

Religion in Panama

Country Summary

Although the Republic of Panama, which is about the size of South Carolina, is now considered part of the Central American region, until 1903 the territory was a province of Colombia. The Republic of Panama forms the narrowest part of the isthmus and is located between Costa Rica to the west and Colombia to the east. The Caribbean Sea borders the northern coast of Panama, and the Pacific Ocean borders the southern coast. Panama City is the nation's capital, which contains about 40 percent of the nation's population.

The country has an area of 30,193 square miles (75,417 square km) and a population of 3.3 million (2008). Racially, the majority of the population is considered *mestizo* (70 percent, mixed Amerindian and Hispanic), while the rest are West Indian (14 percent, Afro-Caribbean), Amerindian (8 percent), Caucasian (6 percent) and Asian/other (2 percent). The Amerindian population (285,230 in 2000) includes eight ethnolinguistic groups: the Guaymí (Ngöbe-Buglé), Kuna, Choco (Emberá-Wounaan), Teribe (Naso), Bokota and Bribri.

In 2000, about 80 percent of the population were Spanish-speaking, about 9 percent were speakers of Asian or Middle Eastern languages (Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Hindustani, Hebrew and Arabic), 8.3 percent were Amerindian (speakers of eight languages), and 3.7 percent were English-speaking (mainly West Indian and North American). However, many Panamanians are bilingual, especially in Spanish and English (Standard English and Western Caribbean Creole English). There is also a small population of "Negros Congos" who speak an Afro-Hispanic Creole, especially on the Caribbean coast of Colón province. The national literacy rate was 90.8 percent.

Panama's dollarized economy mainly depends on a well-developed services sector that accounts for 80% of GDP. These services include operating the Panama Canal, banking, the Colón Free Trade Zone, insurance, container ports, flagship registry and tourism. The nation's principal agricultural products are bananas, rice, corn, coffee, sugarcane, vegetables, livestock and shrimp.

Current Status of Religion

Although Panama's Constitution does not designate the Roman Catholic Church as the country's official religion, it recognizes Roman Catholicism as "the religion of the majority of Panamanians." The Archbishop of Panama enjoys privileges usually reserved for government officials, and Catholicism is taught in public schools, although classes in religion are not mandatory. The Constitution guarantees freedom of religion, as long as "Christian morality and order" are respected; allows religious organizations to own property; bars clergy from public office, except in the areas of social welfare, public instruction and scientific research; and prohibits discrimination in employment based on religion.

According to a January 1996 national public opinion poll conducted by CID-Gallup, the religious affiliation of the Panamanian population was as follows: Roman Catholic, 86.4 percent; Protestant, 7.3 percent; other religions, 2.1 percent; and none/no response, 4.2 percent. **In June of 2004, the company Latin Dichter & Neira conducted another national poll with the following results: Roman Catholic, 79.1 percent; Protestant, 10.8 percent; other religions, 7.7 percent; and**

none/no response, 2.4 percent. A comparison of these two polls reveals that Protestant adherents and those affiliated with “other religions” are growing in Panamanian society, while Catholic adherents are declining.

Overview of Panama’s Social and Political Development

Historically, Panama has played an important role in world commerce, starting in the Spanish colonial period when mineral treasures from the Andean region were brought by ship to Panama and carried overland from the Pacific to the Caribbean coast for transshipment to Spain. During the California Gold Rush (1848-1855) would-be miners arrived by ship in the Caribbean port of Aspinwall, now called Colón, and walked or rode in wagons across the narrow isthmus to Panama City, located on the Pacific Ocean, where they boarded other ships to travel to the gold fields in northern California. In 1850 U.S. businessmen financed the construction of the Panama Railroad between these two major port cities in order to provide transportation for the growing numbers of people who were headed to California. Then, in 1878, a French company acquired the exclusive right to build an inter-oceanic canal on the Isthmus of Panama, which was partially constructed between 1882 and 1889.

With the political and military backing of the US government, the Province of Panama seceded from Colombia in 1903 and established the independent Republic of Panama. Immediately thereafter, the U.S. and Panamanian governments signed the Hay-Bunau Varilla Treaty, which gave the former the right to build the Panama Canal across the Isthmus and to control a 10-mile strip of land from coast-to-coast for its operation, maintenance and protection, which became the US-administered Panama Canal Zone (PCZ). The US Corp of Engineers proceeded to complete the difficult and costly construction of the Panama Canal that was finally opened to shipping in 1914. The U.S.-controlled Panama Canal Company operated the interoceanic waterway until December 1999, when, under the provisions of the Torrijos-Carter Treaty of 1977, the Panama Canal and PCZ were turned over to the government of Panama.

From 1903 until 1968, Panama was a constitutional democracy dominated by a commercially-oriented oligarchy. During the 1950s, the Panamanian military began to challenge the oligarchy's political hegemony. Its civilian government was overthrown in 1968 by a military coup, and for 20 years Panama was run by a left-wing military junta led by generals Omar Torrijos (1968-1981) and Manuel Noriega (1983-1989).

