

# Religion in Costa Rica

## Country Overview

Called the “Switzerland of the Americas,” Costa Rica is located in Central America, between Nicaragua to the north and Panama to the south. The country is bordered by the Pacific Ocean on the west and by the Caribbean Sea on the east. This largely mountainous country, about the size of West Virginia, was home to nearly four million people as the twenty-first century began, two-thirds of whom live in the fertile Central Valley where the country’s largest cities are found: San José (the capital since 1838), Cartago, Heredia and Alajuela. The country has an area of 19,730 square miles.

The total population of Costa Rica (3,824,593) as of June 2000 was composed of the following ethnic groups: Spanish-speaking Costa Ricans, 77.7 percent; Spanish-speaking Nicaraguans, 13.8 percent; other Spanish-speakers (Central and South Americans, Cubans, and Puerto Ricans), 2.8 percent; Native Americans, 1.1 percent; Asians (Chinese and Koreans) 1.0 percent; Afro-Americans (English-speaking), 2.0 percent; and Caucasians (citizens of the United States, Canadians, Europeans, Middle Easterners), 2.0 percent. The literacy rate was 93 percent.

## Current Religious Situation

While the nation’s Constitution establishes Roman Catholicism as the State religion and requires that the State contribute to its maintenance, it also prohibits the State from impeding the free exercise of other religions that do not violate universal morality or proper behavior.

The numerical growth and geographical expansion of independent Western Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions, Protestant denominations, marginal Christian groups, and non-Christian religions in Costa Rica is largely a phenomenon of the post-World War II era, which also witnessed a decline in Catholic Mass attendance and in the observance of older Catholic traditions.

Although the **Roman Catholic Church** remains the dominant religion of Costa Rica, the growth of new religious movements during the twentieth century—especially among Protestants since the 1960s—has led to the current situation of religious pluralism, which is demonstrated by the following polls. According to a national public opinion poll by CID-Gallup in September 2003, the Catholic population was 69 percent, Protestants 18 percent, other religions one percent, and those with no religion (or no answer) 12 percent. An August-September 2008 public opinion poll by Simer, S.A. on the Greater Metropolitan Region (GAM), which includes the cities of San José, Cartago, Heredia and Alajuela in the Central Valley, reported that Catholics adherents were 47.2 percent, Protestants 24.1 percent, other religions 1.7 percent, and those with no religious affiliation (or no response) 26.9 percent. A comparison of these two polls reveals that Protestant adherents and those with no religion have a stronger presence in GAM than in the rest of the country, whereas Catholic adherents are stronger in smaller population areas.

## Historical Overview of Political and Social Development

European discovery of Costa Rica was made by Christopher Columbus during his fourth voyage to the Americas in 1502, when he sailed from Honduras to Panama and anchored briefly off the Caribbean coast of a land that was later called the “Rich Coast” due to its lush tropical vegetation. However, it was on the Pacific coast that the Spanish conquistadors first explored the territory of Costa Rica: Gáspar de Espinosa, accompanied by Hernán Ponce de León and Juan de Castañeda, in 1519, and Gil González Dávila in 1522. Participating in the later expedition was the **Spanish Roman Catholic priest, Diego de Agüero**, who became the first foreign religious worker to visit present-day Costa Rica and Nicaragua. After exploring the Nicoya Peninsula (extending southeast from the northwestern territory of Costa Rica), the Spaniards established a temporary settlement among the Chorotega people, where the priest claimed to

have converted and baptized about 6,000 individuals—although neither the Spaniards nor the Chorotegas understood each other's language. The first Roman Catholic chapel in Costa Rica was built in 1544 in the village of Nicoya during the administration of the first governor, Diego Gutiérrez. **In 1560, Franciscan friar Juan de Estrada Rávago arrived in Costa Rica from Granada, Nicaragua,** and he and his fellow Franciscans are credited with advancing the “evangelization” of Amerindians in Costa Rica by the cross and sword. Some of the Amerindians who were conquered by the Spanish were forced to live in “reducciones” (organized communities) near the mission stations, where they were given religious instruction and used as laborers by the missionaries, while other captives were distributed among the Spanish colonists as slave labor.

La primera iglesia Católica en Costa Rica fue construida en 1544 en la Villa de Nicoya durante la administración del primer gobernador, Diego Gutiérrez. La segunda iglesia Católica fue fundada en el pueblo de Chomes entre 1554 y 1556, también en la Península de Nicoya. En 1560, el fraile franciscano Juan de Estrada Rávago llegó por primera vez a Costa Rica desde Nicaragua, acompañado por treientos hombres bien pertrechados. En mayo de 1561, Padre Estrada recibió el título de Vicario de Costa Rica, y con las riendas del mando en sus manos comenzó la tarea de la evangelización, edificación y consolidación de la misión encomendada, con la ayuda del misionero franciscano fray Pedro de Betanzos. En 1562, llegó a Costa Rica el fray Martín de Bonilla con el conquistador Juan Vásquez de Coronado, quién fundó la ciudad capital colonial de Cartago en 1564. Durante el año 1564 llegaron a Cartago los frailes Franciscanos Lorenzo de Bienvenida, Diego de Salinas y Melchor Salazar, acompañado por el fraile Martín de Bonilla. En 1565 se fundaron un convento franciscano en Cartago.

