



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.



Paraguay



Population: 6.7 millions (#105 out of countries)

By David Stewart and Matt Martinich

Geography

Area: 406,752 square km. Landlocked in South America, Paraguay borders Brazil, Argentina, and Bolivia. Terrain primarily consists of flat plains covered by grasslands, forest, and swamp with subtropical to temperate climate. Semi-arid conditions occur in the west, which is dominated by the Gran Chaco - a large, sparsely populated wooded plain in interior South America. The Rio Paraguay and Rio Parana are the largest rivers which flow through the country, both of which form part of the Argentine border. Flooding is a natural hazard. Environmental issues include deforestation, wetland loss, water pollution, and poor sanitation conditions. Paraguay is administratively divided into 17 departments and one capital city.

Population: 6,375,830 (July 2010)

Annual Growth Rate: 1.31% (2010)

Fertility Rate: 2.16 children born per woman (2010)

Life Expectancy: 73.39 male, 78.71 female (2010)

Peoples

Mestizo: 95%

Other: 5%

Mestizos consist of those who have a mixed Spanish and Amerindian heritage. Other ethnicities include Amerindians and immigrants from Europe and Asia.

Languages: Guarani dialects (80%), Spanish, German, and other European languages (19%), other Amerindian (1%). Spanish and Guarani are both official languages. Most of the population is bilingual in both languages. Common European languages include Portuguese and German. With the exception of Guarani, no Amerindian languages have over 20,000 speakers.

Literacy: 94% (2003)

History

Amerindian groups settled the region prior to the arrival of the Spanish in the 16th century. In 1811, Paraguay won independence from Spain. Between 1865 and 1870, war with Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay drastically reduced the male population and resulted in Paraguay losing a large portion of its territory. In the 1930s, the Chaco War with Bolivia resulted in Paraguay gaining large areas of territory in the west. A military dictatorship under Stroessner lasted for 35 years, ending in 1989. Although political conditions have stabilized somewhat, Paraguay's history as an independent nation has been marked by political turmoil and social upheaval.

Culture

Paraguay has one of the strongest Amerindian cultures among Spanish-speaking nations in Latin America which has been infused with Spanish culture over the past several centuries. Cuisine consists of many dishes with cornmeal, cheese, bread, and vegetables. Paraguayans highly regard their extended families. Cigarette consumption rates rank average compared to other nations whereas alcohol consumption rates are lower than most nations.

Economy

GDP per capita: \$4,100 (2009) [8.84% of US]

Human Development Index: 0.761

Corruption Index: 2.1

One of the largest soy producers in the world, Paraguay relies on heavily on agriculture. . Most Paraguayans have experienced little if any increase in wages from 1980 levels. Many Paraguayans are subsistence farmers. Agriculture employs 27% of the population and produces 20% of the GDP. Primary crops include cotton, sugarcane, soybeans, and grains. Industry accounts for less than 20% of the GDP and workforce whereas services employ 55% of the labor force and produce 61% of the GDP. Sugar, cement, and textiles are major industries. Primary trade partners include Brazil, China, Argentina, and Uruguay.

Corruption in Paraguay is perceived as the second most widespread in South America after Venezuela. The Argentina-Brazil-Paraguay border area is a haven for illegal activity and terrorism. Paraguay is a major drug producer and trafficker. Money laundering and poor law enforcement are additional challenges.

Faiths

Christian: 97%

Other/unspecified: 1.9%

None: 1.1%

Christians

Denominations Members Congregations

Catholic 5,712,744

Latter-day Saints 78,220 149

Seventh Day Adventists 15,189 54

Jehovah's Witnesses 8,398 155

Religion

Most Paraguayans are Catholic and account for 87% of the population. Most non-Catholics are evangelical Protestants.

Immigrants and non-natives are most likely to belong to non-Catholic Christian denominations or other religious groups.[\[1\]](#)

Religious Freedom

Persecution Index:

The constitution protects religious freedom, which is typically upheld by government policies and law. There are few legal restrictions regarding freedom of religion, speech, and conversion to another religion. The Catholic Church is recognized by the government due to its historical legacy in Paraguay, but there is no state religion. Religious groups must register with the government. Foreign missionaries may proselyte freely. Religious instruction may occur in public schools. Societal abuses of religious freedom have been minor. The government has worked to encourage good cooperation and dialogue between religious groups.[\[2\]](#)

Largest Cities

Urban: 60%

Asunción, San Lorenzo, Capiatá, Lambaré, Fernando de la Mora, Limpio, Nemby, Encarnación, Colonia Mariano Roque Alonso, Itauguá.

All 10 of the largest cities have an LDS congregation. 40% of the national population lives in the 10 largest cities and 29% of the national population resides in Asuncion.