In October 1968, Dr. Arnulfo Arias Madrid (b. 1901- d. 1988), twice elected president (1940–1941, 1949–1951) and twice ousted by the Panamanian military, was ousted for a third time as president in October 1968 by the National Guard after only 10 days in office. A military government was established, and the commander of the National Guard, Brigadier General Omar Torrijos, soon emerged as the principal power in Panamanian political life. Torrijos' regime was harsh and corrupt, but his charisma, populist domestic programs and nationalist (anti-US) foreign policy appealed to the rural and urban constituencies largely ignored by the oligarchy. In 1979, Torrijos founded the Revolutionary Democratic Party (PRD), with a Social Democratic ideology, described as center-left.

Torrijos' sudden death in 1981 in a mysterious plane crash – rumored to have been caused by CIA operatives – altered the tone but not the direction of Panama's political evolution. Despite the 1983 constitutional amendments, which appeared to proscribe a political role for the military, the Panama Defense Forces (PDF), as they were then known, continued to dominate

Panamanian political life behind a facade of civilian government. By this time, General Manuel Noriega was firmly in control of both the PDF and the civilian government.

The U.S. government froze economic and military assistance to Panama in the summer of 1987 in response to the domestic political crisis in Panama and an attack on the US Embassy. In April 1988, President Reagan invoked the International Emergency Economic Powers Act, freezing Panamanian Government assets in all US organizations. In May 1989 Panamanians voted overwhelmingly for the anti-Noriega candidates. The Noriega regime promptly annulled the election, and embarked on a new round of repression. By the fall of 1989 the regime was barely clinging to power, and the regime's paranoia made daily existence unsafe for American citizens.

On December 20, 1989, U.S. President George H. W. Bush ordered his military forces into Panama, allegedly to protect the lives and property of US citizens (about 25,000 resided in the PCZ, both civilians and military personnel), to fulfill US treaty responsibilities regarding the operation and defense of the Panama Canal, to assist the Panamanian people in restoring democracy, and to bring Noriega to justice. The US troops involved in "Operation Just Cause" achieved their primary objectives quickly, and Noriega eventually surrendered to US authorities on January 3, 1990; and he was immediately taken to Florida on a US military airplane to face criminal charges in a US Federal Court.

On December 22, 1989, the Organization of American States (OAS) passed a resolution deploring the US invasion of Panama and calling for the withdrawal of US troops. On December 29, 1989, the UN General Assembly voted 75–20 with 40 abstentions to condemn the U.S. invasion of the Republic of Panama as a "flagrant violation of international law."

Since the 1989-1990 US invasion and occupation of Panama City and surrounding areas, which ended the 21-year Torrijos-Noriega military dictatorship, Panama has successfully completed three peaceful transfers of power to opposition political parties. Panama's political landscape is now dominated by two major parties and many smaller ones, which are driven more by individual leaders than by ideologies.

Guillermo David Endara Galimany, who won the 1989 presidential election that Gen. Noriega annulled, was later declared the winner after the US invasion and served as president from 1989 to 1994 with the support of a coalition of anti-Noriega parties. Ernesto Pérez Balladares (PRD), who was an ally of General Omar Torrijos, served as president from 1994-1999; since leaving office, he has been implicated in charges of corruption. Current President Martin Torrijos (PRD), the son of Gen. Omar Torrijos, succeeded President Mireya Moscoso (1999-2004), the widow of former President Arnulfo Arias Madrid who founded the Panameñista Party (renamed the Arnulfista Party in 1990).

Roman Catholic Church

Missionaries of the **ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH** accompanied the early Spanish explorers and settlers, which led to the establishment of the first Catholic parish in Panama in 1510. This became the seat of the Diocese of Santa María La Antigua del Darién and was the first diocese formed on the mainland of the Western Hemisphere, when Bishop Juan de Quevedo Villegas (d. 1519) arrived with Governor Pedro Arias de Avila (also known as Pedrarias Dávila, c.1440–1531) in 1513. The name was changed to the Diocese of Panama in 1520, and this jurisdiction became an archdiocese in 1925.

Many of the colonial churches built by the Spanish were constant reminders of the wealth and power of the Catholic Church in Panama and its temporal powers. One of these colonial treasures, the Cathedral of Old Panama City, was ransacked and burned by Englishman Captain Henry Morgan (1635-1688) and his pirate band in 1671, but its ruins are still the centerpiece of Panamá Viejo and a major tourist attraction.

In 1911, Monsignor F. X. Junguito, S.J., who was appointed bishop in April of 1901, resided in Panama City and was assisted by his vicar-general, his secretary, the priest of the parish of the Sagrario and two other secular priests labored to supply the spiritual needs of the 30,000 inhabitants, at least two-thirds of whom are Catholics. They were assisted by the resident Jesuit Fathers (seven priests), Lazarists (five priests) and the Discalced Augustinians (three priests and two lay brothers).