Al Padre Estrada y a los otros franciscanos se les acredita la primera evangelización amplia de los amerindios en el territorio de Costa Rica. Durante toda la época colonial española, eran los franciscanos quienes llevaron a cabo la evangelización del país, con la ayuda ocasional de unos dominicos y mercedarios, pues éstas otras órdenes religiosas no estaban formalmente establecidas y su misión era transitoria.

In addition to the Chorotegas, Costa Rica was inhabited by several other Amerindian groups: the Huetares in the Central Valley and Caribbean coast, and the Bruncas in the southern region along the Pacific coast. Although scholars disagree about the size of the indigenous population in Costa Rica at the beginning of the Spanish Conquest, some early records (1569) indicate that there were probably no more than 30,000 Chibchan-speaking peoples present in 1502. Many of the Amerindians later died of disease or warfare at the hands of the Spaniards, which led to a decline in the total population. By 1611, the entire population of Costa Rica was reported as 15,000, including Amerindians, Spaniards, and *mestizos*. Today, the descendants of the original indigenous peoples number about 40,000 and are known as Cabécares, Bribris, Guaymí, Borucas, Téribes, Guatusos, and Huértares.

During the Spanish colonial period, Costa Rica became a nation of small farmers because there were no significant mineral resources to exploit, such as gold and silver. Therefore, the colonists turned to producing sufficient food products for their own survival, as well as to producing goods for export to other Spanish colonies. The socioeconomic elite of the era were the principal families of the **colonial capital of Cartago (founded in 1563)** who traced their lineage to the Spanish conquistadors, and who controlled the cattle ranches of Guanacaste on the Pacific coast and the cacao producing areas around Matina on the Caribbean coast. These families monopolized the wholesale and retail trade in Costa Rica, and they dominated civil, military and ecclesiastical life.

The 18<sup>th</sup> century in Costa Rica produced an increasing racial mixture of whites, blacks and Amerindians, which created today's majority *mestizo* population. This new *mestizo* peasantry began to populate other parts of the Central Valley, in particular the fertile land around Heredia (founded in 1706), San José (founded in 1736) and Alajuela (founded in 1782), where local chapels were constructed and administered by the few Catholic priests then in Costa Rica.

Although during the colonial period (1519-1821), Spaniards and **Roman Catholicism** dominated the social and religious life of Costa Rica, beginning in the mid-1800s some ethnic, racial and religious diversity appeared. The first Protestant worship services were conducted in San José during the 1840s among English-speaking foreigners, who were mainly American, British, and German citizens. This

congregation eventually became the nondenominational Church of the Good Shepherd, now Episcopalian. During the mid-1800s, indentured servants were imported from mainland China to provide laborers for the growing coffee industry, and they brought their ancient religious beliefs and practices with them. During the late 1800s, additional Chinese laborers arrived in Costa Rica, along with Asian Indians and Afro-American immigrants from the British-controlled West Indies, particularly Jamaica, to help with railroad construction and banana industry development on the Caribbean coast. Most of the Asian Indians were Hindus, and the majority of the black West Indians were English-speaking Protestants upon their arrival; the latter established the first Baptist, Methodist and Anglican churches on the Caribbean coast.

Costa Rica became independent of Spain in 1821 and was a member of the Central American Federation from 1824 to 1838 when that federation was dissolved. The Captaincy General of Guatemala (established in 1529) declared its independence from Spain on 15 September 1821, which included a region stretching from the southern border of Mexico to the border of the Province of Panama (part of the Republic of Colombia). In 1824, this region declared itself to be a new nation, known as the Central American Federation, with its capital in Guatemala City. However, the transition to statehood was far from smooth, because the other constituent provinces of the old Captaincy General of Guatemala (El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua and Costa Rica) had national aspirations that were often at odds with the central government in Guatemala City. When established, the new nation was immersed in political chaos, which continued until 1838 with almost permanent civil war between liberal and conservative factions.

Following the collapse of the Central American Federation in 1838, liberal political parties continued to struggle with conservative ones for control of the Costa Rican government until the 1940s, when new political options and ideologies appeared on the national stage. During the 1800s, Costa Ricans became more conscious of the larger world and the need to strengthen their economy by exporting goods to North America and Europe, and by importing goods to make their life easier. During the late-1800s, coffee production and exportation became the country's leading industry, and its capital of San José became a showcase for the newly-found prosperity: elaborate new public buildings, hotels, churches, homes, parks and monuments were constructed, including the impressive National Theater (1897) that is a replica of the Paris Opera House.