LDS History

The first known convert baptized in Paraguay occurred in 1949.[\[3\]](#) The First Presidency authorized the opening of Paraguay to missionary work that year.[\[4\]](#) The Church obtained official government recognition in 1950 and began to send missionaries who were serving in Uruguay.[\[5\]](#) During the early 1950s, the Uruguay-Paraguay Mission almost closed Paraguay temporarily for missionary work due to a shortage of missionaries resulting from the Korean War.[\[6\]](#)

Seminary and institute began in the early 1970s. The Church organized the Paraguay Asuncion Mission from the Uruguay Montevideo Mission in 1977. In 1979, President Ezra Taft Benson created the first stake in Asuncion.[\[7\]](#)

In 1997, President Hinckley became the first Church president to speak in Paraguay.[\[8\]](#) The following year, the Paraguay Asuncion Mission was divided to create the Paraguay Asuncion North Mission. In 2002, Paraguay became the last Spanish-speaking South American nation to have an LDS temple.

Membership Growth

LDS Membership: 78,220 (2009)

After 27 years of proselytism, membership reached 1,400 in 1977.[\[9\]](#) By 1990, there were 12,000 members. Membership growth began to rapidly accelerate in the mid-1990s. In 1996, there were more convert baptisms than in the previous five years combined.[\[10\]](#) In 1997, membership was 32,000.[\[11\]](#) By year-end 2000, there were 47,850 members. During the 2000s, rapid growth continued as membership reached 53,420 in 2002, 61,308 in 2005, and 71,531 in 2007. Most years in the past decade experienced annual membership growth rates between four and six percent, with the most rapid membership growth rates between seven and nine percent occurring in 2006 and 2007. In 2009, one in 82 people was nominally LDS.

Congregational Growth

Wards: 62 Branches: 87

In 1975, there were nine branches and two districts.[\[12\]](#) The first two stakes were organized in 1979 and 1980 in the Asuncion area. During the 1990s, four additional stakes were created in Asuncion North (1992), San Lorenzo (1994), Ciudad Del Este (1996), and Fernando de la Mora South (1997). In early 1998, there were six stakes and 10 districts.

In the 2000s, new stakes were created in Luque (2001), Capiatá (2004), Ñemby (2005), and Luque South (2006). The Mariano Roque Alonso Paraguay District (2005) is the most recently created district. Almost all the remaining 10 districts operating in mid-2010 were created in the 1981 and 1994. Most districts are located in the largest cities outside the capital.

By year-end 2000, there were 117 congregations. Between 2000 and 2005, the Church created 26 new congregations including 19 wards. Between year-end 2005 and mid-2010, the number of wards increased by six yet the number of branches remained unchanged. In mid-2010, two new branches were organized in the Mistolar area in the large towns of Filadelfia and Neuland.

Activity and Retention

In 1997, President Hinckley spoke to 7,120 members for a regional conference in Asuncion, 22% of the national membership at the time. He requested the members to do all they can to keep the large numbers of new converts active through befriending them.^[13] 22,483 attended the Asuncion Paraguay Temple open house and 6,199 attended the dedication in 2002.^[14] 2,549 were enrolled in seminary or institute during the 2008-2009 school year.

The average number of members per congregation increased in the 2000s as membership growth outpaced congregational growth. Between 2000 and 2009, the average congregation grew from 409 to 532 members. An increase of 123 members per congregation - with 84% of this increase since year-end 2005 - suggests that many converts were not retained during this period; otherwise a greater number of congregations would have been organized.

The number of active members per congregation varies dramatically by ward or branch. Missionaries report some wards with over 100 active members and others with fewer than 50. Branches also vary widely with some having over 50 active members and others with fewer than 20. Nearly all missionaries report that most congregations have major inactivity issues. The census in 2002 reported 9,374 Latter-day Saints^[15] which accounted for 17.5% of reported Church membership for the year, demonstrating that over 80% of members on church rolls do not consider the LDS Church to be their faith of preference, and are unlikely to attend or participate. Current nationwide active membership appears to number between 12,000 and 15,000, or 15% to 20% of total membership.

Language Materials

Languages with LDS Scripture: Spanish, Portuguese, Guarani, German

All LDS scriptures and most church materials are available in Spanish, Portuguese, and German. The Church recently completed a Spanish-translation of the LDS-edition of the Bible complete with full LDS footnotes, Bible dictionary, and topical guide. Guarani language materials include the Book of Mormon, Gospel Principles, The Prophet Joseph Smith's Testimony, and hymns and children's songs. Church materials translated in Nivacle include Gospel Principles Simplified and The Prophet Joseph Smith's Testimony.