The Roman Catholic Church holds a respected, though not very powerful, position in Panamanian society and is a familiar facet of daily life. The Constitution of 1946 provides for freedom of religion, provided that “Christian morality and public order” are respected; and it recognizes that Catholicism is the country’s predominant religion, which is taught in the public schools. Such instruction or other religious activity is not compulsory, however.

The basic principles governing the Church’s activities or its relationship with the government were not affected by the Constitution of 1946. From the early years of independence up until the late 1960s, the Catholic Church continued to emphasize its spiritual role and generally avoided involvement in secular affairs. However, since the Second Vatican Council in 1965 and the Conference of Latin American Bishops in Medellín in 1969, the Catholic Church has become more active in temporal matters, due to its increasing concern for, and commitment to, improving the social conditions of the impoverished masses in Panama and elsewhere.

Diverse tensions arose within the Panamanian Catholic Church during the 1960s and following years, which resulted from challenges posed by the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), the Conference of Latin American Bishops held in Medellín (Colombia) in 1968, Latin American Liberation Theology, and the Catholic Charismatic Renewal movement. These powerful new currents polarized Catholic bishops, priests (diocesan and religious), lay brothers and sisters (members of religious orders), and the laity in general into various factions. **Traditionalists** wanted the Church to remain as it was prior to the reforms approved by the Second Vatican Council (mid-1960s). **Reformers** generally supported the Church’s modern, post-Vatican II stance. **Progressives**, inspired by reforms approved at the Vatican II and Medellín conferences, sought to implement the new vision for “a preferential option for the poor” through social and political action aimed at transforming Panamanian society and establishing greater social justice through peaceful democratic means. **Radicals** adopted the Marxist-inspired Liberation Theology and advocated violent revolution by the people as a means of overthrowing the Torrijos-Noriega dictatorship and creating a Socialist State that would serve the poor marginalized masses. **Charismatic agents** sought to transform the spiritual and communal life of Catholics by means of the power and gifts of the Holy Spirit (including the “baptism of the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues”), rather than by political and social activism.

Traditionally, Panama has had a very low percentage of native-born priests and nuns within religious orders. In 1970, more than 75 percent of the Catholic missionaries in Panama were foreigners, mostly coming from Spain, Italy and the USA, or from other Latin American countries. Present in Panama were religious orders and personnel from Catholic missions in North America that included: 28 male religious orders representing the Vencentians (21),

Benedictines (1), Holy Cross Father (1) and Sulpicians (1), plus three diocesan priests and one lay brother. In addition, there were ten female religious groups representing the Maryknolls (6), Mercy of Brooklin (1), Franciscans of Mary Immaculate (1) and St. Joseph of Medaille (1), as well as one lay sister. Also, the Scarboro Foreign Mission Society of Canada had one priest in Panama.

However, these religious orders and missionaries from North America represented a small part of the total number of Catholic mission workers in Panama in 1980. Most of the 209 religious priests, 490 sisters and 58 lay brothers in Panama were from Europe or other Latin American countries. The Jesuits, Carmelites, Paulists and La Salle Christian Brothers were the major groups represented in Panama, whereas the Visitandinas was the only order of cloistered nuns in the country.

In 1980, approximately 87 percent of the population was considered Roman Catholic and virtually every town had a Catholic church, although many towns did not have a resident priest. Due to the small number of Catholic clergy in Panama, only one priest for every 6,299 inhabitants in 1980, many rural Catholics received only an occasional visit from a busy priest who traveled among a number of parishes. While Catholicism permeates the environment of most Panamanians, its impact is not as pronounced as in many other Catholic countries of Latin America.

The Catholic Church in Panama, in 1980, consisted of one archdiocese, three dioceses, a vicariate apostolic in Darien and a nullius prelate in Bocas del Toro. A papal nuncio also represented the Vatican. At that time, Panama was organized into 133 parishes. Catholic institutions included 70 elementary and secondary schools, a Catholic university, a seminary for training diocesan priests and numerous charitable programs. Mons. Marcos Gregorio McGrath (1924- 2000) was Archbishop of Panama from 1969 to 1994, and he was succeeded by Monsignor José Dimas Cedeño Delgado in 1994.

Until September 2000, when Archbishop Cedeño declared “Holy Mary of La Antigua” to be the official patroness of Panama, the unofficial patron saint had been the “Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary,” which is celebrated nationally on December 8 (Mother’s Day). Another important religious festival is celebrated annually in Portobelo, Colón province, dedicated to the “Miraculous Black Christ” whose statue is paraded through city streets.