Since the mid-1940s, two major political ideologies have dominated Costa Rican politics: the **Calderonista movement** (founded by Rafael Ángel Calderón Guardia, President from 1940-1944, based on Social Christian Catholic ideology) and the **Social Democrat movement** (founded in 1951 by José "Pepe" Figueres who was President for three terms: 1948-1949, 1953-1958 and 1970-1974). Today, the **Social Christian Unity Party** (PUSC, conservative) represents the former, and the **National Liberation Party** (PLN, liberal) represents the latter. Between 1950 and 1990, the PLN won more presidential elections than the PUSC, but during the period 1998-2006 PUSC won two presidential elections, under Miguel Angel Rodríguez (1998-2002) and Dr. Abel Pacheco (2002-2006). Democracy, peace, stability, and economic growth and development have characterized this nation since 1950.

Oscar Arias Sánchez (Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of Essex, England, in 1974) of the PLN served as president from 1986-1990 and won the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1987 for proposing the "Arias Peace Plan" (also known as "Esquipulas II"). The presidents of Central America signed this peace proposal in August of 1987, thereby ending a series of armed conflicts in the region between Marxist-led insurgents and democratically-elected governments during an ugly era of the Cold War in Central America.

After a Constitution reform was approved in 2005 that permitted the reelection of former presidents, Dr. Arias ran again on the PLN ticket and won the presidency in 2006, which was the first time in 36 years that such a thing had happened. Arias' opponent in the 2006 election was economist Ottón Solís Fallas of the **Citizen's Action Party** (PAC), a center-left party composed mainly of PLN dissidents who strongly opposed the PLN's neoliberal "free trade" policies with the U.S. government.

## **Roman Catholic Church**

Until the mid-1800s, the **Roman Catholic Church** of Costa Rica was administered as part of the Episcopal Province of León, Nicaragua, founded in 1534. However, in 1850, Pope Pius IX created an independent bishopric (diocese) in Costa Rica and appointed Dr. Anselmo Llorente y Lafuente (a Costa Rican) as its first bishop. In 1852, the government signed a Concordat with the Holy See in Rome, by which the jurisdiction of church property and its temporal rights were transferred to the civil authorities. The first Catholic seminary was established for training local priests in 1878, and the Diocese of San José was elevated to an Archdiocese in 1921.

**Juan Primitivo Próspero Fernández Oreamuno**, President from 1882 to 1885, implemented measures that sought to undermine the power of the Catholic Church; he withdrew the Concordat with the Holy See, expelled the Jesuits and the German Bishop Bernardo Augusto Thiel Hoffman (1880-1901) from the country, and in 1884 passed laws that placed cemeteries under state control, introduced civil marriage and legalized divorce. It was not until the administration of President Rafael Ángel del Socorro Calderón Guardia (1940-1944) that the anti-clerical laws of 1884 and 1894 were repealed, which prohibited religious instruction in the public schools and the presence of religious orders in Costa Rica.\*\*

For centuries Catholic religious life was centered in the old cathedral of the nation's colonial capital and in the shrine of "Our Lady of the Angels," both located in Cartago, where the faithful believe that a small statue of the Virgin Mary and Child mysteriously appeared to a *pardo* woman (of mixed Indian and Negro blood), known today as Juana Pereira, in 1635. However, the veneration of the hand-carved stone statue of the Black Madonna, known as *La Negrita*, at "Our Lady of the Angels" chapel was not popular outside of Cartago until the Catholic hierarchy began to promote this in the 1880s. After 1926, when "Our Lady of the Angels" became the nation's Patron Saint, the most important religious holiday in Costa Rica has been on August 2, the Virgin of the Angels Day. Beginning the previous day, tens of thousands of Catholics of all ages participate in an all-night pilgrimage by walking from their home towns to the *Basilica de Nuestra Señora de Los Ángeles* in Cartago. Annually, during the morning of August 2nd, the nation's Catholic clergy, led by the archbishop, conduct a special ceremony in honor of the Virgin Mary in the large plaza facing the Basilica, where great crowds of Catholics and some foreign tourists typically gather. The statue of the Black Madonna is believed to have great healing powers, which is demonstrated by the presence of thousands of small replicas of body parts (housed in glass-covered display cases) that people have given to the Basilica as a testimony of their alleged miraculous healing after making a pilgrimage and praying before the altar.