Meetinghouses

Most congregations meet in Church-built meetinghouses. The Asuncion area alone has nearly 60 meetinghouses. Some smaller branches, dependent branches, or groups meet in rented facilities.

Humanitarian and Development Work

At least 14 humanitarian projects have occurred since 1985, many of which provided vision care, medical equipment and training, and emergency relief.^[16] In 1997, 7,000 members in Argentina, Paraguay, and Uruguay contributed 33,000 hours of community service and development work on one day.^[17] 250 youth in Asuncion helped displaced flood victims clean their homes and restore a downtown plaza to its original condition.^[18] In 2000, 400 members cleaned and refurbished several public schools in Asuncion.^[19]

Opportunities, Challenges and Prospects

Religious Freedom

The Church enjoys full religious freedom and full-time missionaries openly proselyte. Societal abuses of religious freedom are infrequent and Latter-day Saints report few instances of persecution or harassment.

Cultural Issues

Paraguay has one of the most Catholic populations in South America, yet discrimination and persecution of non-Catholics is

rare. The traditionally strong institution of the family and its conservative values in Paraguay offer opportunities and challenges for Latter-day Saints as many family values help reinforce Church doctrine but converts who join the Church individually can face opposition from family members. Poverty in many areas is a factor which can affect leadership development and member self-sustainability as many are underemployed and unable to financially provide for their families.

National Outreach

With two LDS missions serving less than 6.5 million people, Paraguay receives excellent mission outreach. Approximately half the national population resides in an urban location with an LDS congregation. All cities with over 10,000 inhabitants have a mission outreach center. 16 of 17 administrative divisions have mission outreach centers; only Alto Paraguay (0.2% of the national population) does not. Four administrative divisions (Misiones, Presidente Hayes, and San Pedro) have only a couple mission outreach centers and together account for 11% percent of the national population. The 2.5 million rural inhabitants remain largely outside the reach of current mission outreach centers.

Church infrastructure and membership are heavily concentrated in Asuncion as the Central Department - which consists of Asuncion and large suburban communities - constitutes 30% of the national population and accounts for eight of the ten LDS stakes (80%). The two missions have assigned missionaries to small towns on the outskirts of larger cities. The city of Asuncion is divided between the two missions, creating opportunities for both missions to maximize outreach potential in the largest city by requiring fewer outreach centers for a large population as well as sharing the burden of establishing new outreach centers in rural areas where there are few members and lacking Priesthood leadership.

The Church made significant progress expanding national outreach in the 1980s and 1990s. Mission outreach began outside the largest cities in the 1980s. In 1980, Walter Flores - a recent LDS Nivacle Amerindian convert - invited missionaries to teach his fellow Nivacle villagers in Mistolar, located in the remote Gran Chaco. On November 18th, 139 people from the area were baptized. By 1991, there were over 400 members in the Mistolar area.^[20] Outreach in rural communities expanded elsewhere in Paraguay. In 1985, the remote Natalio 10 Branch was established 72 miles north of Encarnacion with 30 active members by 1991.^[21] In 2002, the Mistolar area had approximately 500 members; only six Nivacle families had been to the temple.^[22] The Mistolar area appears an anomaly as many rural areas initially experience large numbers of convert baptisms with poor retention, resulting in current dependence on foreign missionaries to fill leadership positions and only a handful of active members. However, expanding national outreach in remote areas requires proper understanding of the relationship between population and geography in Paraguay. The three provinces in Western Paraguay account for 61% of Paraguay's total geographical area yet are home to only 2% of the national population.

The Church experienced little increase in national outreach during the 2000s. New mission outreach centers began to be created again in 2010 in western Paraguay. Opportunities for expanding national outreach appear highest in the many small towns with several thousand inhabitants in rural areas, many of which have yet to receive initial LDS mission outreach.

Member Activity and Convert Retention

Congregational growth rates have declined sharply in the late 2000s. This trend relates at least in part to quick baptism tactics of missionaries, inadequate pre-baptismal and post-baptismal teaching for converts, and a lacking social support infrastructure in some areas. Between 2006 and 2009, nearly 12,000 Latter-day Saint members were added to church records yet congregations only increased by three during this period. The lack of new congregations likely indicates a worsening retention problem among new converts, poor member activity levels from less recent converts, and increased standards by local and regional Church leaders regarding the creation of additional congregations.

Many of the principles and policies of the Preach My Gospel program appear to not be followed in many areas. The Preach My Gospel program was tailored in part to address convert retention issues experienced in the past decades which were related to investigators receiving adequate teaching from missionaries and members, increasing the involvement of ward or branch leaders in missionary work on a localized level, and stressing simplicity in teaching and adherence to true doctrine taught by missionaries in an inspirational manner. Perhaps greater implementation and focus on the Preach My Gospel program throughout areas with a Church presence may yield higher convert retention and stronger long term growth.