In 2004, the Archdiocese of Panama included 88 parishes that were served by 80 diocesan priests and 117 religious priests (a total of 197, or one priest for every 3,126 Catholics); in addition there were 161 lay brothers, 218 nuns, and 48 permanent deacons. However, these statistics do not include the dioceses of Chitré, Darién, David, Penonomé, Santiago de Veraguas, Colón-Kuna Yala and Territorial Prelature of Bocas del Toro.

Since the 1950s, the Catholic Church has attempted to revive active interest in religious affairs, raise church attendance and increase the incidence of church marriages. This has been a continuing effort since 1958, when a lay mission group, *La Santa Misión Católica* (The Holy Catholic Mission), arrived from Rome to stimulate and support the local clergy. Focusing first on the lower classes in the capital, the campaign soon spread throughout the country. It helped introduce Church-sponsored social welfare projects, and served to rouse Catholics from the lethargy that had traditionally plagued the Catholic Church in Panama. However, the Panamanian Catholic Church continues to confront obstacles: a shortage of priests, the indifference of nominal Catholics and the secular attitudes of a growing urban population, especially among the youth.

During the 1970s, the Catholic Church received moderate public support, which was bolstered at times by militant Catholic action groups, such as federations of Catholic doctors and lawyers, who campaigned for a more dynamic role for the Catholic Church in community life. A growing number of priests and nuns took a more active role in labor movements, in the formation of cooperatives, in concern for the poor and in activities that sought to produce moderate reform within Panamanian society.

An added dimension during the 1970s was the birth and development of the **Catholic Charismatic Renewal (CCR)** movement, which began when a Spanish priest and a Panamanian nun were strongly influenced by Catholic Charismatics in the USA. The CCR was officially organized in the Archdiocese of Panama in September of 1974, following a retreat led by Friar Alfonso Navarro Castellanos (1925-2003) of the Congregation of the Missionaries of the Holy Spirit in Mexico City, one of the early leaders of the CCR in Latin America. From the beginning, Monsignor Marcos Gregorio McGrath (1924-2000), Archbishop of Panama, supported the CCR, which became known in Panama as “*Renovación Cristiana en el Espíritu Santo*.” The principal leaders of the CCR in Panama are Mons. Alejandro Vásquez Pinto, Segundo Cano, David Cosca, Francisco Verar, Teófilo Rodríguez, Reynaldo Karamañites and Rafael Siú.

Numerous Charismatic Bible study, prayer and fellowship groups were organized in the early 1970s, along with Charismatic Masses and rallies. Soon, Protestant pastors and laymen were also participating in the Charismatic Renewal Movement, which then took on an ecumenical flavor during the 1970s. This new openness and receptivity was most apparent among the middle and upper classes, where barriers between Protestants and Catholics became less important. This spirit of unity among Christians, regardless of church affiliation, became evident as scores of small Bible study and prayer groups developed spontaneously to meet the growing need for fellowship and spiritual nurture among new converts and revitalized older believers who experienced charismatic renewal.

Parallel to this development, the work of the Assemblies of God in Panama began in 1967 under the leadership of missionaries Richard Jeffery and David and Doris Goodwin, who held extended evangelistic crusades, called “*Gran Campaña de Sanidad Divina*” (Great Campaign of Divine Healing), throughout much of Panama. The first such crusade was held on Calle Primera, Vista Hermosa, in Panama City. Some of the early converts in these crusades were Hermenia Villarreal and Carmen and Anita González, who began working with the Assemblies of God under the guidance of missionary Richard Larson, who arrived in Panama in 1969 and established a church in the Canal Zone.

Carmen González, a few months after her conversion, traveled to the USA and was strongly influenced by the CCR there. Upon her return to Panama, Carmen worked in an evangelistic ministry in the Province of Chiriquí in western Panama, where she met María Ramos. In 1973, Carmen and María returned to Panama City and became leaders in the early Charismatic Renewal Movement there. They met with a large number of Charismatics in the Guadalupe Catholic Church and at Colegio Las Esclavas del Sagrado Corazón de Jesús until they were forced to leave and find another meeting place. In 1975, they began meeting at a house in Barrio San Francisco and became known as the “**Interdenominational Charismatic Prayer Group**.” Later, this group moved to Barrio Bella Vista and was organized as a church with María Ramos as pastor, under the name “**Christian House of Prayer**” (*Casa de Oración Cristiana*); it became affiliated with the Assemblies of God in 1977, under the pastoral leadership of Mario Vásquez.

By 1980, the Catholic hierarchy attempted to place restrictions on the CCR and to more strongly direct its course in order to avoid losing members to Evangelical groups, which were seen as a threat largely due to wide-spread Pentecostal growth in the capital. The CCR had a considerable impact among members of the upper class, although relatively few became members of Evangelical churches. However, a growing spiritual receptivity among the upper class was evidenced by attendance at ecumenical meetings sponsored by the Full Gospel Business Men's Fellowship (FGBMF) and Women's Aglow Fellowship during the 1970s.