Historically, the Costa Rican Catholic Church has suffered from a lack of economic resources, as was true in other Central American countries, because it depended of the tithes of a relatively small and poor population. Even in the mid-1970s, the Catholic Church was still small and poor as an organization in Costa Rica, with only about 350 priests to attend to the spiritual needs of about 1.9 million parishioners, which is about one priest for every 5,429 Catholics. Although the Archdiocese of San José reported one priest for an average of 3,000 Catholics, many remote parishes were not as well off: Tilarán had one priest for every 7,600 people and San Isidro de El General had one priest for every 8,700 people. Although the majority of the diocesan priests were Costa Ricans, nearly all the religious priests (members of religious orders) were foreign-born, mainly from Spain, Germany, Italy and the USA.

Although nationally the priest-to-population ratio was about 1:3,955 Catholics in 1999, this was a marked improvement over the mid-1970s. Part of this change was due to the improved operation of the Central Seminary in Paso Ancho for the preparation of diocesan priests, and of the Franciscan Seminary in Sabanilla for the training of religious priests. However, in 2004, the large Archdiocese of San José, with a reported population of 1,621,800 parishioners, only had a total of 395 priests (diocesan and religious), which is an average of one priest for 4,105 Catholics. This is about the same proportion of priests-to-population as existed in the Archdiocese in 1949.

Several diverse tensions arose within the Costa Rican 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 Costa Rican society and establishing greater social justice through peaceful democratic means. *Radicals* adopted the Marxist-inspired Liberation Theology and advocated violent revolution by the people in neighboring Nicaragua as a means of overthrowing the Somoza 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.

The origin and development of the **Catholic Charismatic Renewal (CCR)** movement in Costa Rica during the early 1970s had a strong impact on many Catholics, although it also created a great deal of controversy. Opponents denounced it as the "pentecostalization" of the Church. The visits by several Catholic Charismatic leaders to Costa Rica, such as Dominican priest Francis MacNutt, Catholic laywoman Barbara Shlemon (RN), and other members of MacNutt's team in 1970-1971, preceded by the visit an Evangelical Charismatic pastor from Argentina, Juan Carlos Ortiz of the Assemblies of God, in 1969, resulted in the birth an ecumenical Charismatic movement that removed some of the previous barriers to fellowship that existed between Catholics and Evangelicals. In July of 1973, Father Francis Corbett visited Costa Rica and spoke to numerous groups, which further impacted the development of the CCR in this nation.

One of the significant events that marked the beginning of the ecumenical phase of the Charismatic Renewal movement among university students was a conference held at Camp Roblealto in San José de la Montaña in Heredia, where Father MacNutt spoke to and prayed for students in July 1971, which greatly impacted their lives and motivated a few students to form fellowship groups and Bible study groups to share their Charismatic Renewal experiences with others.

Following the July 1971 visit by members of MacNutt's team, the leadership of the CCR in Costa Rica was assumed by Padre Reinaldo Pol Iparaguirre, who initially welcomed Catholics as well as Evangelicals to CCR activities held in Catholic institutions and private homes. In addition, a group of university students, Catholics and Evangelicals, who were influenced by MacNutt's ministry, founded the Agape Coffee House ministry in May 1972 in San Pedro, Montes de Oca, near the University of Costa Rica campus. This ecumenical coffee house ministry had a strong impact on scores of university students who became active Charismatics until it was closed sometime in 1974.

An additional influence that encouraged the development of the CCR in Costa Rica was the visit of Father Francis Corbett, a Charismatic parish priest from the USA, in January-February and July of 1973. In February of that year, Father Corbett participated in an ecumenical youth retreat at Camp Roblealto, where scores of high school and university students were impacted by the CCR movement. Many of them returned to their homes, parishes and campuses having experienced Charismatic renewal. It was in the days following this retreat at Camp Roblealto that Father Corbett spoke during Mass at Holy Trinity Catholic Church in Barrio México, where those who had attended the camp first met the group that eventually became the "official" Catholic Charismatic Renewal in Costa Rica in 1972, led by a Catholic couple – José Miguel and Silvina Arias – and José Miguel's sister, Sor Cecilia Arias of the Sisters of Charity. Father Corbett also attended other meetings during those few days, and prayed over people to be baptized in the Holy Spirit. The Arias family provided key leadership to the CCR and Padre Pol, who was a very close assistant to Archbishop Carlos Humberto Rodríguez Quirós (1960-1979), joined the group some time later.

In addition to the ecumenical Agape group in San Pedro, two other small Charismatic communities were also formed about this time in the San José metro area: the Shekinah group met in Barrio Escalante (mostly Catholics) and another group met in the Hatillo-Desamparados area and was ecumenical in

composition. For about six months, all these “communities” met together every Monday in a general gathering for prayer and fellowship that held them together and was supposed to continue to strengthen the Charismatic experience. These meetings were held at the chapel of Colegio St. Francis in Moravia and were open to newcomers, both Catholics and Evangelicals. The Agape group continues to function today in the area of Sabanilla-San Ramón de Tres Ríos, but its name was changed in 1977 to “Comunidad Arbol de Vida” (Tree of Life Community), which is modeled after the “World of God Community” in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

