach center. Fifteen percent (15%) of the national population resides in the four unreached provinces of Lubuskie, Opolskie, Podkarpackie, and Warminsko-Mazurskie. No meaningful mission outreach has occurred in rural areas.

The Poland Warsaw Mission greatly increased the scope of national outreach in the early 2000s, but limited numbers of full-time missionaries serving worldwide and poor receptivity in newly opened cities resulted in the closure of almost all new cities opened during this period. Small gatherings of members may have church meetings in some of these locations, but none are reported as groups on the Church's Poland website or meetinghouse locator. Due to low receptivity, few local full-time missionaries, modest member involvement in missionary activity, and no sustained significant increase in the worldwide full-time missionary force since the early 2000s, few if any additional cities appear likely to open to full-time missionaries in the foreseeable future.

The Church maintains an Internet site for Poland at http://www.mormoni.pl/. The website offers Polish language church information, including meetinghouse locations and a self-referral system to request a visit from full-time missionaries. Use of the website by full-time missionaries and members can help educate the public regarding Latter-day Saint teachings and beliefs and can be used to extend outreach in lesser-reached areas. However, most information about the Church on the Internet in Polish is negative and inaccurate. Missionaries report a need for greater amounts of Polish translations of Church materials online.

Member Activity and Convert Retention

Despite church membership doubling since 1999, there appears to have been no significant increase in the number of active Latter-day Saints. Poland has experienced low convert retention and member activity rates for much of the Church's history. Cities that have had a longer church presence tend to have lower member activity rates, as less active members have accumulated over the years. Full-time missionaries report that some members have become offended and refuse to attend

church thereafter. Little success has come from member reactivation efforts. Emphasis on seminary and institute attendance may help increase doctrinal understanding of members, reduce the frequency of active members leaving the church, improve member relations, and increase church attendance over time. Emigration continues to be a major challenge, as many active members relocate to Western Europe or elsewhere, searching for better employment and greater opportunities to associate with larger Latter-day Saint populations.

Ethnic Issues and Integration

The highly homogenous Polish Catholic population reduces ethnic integration challenges. However, the lack of ethnic diversity creates cultural challenges for Polish members and prospective converts. There have been no reports of challenges integrating the few non-Polish members into predominantly Polish congregations. Several non-Polish families have historically resided in Warsaw.

Language Issues

Nearly the entire population has church materials translated in their native language. Polish and German speakers benefit from a large array of Church materials in addition to translations of all Latter-day Saint scriptures in both languages.

Missionary Service

Poland remains almost entirely dependent on foreign missionaries to staff its full-time missionary needs. One of the first senior missionary couples assigned to Poland served for five years from 1985 to 1990.[33] In mid-1989, ten missionaries served in Poland, including three senior couples.[34] The first member from Poland to serve a mission was assigned to the United States in 1989.[35] In late 2008, there were 104 full-time missionaries serving in Poland, none of whom were native members. By late 2010, fewer than seventy full-time missionaries were serving in Poland, and only few local members were serving full-time missions. In late 2010, two recent Polish-American converts fluent in Polish began serving in the Poland Warsaw Mission. In the 2010s, the number of missionaries assigned to Poland appeared to decrease.

Leadership

Poland has developed local priesthood leadership in many areas despite limited numbers of church members. A nationwide church conference in 2001 had one hundred priesthood holders in attendance.[36] Self-sufficiency of local leadership has led to the establishment of two districts in the 2000s in Warsaw and Katowice. Most branches have a Polish branch president, but many have full-time missionaries serving as counselors due to the small number of active male members.

Temple

Poland is assigned to the Freiberg Germany Temple district. Temple trips occur frequently and are within the budget of most members. Regular temple excursions in the mid-2000s would accommodate sixty members. Temple trips have in the past been well attended.[37] Prospects for a closer temple appear unlikely for the foreseeable future.

Comparative Growth

Poland has one of the lowest percentages of Latter-day Saints in the general population among European nations with an official church presence and has consistently ranked among the lowest baptizing missions worldwide. No other nation in Europe has more than ten million people and a lower percentage of Latter-day Saints in the population as Poland. Other former communist nations have experienced greater membership growth and broader mission outreach. Ukraine has a population 14% larger than Poland, but has nearly six times as many Latter-day Saints. Poland has historically reported one of the lowest percentages of members enrolled in seminary or institute worldwide at 2%.

Jehovah's Witnesses have experienced tremendous growth in Poland over the years and are the largest nontraditional Christian denomination, as one in 325 is a Witness. Witnesses established a strong membership base and had gained tens of thousands of converts prior to the fall of communism due to illegal proselytism. However, stagnant membership growth and significant congregation consolidations have occurred for Witnesses in the 2010s. For example, the number of Witness congregations in Poland decreased from 1,814 to 1,294 between 2010 and 2017. No noticeable growth has occurred for Seventh Day Adventists over the past two decades.

Future Prospects

Although Poland would seem to offer some of the greatest church growth potential for Latter-day Saints among former-communist Europe due to its large religious population and many societal attitudes that complement Latter-day Saint

teachings, receptivity has been consistently low. One recently returned missionary remarked that it appears the Church has yet to figure out an effective strategy to conduct missionary work in Poland given the lack of progress despite three decades of consistent proselytism. Latter-day Saint mission planners and area leaders allocated over one hundred full-time missionaries for many years in hopes of a greater response from the general population to the Church, yet there has been little response from native Poles. The number of convert baptisms appears to have remained fairly constant despite a significant reduction in the number of full-time missionaries assigned to Poland, indicating increased efficiency or limited impact of foreign missionaries. Success among other missionary-oriented Christian groups like Jehovah's Witnesses demonstrates that church growth potential exists despite challenging social conditions for non-Catholic groups to conduct missionary work. Long-term stability and greater growth will hinge upon increases in the number of active membership in cities with established mission outreach centers and larger numbers of youth who join the church, serve full-time missions, and remain in their home country actively serving in the church.

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