Also, there are four **independent Catholic denominations** in Panama. The **Apostolic Orthodox Old Catholic Church** (under Mons. Jorge Rodriguez-Villa) represents the Old Catholic Tradition. The **Apostolic Community of Communities of Our Lady of Guadalupe of Panama** was founded by Friar Orlando Enrique Rojas Bonilla (located in El Común, Tolé Municipality of Chiriquí Province), which is affiliated with Our Lady of Guadalupe Community of Communities, founded in Costa Rica by Mons. Higinio Alas Gómez in 2007 (previously this group was known as Reformed Apostolic and Catholic Church, 2000-2005). The **Reunited Apostolic Catholic Church** (Diocese of Central America, Panama and the West Indies) was founded in Costa Rica by Archbishop Mons. Pablo José de Jesús María (secular name: Francisco Eduardo de la Espriella Torrens), which is affiliated with the Brazilian Apostolic Catholic Church (founded by Mons. Carlos Duarte Costa, Bishop of Maura), the Free Orthodox Church of Ibero-America, and the Byzantine Catholic Church, Inc. (under Patriarch Mar Markus I) of Los Angeles, California. The **Ecumenical Catholic Church of Christ** is affiliated with the Diocese of Our Mother of God in Costa Rica (under Mons. Sebastián Herrera Plá) and is part of the Apostolic Administration of Central America, Panama and Cuba (under Mons. Karl R. Rodig of Miami, Florida).

The Protestant Movement

The Roman Catholic Church dominated the religious life of Panama until labor opportunities in the PCZ brought many American citizens and other foreign nationals to the country. The rapid influx of thousands of **Protestant immigrants** to Panama in the early 1900s led to the construction of many Protestant chapels for the largely English-speaking population of the PCZ, which included many African Americans from the British West Indies. The US occupation of the PCZ also provided an open door for many **U.S. Protestant mission agencies** to begin work in Panama, such as the SALVATION ARMY, the SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH (1904), the SOUTHERN BAPTIST CONVENTION (1905), the Methodist Episcopal Church (now an integral part of the UNITED METHODIST CHURCH) (1906), the CHURCH OF GOD (ANDERSON, INDIANA) (1906), and the NATIONAL BAPTIST CONVENTION, USA (1909).

By 1911 about ten thousand residents in the PCZ were being served by thirty-nine Christian churches: Protestant Episcopal (13), nondenominational (8), Roman Catholic (7), Baptist (7), Methodist (3), and Adventist (1). Three additional Protestant groups arrived in the next decade: the FREE METHODIST CHURCH OF NORTH AMERICA (1913), the Christian Mission of Barbados (1914), and the Christian Brethren (1918). Also in 1914, the Union Churches of the Canal Zone were organized as nonsectarian, interdenominational community churches. In 1935 the population of the PCZ numbered 14,816 and was served by fifty-four congregations.

However, the first Protestants to arrive in Panama were a group of twelve hundred colonists from Scotland (some of whom were Presbyterian) who attempted to build a commercial

colony on the Caribbean coast of the Darien Peninsula in 1698. However, the colony was abandoned in late 1699.

The next Protestants to arrive were Wesleyan (British) Methodists who were among Afro-Caribbean immigrants to settle in the Bocas del Toro region of the Caribbean coast, beginning in the 1820s. The United Methodist Free Church of England (1870s), the Jamaican Baptists (1880s), and the Jamaican Wesleyan Methodists (1880s) also began work among West Indian immigrants in Panama.

The CHURCH OF ENGLAND (through the SOCIETY FOR THE PROPAGATION OF THE GOSPEL IN FOREIGN PARTS) arrived in the 1850s during the construction of the Panama Railroad. Company officials helped to finance the construction of the first permanent Protestant church building in Panama, Christ's Church-by-the-Sea in Aspinwall, built in 1864–1865. This was the second-oldest permanent Protestant church in Central America, with the first being St. John's Anglican Cathedral in Belize City, built in 1825. However, occasional Anglican-Episcopal worship services had been held in Panama since 1849, conducted by clergymen en route to the gold fields in California, which led to the establishment of the first Episcopal congregation in 1851 in the port town of Taboga. An official "Isthmian Mission" of the Anglican Church was established in Panama in 1853, although missionary work was sparse until 1883.

Prior to the 1950s, Protestant missionary activities were largely centered in the PCZ, where many of the English-speaking people were concentrated. However, over time, some of the Protestant denominations began to evangelize and establish churches among the Spanish-speaking population, mainly in the urban areas adjacent to the PCZ and in the western provinces of the country.