However, by the mid-1970s, Catholic and Evangelical Charismatics went their separate ways, due mainly to restrictions placed on ecumenical cooperation between the two groups by the Catholic hierarchy, which placed a strong emphasis on different practices of popular piety that had fallen into relative disuse after Vatican II, such as rosaries, pilgrimages, novenas, etc. All this Catholic reaction was favored by the style of the new Pope, John Paul II (elected in 1978), who, contrary to Paul VI, was very favorable to traditional piety and to promoting Marian devotion. After Bishop Román Arrieta, until then of the Diocese of Tilarán, became the Archbishop of San José in 1979, he gave support to the Catholic Charismatic Renewal, but he also made sure that it was strictly Catholic. Although he supported ecumenism in theory, he often spoke against “fundamentalist sects” and discouraged specific expressions of ecumenism in his archdiocese. However, he did endorse the Comunidad Agape (later called “Arbol de Vida”) as an “official” ecumenical group within his archdiocese.

Charismatic Catholics have made a significant contribution to church renewal in Costa Rica by opening an opportunity for greater participation by the laity in church activities, including hundreds of home Bible study and prayer groups that were established throughout the country, especially in the San José metro area. This movement deepened the faith and commitment of tens of thousands of Catholics and led to liturgical changes in worship services and to greater spiritual vitality in the daily lives of believers, mainly among the middle and upper classes.

The CCR in Costa Rica was mainly an effort led by Catholic laypeople with the participation of a few Catholic priests and nuns, such as Padre Pol. In 1982, an estimated 25,000 people attended a CCR celebration at the National Stadium in San José, which was reported to be the largest Charismatic gathering in the history of Costa Rica.

During 2000-2001, the popular radio ministry of diocesan priest Minor de Jesús Calvo and the Charismatic format of “Radio María de Guadalupe” in San José worked to the advantage of the Catholic Church. However, the Charismatic appeal and fundraising success of Radio María, along with the growing popularity of “Padre Minor,” was perceived as a threat by the Catholic hierarchy. Consequently, in 2001, the Archbishop of San José removed Padre Minor from his position as director of Radio Maria and the station was disbanded, which created a serious crisis for the Catholic Church. Many Catholics who supported Padre Minor became angry at the Archbishop for forcing him to resign from this independent ministry, which had been founded and developed by Padre Minor and his business associates using similar programming and promotional tactics as Evangelicals in their successful radio and television ministries in Costa Rica and elsewhere. In 2005, Padre Minor and his chief financial partner, businessman Omar Chaves, were tried and convicted of fraud and corruption in the administration of Radio María funds, and both are currently serving long prison terms (12-15 years).

After Padre Minor disappeared from public view in 2001, the Catholic Church seemed satisfied to continue its traditional programming on Radio Fides, the Church’s official station. However, the Catholic public expressed disappointment and disillusionment with the treatment received by Padre Minor and with the loss of the inspirational format of Radio Maria, which had a special appeal to tens of thousands of listeners, especially charismatic Catholics.

In 2002, the Ecclesiastical Conference of Costa Rica (CECOR) consisted of seven dioceses and 284 parishes, which were served by 561 diocesan priests and 192 religious priests, for a total of 753. In July of 2002, Monseñor Hugo Barrantes Ureña was appointed as Archbishop of San José. In May of 2005 the Diocese of Cartago was created. The Catholic University of Costa Rica (*Universidad Católica de Costa Rica Anselmo Llorente y Lafuente*) was founded in 1993.

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COUNTRY	CATHOLIC	PROTESTANT	OTHERS	NONE
COSTA RICA	47.2%	24.1%	1.7%	26.9%

## The Protestant Movement

**The earliest Protestant missionary efforts in Costa Rica** took place in the 1880s among English-speaking West Indians (Afro-Caribbean peoples), who came from the British West Indies to work on the construction of a railroad (1870-1890) between the capital city of San José in the Central Valley and Port Limón on the Caribbean coast. Many of these laborers remained on the Caribbean coast to work in railroad maintenance, agriculture (cacao and banana plantations), fishing, and other endeavors, and they brought their own belief systems with them: **Myalism** (an African adaptation of Christianity), **Obeah** (witchcraft), and Protestant Christianity. The **Jamaican Baptist Missionary Society** sent its first worker to Costa Rica in 1887, the **British Methodists** in 1894, the **Anglicans** in 1896, the **Seventh-day Adventists** in 1903, and **The Salvation Army** in 1907.

The first Protestant worship services were conducted in San José, the nation’s capital, in the 1840s among English-speaking foreigners, mainly American, British and German citizens. The first Protestant chapel, **Church of the Good Shepherd**, was constructed in San José in 1865 to serve the expatriate community. Although this church was founded as a nondenominational worship center, in 1896 it became part of the **Anglican Communion**.