Ethnic Issues and Integration

Almost the entire population is a compound of centuries of intermarriage between Spanish colonizers and the Amerindian population resulting in little ethnic diversity. The Church appears to have not experienced ethnic integration issues in congregations. Socio-economic status and urban versus rural lifestyle differences in some areas on the peripheries of Asuncion may lead to some social challenges at church.

Language Issues

Foreign missionaries struggle learning Guarani due to its often informal use, frequent transitions of Paraguayans between Guarani and Spanish, the complexity of the Guarani, language study time dedicated to Spanish. The Church has stressed the

use of Spanish due to its more formal usage, high percentage of Guaraní speakers who are bilingual, and widespread usage of Spanish in South America. Other nations with sizeable Amerindian groups such as Bolivia and Peru have experienced similar Church policy regarding the usage of Amerindian languages in proselytism and worship. Paraguay is the only South American nation in which most speak an Amerindian language, which raises its importance in ecclesiastical affairs.

Missionary Service

In 1994, the Argentina Missionary Training Center was completed for missionaries serving from Argentina, Paraguay, and Uruguay.^[23] Missionaries from Paraguay serve in large numbers in their native country and many Latin American nations. With the recent influx of missionaries serving in Paraguay over the past decade combined with little improvement in the size of the native missionary force, Paraguay will likely remain dependent on foreign missionaries to provide the needed manpower to proselyte Paraguay at current levels.

Leadership

The Church appears to have a small, strong local leadership base which has grown at a much slower pace than general membership. In 1988, Paraguayan native Carlos Ramon Espinola from Asunción was called to serve as a mission president in the Chile Antofagasta Mission.^[24] In 1993, Carlos Ramon Espinola was called as a regional representative.^[25] Ernesto A. Da Silva was called as an Area Authority Seventy in 2002.^[26] Despite poor member activity and few active priesthood holders, Church employees only occasionally serve in stake presidencies and do not appear to be heavily overrepresented in ecclesiastical leadership. However, rural areas or small cities with a congregation remain dependent on foreign full-time missionaries or one full member family to run administrative duties, such as the Yby Yau Branch in northern Paraguay.

Temple

Paraguay is assigned to the Asunción Paraguay Temple district. Prior to the completion of the Asunción Paraguay Temple, members traveled to São Paulo to perform temple ordinances. The Asunción Paraguay Temple was announced in 2000 and dedicated in 2002. In 2009, one of only four Beehive Clothing plants in the world which produces temple clothing was located in Paraguay.^[27] The temple continues function well below capacity. In 2010, the temple scheduled at least two endowment sessions daily on Tuesdays through Thursdays, three sessions on Fridays, and five sessions on Saturdays.

Comparative Growth

Paraguay experienced rapid LDS membership growth later than most Latin American nations, which saw the most rapid growth in the 1980s. Membership growth rates in Paraguay in the 2000s were the highest among Spanish-speaking nations in South America. Worldwide, only Nigeria had more members and a higher membership growth rate than Paraguay during the 2000s. The increase in the ratio of members per congregation in the 2000s comparable to other Latin American nations suggests that member activity and convert retention rates appear comparable to most nations in the region. Overall member activity rates seem average for Latin America. The percentage of members enrolled in seminary or institute and the percentage of LDS members in the general population is about average for South America.

Most Christian churches have few members and add few converts year to year. Evangelicals appear one of the most successful groups. Seventh Day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses have a much smaller presence in Paraguay compared to other Latin American nations and tend to gain fewer converts year to year. However on the 2002 census, there were only a couple thousand fewer Seventh Day Adventists than Latter-day Saints and a couple thousand more Jehovah's Witnesses, reflecting much higher rates of convert retention and member activity among these groups. Jehovah's Witnesses report a tenth of the membership reported by the LDS Church, yet have more congregations.

Future Prospects

The history of the LDS Church in Paraguay demonstrates the need for sustained mission outreach in many currently less receptive countries to the LDS Church as little church growth occurred in Paraguay over the first three decades of missionary work. However, once conditions became more favorable for growth, rapid membership increase ensued. Sustained strong membership growth rates in Paraguay over the past 15 years indicate that the population remains receptive to LDS Church teachings, but the small numbers of new congregations created in the late 2000s suggests that the Church has struggled to develop local leadership and retain members. Greater youth involvement in seminary, institute and full-time missionary preparation may help curb current inactivity challenges and ensure long term growth. Large numbers of full-time missionaries have been assigned to Paraguay due to high receptivity, but widespread quick-baptism tactics and overreliance of local members on full-time missionaries for finding, teaching, and baptizing converts may have hurt church growth, member activity, and local self-sufficiency in the long run.

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