Prior to the 1940s, Southern Baptist work in Panama was largely limited to North Americans and West Indians in the PCZ and in the port cities of Panama City and Colón. In the 1940s increased efforts were made by the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board to launch work in Spanish-speaking communities, and in the 1950s among the Kuna Indians on the Caribbean coast of northeastern Panama. Protestant efforts among the Kunas began in 1913, led by British and American independent missionaries under the sponsorship of the San Blas Mission. During the 1950s, the nondenominational New Tribes Mission and several Mennonite groups began work among Amerindian groups in Panama, as well.

Pentecostal work in Panama began with the arrival of the Arthur Edwards family in 1928, sent out from the U.S.-based INTERNATIONAL CHURCH OF THE FOURSQUARE GOSPEL. Early evangelistic efforts by Edwards and his helpers proved quite successful among the Spanish-speaking population during the 1930s and 1940s, especially following revival meetings in the PCZ town of Frijoles, where supernatural "signs and wonders" were reported for several years in the mid-1930s. The mother church of the Panamanian Foursquare movement, the "Calle Q Foursquare Church," was founded in 1937 in Panama City and became a training center for missionary efforts throughout the country. The Foursquare Bible School was established at the mother church in 1938. By 1981, the Foursquare Church had grown to include 21,700 baptized members, 206 organized congregations, and 201 preaching points in all nine provinces, with about 97 percent of the membership composed of Spanish-speaking Panamanians. At that time, the Foursquare Church was not only the largest Pentecostal denomination in Panama but also the largest Protestant denomination.

Other Pentecostal denominations in Panama include the CHURCH OF GOD (CLEVELAND, TENNESSEE) (1935), the Evangelistic Doctrinal Church of Puerto Pilón (an independent group, founded in 1940), the CHURCH OF GOD OF PROPHECY (1946), the INTERNATIONAL EVANGELICAL

CHURCH SOLDIERS OF THE CROSS (1950), the Pentecostal Church of God-International Mission of Puerto Rico (1956), the APOSTOLIC ASSEMBLY OF FAITH IN JESUS CHRIST (1960), the CHURCH OF GOD IN CHRIST (1964), the New Life Evangelical Church (a 1967 split from the Foursquare Church in the Province of Chiriquí), the ASSEMBLIES OF GOD (1967), the Pentecostal Christian Church of the World Wide Missionary Movement (1973) and Missionary Advance (1973), both from Puerto Rico, the Pentecostal Church of Jesus Christ (1974), the United Pentecostal Church (1980), and the International Pentecostal Holiness Church (1988). Also, the Maranatha World Revival Ministry (founded by Apostle Nahum Rosario in Chicago, Illinois) arrived in 2003.

Small, non-Pentecostal Protestant denominations include the following: the LUTHERAN CHURCH-MISSOURI SYNOD (1942, *Iglesia Evangélica Luterana de Panamá*), the nondenominational Central American Mission (1944), the independent CHURCHES OF CHRIST (1945), the New Tribes Mission (1952), the Gospel Missionary Union (1952), Conservative Baptist Home Mission Society (1952, renamed Mission to the Americas in 1994), the CHURCH OF THE NAZARENE (1953), the Society of Bible Churches (1958), the Mennonite Brethren Board of Missions and Services (1958), the CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN (1958), the United Gospel Church (1961), the Evangelical Mission of Panama (1961), Baptist International Missions (1961), the Association of Lutheran Churches of Panama (1963), and the Free Will Baptist Church (1964), American Baptist Churches in the USA (2001), and the Church of God-Holiness (2003). Also, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is engaged in relief and development ministry in Coclé Province, which includes a "Ministry of Reconciliation" between Amerindian peoples (Ngöbe-Buglé) in Penonomé.

In 1980 the largest Protestant denominations in Panama were the Foursquare Church, the EPISCOPAL CHURCH (which assumed responsibility for the Anglican community in 1906 due to growing US influence in the PCZ), the SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH, and the Panamanian Baptist Convention (affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention).

By 2005, the Assemblies of God had become the largest Protestant denomination as a result of thirty-eight years of strenuous evangelistic and church-planting efforts throughout the country, with 800 congregations (churches and missions) and about 50,000 members. Second largest was the Seventh-day Adventist Church, with 162 congregations and 40,600 members. The Foursquare Church was third largest, with 415 congregations and 31,200 members. Other large denominations included the Baptist Convention (120 congregations with 12,100 members), the Evangelical Methodist Church and the Wesleyan Methodist Church (combined statistics were 257 congregations and about 12,000 members), the Pentecostal Church of God (103 churches and 154 missions with 8,134 members), the independent Churches of Christ (84 churches with 6,740 members), the New Tribes Mission-related churches (72 churches and 6,090 members), the Anglican-Episcopal Church (23 churches with 5,400 members), the Church of God (Cleveland, Tennessee) with 85 congregations and 5,200 members, the Evangelical Doctrinal Church Association (34 congregations and 4,060 members), and the United Pentecostal Church (77 congregations and 3,850 members). All other Protestant denominations had fewer than 3,000 members each in 2005.