The activities of the **British and Foreign Bible Society**, beginning in 1845, and the **American Bible Society** (1890s) in San José and other major cities helped to promote Bible reading among Costa Ricans, and to strengthen the resolve of early Protestants to maintain their faith in an environment of religious intolerance created by Roman Catholics.

The first Protestant mission agency (nondenominational) to work in the Central Valley of Costa Rica was the **Central American Mission** (now CAM International), founded in Dallas, Texas, by Dr. C. I. Scofield and three friends “to pursue evangelism in Central America.” The first CAM missionary couple was the Rev. and Mrs. William McConnell, who arrived in Port Limón in February of 1891 and located to San José with “a vision to evangelize the nation’s 280,000 souls.” This work progressed very slowly and with great difficulty due to strong opposition from Catholic priests and the general public in the Central Valley.

By 1950, at least 15 Protestant mission agencies had begun work in Costa Rica, including those mentioned previously. Five missionary societies concentrated on West Indians along the Caribbean coast, and the other societies devoted their efforts to reaching the Spanish-speaking population, largely in the Central Valley. The **Methodist Episcopal Church** (now part of the United Methodist Church) arrived in 1917, followed by independent Pentecostal missionaries in 1918 (this work is now under the **Pentecostal Holiness Church International**), the **Latin American Evangelization Campaign** (founded by Mr. and

Mrs. Harry Strachan) in 1921, the **Church of God (Anderson, Indiana)** in 1939, the **Church of God International (Cleveland, Tennessee)** also in 1939, the **Southern Baptist Convention** in 1943, the **Assemblies of God** in 1944, the **Pentecostal Church of God** (from Puerto Rico) in 1945, and the **American Baptist Association** in 1946.

The nondenominational **Latin America Evangelization Campaign (LAEC)**, later known as the **Latin America Mission (LAM)**, entered Costa Rica in 1921, under the leadership of Scottish Presbyterian missionaries, the Rev. and Mrs. Harry Strachan. The mission began as a promoter of evangelistic campaigns throughout Latin America, and soon came to have a major role in pulling the evangelical movement in Costa Rica out of its impasse and stagnation. This was accomplished by means of local evangelistic campaigns and the cooperative institutional efforts promoted by the Strachans.

In 1923, Harry and Susan Strachan established a Women's Bible Training School in their home, which was converted into a coeducational "Bible Institute" in 1924. In 1925, the Bible Institute was functioning with 19 students and a faculty composed of missionaries of the Central American Mission, the Methodist Episcopal Church, and the LAEC. This interdenominational Bible Institute met a long-felt need and was well received in evangelical circles, resulting in many mission agencies deciding to send students to the school. In 1930, there were forty students, representing eleven countries and eight denominations or mission agencies. The name was changed to the "Latin America Biblical Seminary" in 1941, when its academic standards were raised to meet the growing needs of the evangelical movement.

Other ministries were created by the LAEC to further its ministry of service in Latin America. In 1926, a Spanish literature ministry was initiated that later became Editorial Caribe/LAMP (Latin America Mission Publications) in 1949, now one of the most important publishers and distributors of Evangelical literature in Latin America. The Bible Clinic was constructed in 1929 to care for people, mainly Evangelicals, who needed hospitalization, since prejudice by Catholics was so strong against them that they were sometimes refused entrance to the city hospital or, once interned, were neglected. Although Costa Rica was becoming more liberal, fanaticism still persisted in many of the state and Catholic institutions. A new hospital building was added to the older Bible Clinic facilities in 1975, which doubled the capacity to over 60 beds. Since 1968, the hospital has been entirely under national management and constant improvements have been made among its staff and in its infrastructure. During the early 2000s, the older buildings were remodeled and new buildings were constructed or acquired, which has made Hospital Clínica Bíblica, now with international accreditation, the largest (over 200 beds) and most prestigious private hospital in the nation. Today, this is an experienced world-class medical institution with state-of-the-art facilities and medical services, valued at over \$50 million.

Susan Strachan had a great concern for sick and homeless children, and in 1931, when a two-hundred acre dairy and coffee farm was purchased by the LAEC, her dreams were fulfilled by the establishment of an evangelical orphanage in 1932, called the Bible Home, located in San José de la Montaña. Hundreds of orphaned and abandoned Costa Rican children have been cared for by the Bible Home, and some of them have become outstanding Evangelical leaders. In 1947, a Christian camping ministry was added, utilizing part of the Mission farm; Camp Roblealto thus became one of the earliest such camping ministries in all of Latin America. Both of these ministries are now under the ownership and administration of the Roblealto Childcare Association, founded in 1970.