Many of the more conservative Protestant churches are associated with the **Panamanian Evangelical Confraternity** (*Confraternidad Evangélica Panameña, CONEPA*), which is affiliated with the WORLD EVANGELICAL ALLIANCE. Members of the **Latin American Council of Churches (CLAI)**, which is affiliated with the **World Council of Churches (WCC)**, include the Episcopal Diocese of Panama, the Evangelical Methodist Church (affiliated with the United Methodist Church in the USA), the Wesleyan Methodist Church (affiliated with the Conference

of the Methodist Church in the Caribbean and the Americas), and the independent Lutheran Church (Diocese of Panama).

In the area of mass communication, Evangelical radio station HOXO (AM transmitter) was founded in 1949 in Panama City, with financial help and technical assistance provided jointly by the Latin America Mission (LAM) in Costa Rica and World Radio Missionary Fellowship, operators of radio station HCJB in Quito, Ecuador. In 1971 an FM radio transmitter was added, called "Radio Vida," and these two radio stations were incorporated in 1974 as the Tropical Broadcasting Association under a Panamanian board of directors. By 2005, at least 13 Evangelical radio stations existed in Panama, five of which were owned and operated by the Assemblies of God as well as a TV channel: "Hosanna Visión - Canal 37."

The Ecumenical Committee of Panama (COEPA) is a fraternal association of churches, founded in 1986, which confess Jesus Christ as God and Saviour and seek to fulfil their common calling to the glory of God while promoting greater unity, dialogue and interreligious activities. Its current members include representatives of the Evangelical Methodist Church of Panama, the Roman Catholic Church, the Episcopal-Anglican Church of Panama, Calvary Baptist Church, the Methodist Church in the Caribbean and the Americas, the Greek Orthodox Church and the Russian Orthodox Church. The president of COEPA is Bishop Pablo Morales of the Evangelical Methodist Church of Panama.

Other Religions

Non-Protestant Marginal Christian Groups present in the country include the CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS (one temple, 93 congregations and 42,606 members in 2007), JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES (235 kingdom halls with 11,704 members in 2005), CHRISTADELPHIANS, and VOICE OF THE CHIEF CORNERSTONE (from Puerto Rico), Mita Congregation (from Puerto Rico), Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (from Brazil, also called "Strong Prayer to the Holy Spirit Church"), God is Love Pentecostal Church (from Brazil), Light of the World Church (from Mexico), Unity School of Christianity, Seicho-No-Ie, Philadelphia Church of God, and Evangelical Doctrinal Church of Port Pilón (founded in Panama).

Eastern Orthodox churches in Panama include a small Greek Orthodox community, affiliated with the **Greek Orthodox Metropolitanate of Central America** under Metropolitan Athenagoras in Panama City; the **Russian Orthodox Greek Catholic Church of Three Saints** founded in the USA in 1898, affiliated with the Moscow Patriarchal Parish; and the **Russian Orthodox Church**, affiliated with the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia-ROCOR.

Today, there are a small number of **Rastafarians** (founded in Jamaica in the 1930s) and adherents of older African-derived religions, such as the syncretistic religion of the *Negros Congos*, Myalism, Obeah, "revivalistic sects" and Kumina, almost exclusively among the Afro-Panamanian population. Historically, some of these religions were present in Panama from the beginning of the African slave trade in the Caribbean to the end of the British colonial period. The *Negros Congos* trace their ancestry to African slaves imported during the Spanish colonial period and speak an Afro-Hispanic Creole, especially on the Caribbean coast of Colón province, centered in the colonial port city of Portobello.

Present among the British West Indian Creole population were the Afro-Caribbean sects of **Myalism** (a syncretistic religion that appealed to all African ethnic groups in Jamaica and the West Indies) and **Obeah** (a religion probably of Ashanti origin, characterized by the practice of sorcery and witchcraft, which had been outlawed in the British colonies during the slavery

period). In addition, several “revivalistic” sects originated in Jamaica and the British West Indies during the 1800s: **Native Baptists**, **Spiritual Baptists** and **Zion Revivalism** (modifications of Myalism, which inserted familiar elements of the Christian faith – the Bible, God, angels, archangels, saints, apostles and prophets – into worship patterns characteristic of African religiosity); and **Kumina** (also known as Pukkumina or Pocomania), a post-Emancipation (August 1, 1834 is celebrated as Emancipation Day throughout the Caribbean) religious tradition traced to African indentured servants who were brought to Jamaica from Central Africa, in which “spirit possession,” ritual healing and animal sacrifice were central features (similar to Santería in Cuba and Puerto Rico). In Panama, Pocomania practitioners are often referred to as “los jumping-jumping.” Also present are **traditional Amerindian belief systems (animistic)** among the Guaymí (Ngäbe Buglé), Kuna, Choco (Wounaan and Emberá), Bribri, Teribe (Naso), and Buglere (Bokota); “popular religiosity” (syncretistic) is practiced by a majority of the Hispanic population.

Other religions include **traditional Chinese religions** (TAOISM, CONFUCIANISM, and BUDDHISM); **HINDUISM** (including the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, International Sri Sathya Sai Baba Organization, and International Society of Transcendental Meditation - TM); **SANT MAT** (including ECKANKAR, the Path of Light and Sound - Sant Thakar Singh - Surat Shadd Yoga, SAWAN KIRPAL RUHANI MISSION - Science of Spirituality; Supreme MASTER CHING HAI MEDITATION ASSOCIATION); **SIKH**; **ISLAM and SUBUD**; **JAPANESE BUDDHISM** (Soka Gakkai International of Panama - Nichiren Shoshu Temple) and **SHINTO**; **JUDAISM**; **BAHA’I FAITH**.

Western Esoteric groups include: Ancient and Mystical Order of the Rosaecruz (AMORC); Wicca; Superet Light Doctrinal Church (a USA-based Spiritualist community); New Acropolis Cultural Association; The God, Love and Charity Spiritist Fraternity (founded in 1982); Latin American Federation of Para-Psychological and Similar Sciences; the Saint Germain Foundation, Raelian Movement; Ishaya Techniques; and the Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity, popularly known as the Unification Church, founded in Korea by the Rev. Sun Myung Moon, which publishes the Spanish-language newspaper, *Tiempos del Mundo*, in Panama.

Beginning with the building of the Panama Railroad in the 1850s, many Chinese laborers arrived via Canada and Jamaica, mainly from Guangzhou province but also from the British crown colony of Hong Kong. Along with the **Chinese immigrants came some Buddhist, Taoist and Confucian traditions** that were centered on family altars where devotion was rendered to their ancestors, which include the Fa Yen Religious Society and Yan Wo Religious Society. There were several waves of Chinese immigrants whose descendants today number around 50,000. Since the 1970s, an estimated 80,000 Chinese have settled in Panama from other parts of mainland China: 99% are Cantonese-speaking, although Mandarin and Hakka speakers are represented among the newer arrivals. Over time, the older Chinese immigrants and their descendents began assimilating into Panamanian society and, often, that meant converting to Catholicism or Protestantism. The Sacred Heart Chapel in Ancon is now home to a Chinese Roman Catholic congregation, and there are a dozen or more Evangelical Chinese churches, mainly located in Panama City and Colón. Some of the Evangelical churches are affiliated with the Chinese Christian Mission of Petaluma, California; the Baptist Convention; the Christian & Missionary Alliance; or the Evangelical Free Church.

With Independence came the North American canal-building effort, which in turn brought in an international labor force and greater religious diversity. Panama’s **Hindu and Muslim**

communities, which initially arrived by way of the British colonies of Guyana and Trinidad-Tobago, first came as canal workers between 1904 and 1913. Most of the Hindus trace their roots back to the states of Gujarat and Sindh, in India and Pakistan respectively. Many ancestors of today's Muslim community also came from those same places, but this community has since been augmented by Arabs who arrived via South American countries and more recently as a result of home-grown converts. The Muslims live primarily in Panama City and Colón, with smaller concentrations in David and other provincial cities. The majority of today's Muslims are of Lebanese, Palestinian or Asian Indian descent. As of March 1997, there were four Mosques (*masajid*) in the Republic of Panama. There are also a few **Sikhs** in Panama, almost all of whom trace their roots to the Punjab.

Some of the South Asian subcontinent organizations in Panama are: the Sunni Muslim Religious Association, the Panama Muslim Mission (originally named the Sunni Indo-Pakistani Muslim Society, founded in 1929), the Islamic Foundation of Panama (Jama Masjid), the Panamanian Hindu Civic Association, the Krishna Radha Temple Society, the Hindustani Society of Panama (Templo Hindu de Tumba Muerto), the Hindustani Society of Colón, the Islamic Cultural Center of Colón, and the Guru Nanak Sahid Civic Society.

Also, about 10,000 **Lebanese** (some are Orthodox Christians and others are Muslim) live in Panama, including many investors who have businesses tied to the Colón Free Trade Zone, which re-exports an enormous variety of merchandise throughout the Americas. Begun in 1948, it is now the largest free trade zone in the Americas and second largest in the world.

The small **Jewish community** (about 9,000) dates from the middle of the 19th century, and includes five synagogues: Beth El Synagogue (Orthodox), Shevet Achim Synagogue in Panama City (Orthodox-Sephardic), Ahavat Sion Synagogue (Orthodox-Sephardic), and Kol Shearith Israel Synagogue in Panama City (Reform), and Ahvat Ahim Synagogue in Colón. The Baha'i Faith maintains one of the world's seven Baha'i Houses of Worship.

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