The period 1941 to 1971 brought many changes to the LAEC. In 1941, its name was changed to "**The Latin America Mission**" (LAM) to reflect the expanding interests and ministries of the Mission. With the death of Harry Strachan in 1945, followed by his wife Susan in 1950, their university-educated son, Kenneth, became the General Director of the LAM (1950-1965). Following the death of Kenneth Strachan, Mr. Horace L. Fenton, Jr., served as General Director from 1965-1971, at which time all of the LAM's ministries became autonomous entities.

The 1940s witnessed the emergence of the **Costa Rican Bible Churches Association (AIBC)**, which grew out of the LAM's evangelistic ministry. Although it was not the Strachans' intention to plant local churches, the expansion occurred naturally resulting from evangelistic work by students and faculty of the Bible Institute and from evangelistic campaigns sponsored by the LAEC. During the 1920s and 1930s, local congregations were formed in the Central Valley and in the northwestern coastal province of

Guanacaste. The Bible Temple in San José, organized in 1929, remained the center of these efforts, with the distinction of being the largest evangelical church in the country at that time.

In 1945, the AIBC was formally organized with 14 churches and 406 baptized members; however, the number of active adherents was considerably larger. The LAM, during its early years of evangelistic enthusiasm, did not adequately follow-up and consolidate the gains made in evangelism by organizing new believers into local congregations. This lack of proper ecclesiastical organization was a common defect of independent Missions, such as the CAM and LAM, and stemmed from an inadequate concept of the importance of the local church. The first LAM missionary to see this weakness was Kenneth Strachan, who initiated the preliminary steps that led to the formation of the AIBC in 1945. However, many of the AIBC's founding congregations had only been organized locally the year before, when the first Latin American pastors of various nationalities were ordained. By 1959, much progress had been made toward self-support among congregations affiliated with the AIBC. In 1960, the AIBC reported 13 organized churches, 18 missions and 37 preaching points, with a total membership of 1,055.

Between 1946 and 1982 numerous new LAM ministries were added: Radio Station TIFC, "The Light of the Caribbean" in 1946-1948; Colegio Monterrey (primary and secondary education) in 1956; Department of Evangelism (later called "Evangelism-in-Depth") in 1959; Goodwill Caravans in 1960; Ministry to the Student World (MINAMUNDO) in 1967; Christian Ministries to the English-speaking (AMCA) in 1968; Roblealto Childcare Association in 1970; International Institute of In-Depth Evangelization (IINDEF) in 1971; the Latin American Center for Pastoral Studies (CELEP) in 1979; and the Missiological Institute of the Americas (IMDELA) in 1982.

It was under Kenneth Strachan's leadership that a major concern for mass evangelization was rekindled in the LAM, a vision that came to fruition beginning about 1948. The renewed evangelistic emphasis was seen in the expansion and growth of the AIBC, in the LAM's participation in the **1958 Billy Graham Caribbean Crusade**, and in the decade of **Evangelism-in-Depth campaigns** held throughout the continent during the 1960s: Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, Venezuela, Bolivia, Dominican Republic, Peru, Colombia, Ecuador and Paraguay.

Evangelical leaders in Costa Rica still remember the year of Evangelism-in-Depth (1960-1961) as a turning point in the history of the Evangelical movement in the country, due to the strong impact that this cooperative effort had on the life and testimony of Costa Rican Evangelicals. They were no longer a persecuted minority, but a growing army of committed disciples of Christ, who eagerly shared their faith with others and openly invited people to their local churches.

In 1971, the LAM was restructured under national leadership to provide a new organizational framework for the expanding ministries of its former departments. The **Community of Latin American Evangelical Ministries (CLAME)** was formed as an international federation of Christian organizations serving the Evangelical community with ministries in Costa Rica, Panama, Colombia and Mexico. Although CLAME was dissolved in 1986, most of its component ministries continue to exist as autonomous entities.

Between 1950 and 1985, at least 28 additional Protestant mission agencies began work in Costa Rica, and numerous other church bodies came into existence as the result of the nationalization of missionary efforts, as a reaction to missionary domination, or as a result of independent efforts.

The latest national survey of Protestant churches in Costa Rica conducted by PROLADES (2000-2001) identified 210 church associations with 2,367 local congregations distributed as follows: non-Pentecostal groups (908 or 41.5 percent) and Pentecostal (1,459 or 58.5 percent). The total Protestant church membership (over fifteen years of age) was estimated at 235,000, and the total Protestant population at about 800,000.

Today, there are four **Protestant universities in Costa Rica** that operate with official government authorization under the supervision of the country's Council of Higher Education (CONESUP): the Adventist University of Central America (UNADECA), founded in 1986; the Latin American Biblical University - UBLA (formerly the Latin American Biblical Seminary, 1924), founded in 1997; the Evangelical University of the Americas (UNELA), a merger of the Missiological Institute of the Americas

(IMDELA, 1982) and the Nazarene University of the Americas (UNAZA, 1992), established as UNELA in 1998; and the Methodist University of Costa Rica (UNIMET), founded in 2001.

Most of the more conservative Protestant denominations and independent churches are associated with the **Costa Rican Evangelical Alliance** (*Alianza Evangélica Costarricense*), which is affiliated with the **World Evangelical Alliance (WEF)**. The **Latin American Council of Churches (CLAI)** is represented in Costa Rica by the Evangelical Methodist Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church, the Costa Rican Lutheran Church, the Federation of Baptist Associations, the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (a split from the AIBC), the Episcopal Church, the Moravian Church, and the Faith and Holiness Pentecostal Church; and CLAI is affiliated with the **World Council of Churches (WCC)**.

**The Charismatic Renewal Movement (CRM)** began in Costa Rica during the period 1969-1973 inspired by the visit of several Evangelical Charismatic leaders from the Argentine Charismatic Renewal movement in Buenos Aires: Juan Carlos Ortiz (Assemblies of God) and the Alberto Mottesi (Baptist). After hearing about the Argentine Renewal movement that began among the Plymouth Brethren in Buenos Aires in 1968, a small group of Evangelical leaders (led by Jonás González and Rubén Lores of the LAM) in Costa Rica agreed to invite Ortiz to visit San José and share what was happening in Argentina at a “Seminar on Evangelization.” This seminar, held in September of 1969, was well-attended by an ample cross-section of Evangelical leaders who were electrified by his message.

This historic event was co-sponsored by the Costa Rican Evangelical Alliance, the LAM’s Department of Evangelism-in-Depth, the Latin American Biblical Seminary (affiliated with the LAM), the Assemblies of God Bible Institute, the Foursquare Bible Institute and the Pentecostal Holiness Bible Institute. Also participating in the seminar were pastors from the Costa Rican Bible Church Association (AIBC, affiliated with the LAM), the Assemblies of God, the Pentecostal Holiness Church, the Association of Central American Churches (affiliated with CAM), the Baptist Convention (affiliated with the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board), the Foursquare Gospel Church, the Evangelical Methodist Church, and several smaller denominations. The participants included leaders from non-Pentecostal as well as Pentecostal churches and institutions, and some of them accepted the CRM as God-given while others rejected it as heresy, such as the Baptists and the CAM-related pastors.

Many of the early CRM activities were associated with the Bible Temple (*Templo Bíblico*) in downtown San José (affiliated with the AIBC), which was one of the largest congregations in the country in 1970. After Ortiz shared his testimony regarding the Argentine Renewal Movement at the Bible Temple, this historic non-Pentecostal church (founded by the LAEC/LAM in 1927) became a catalyst for the CRM in Costa Rica. The CRM soon spread during the next few years to most of the AIBC churches in the Central Valley and Guanacaste province, and to some churches affiliated with the Baptist Convention, the Evangelical Methodist Church, the Association of Central American Churches, as well as to many Pentecostal denominations.

An additional catalyst for the spread of the CRM in Costa Rica was Evangelical radio station TIFC, known as “*Faro del Caribe*,” owned and operated by the LAM, which broadcast the recorded messages that Ortiz delivered at the “Seminar on Evangelization” in 1969. This was followed by recorded messages delivered in San José by other charismatic leaders: Gerardo de Ávila (a Cuban Pentecostal pastor from New York City) in 1970, Alberto Mottesi (a Baptist pastor from Buenos Aires) in 1971 as well as a second visit by Ortiz that year and two more visits in 1972, and Father Francis MacNutt (a Dominican priest from the USA) in 1971 as well as Víctor Landero (an Evangelical pastor from Colombia with the LAM-affiliated Association of Bible Churches of the Caribbean) in 1972.

After several members on the Board of Elders of the Bible Temple attended a private gathering of Catholics and Protestants in 1971 to hear the testimonies of Father MacNutt, Catholic laywoman Barbara Shlemon (RN), and Methodist pastors Tommy Tyson and Joe Petree concerning the nature, origin and early development of the **Catholic Charismatic Renewal (CCR)** movement in the USA (which began in 1967 at Dusquesne and Notre Dame universities), Father MacNutt was invited to speak at the Bible Temple on a Sunday morning. This was the first time in memory that a Catholic priest had spoken from the pulpit of an Evangelical church in Costa Rica; and MacNutt gave a powerful message at the Bible Temple regarding the person, power and gifts of the Holy Spirit (including “speaking in tongues,”

prophecy and healing) that had a great spiritual impact on the audience. This event further stimulated the growth and expansion of the CRM among AIBC churches through the country.

Other catalysts for the spread of the ecumenical CRM in Costa Rica were the establishment of chapters of the **Full Gospel Business Men's Fellowship** (FGBMF, founded in 1951 by businessman Demos Shakarian in Los Angeles, CA) and **Women's Aglow Fellowship** (founded in 1967 in Seattle, Washington) in the San José metro area during the early 1970s, which were well-attended by Evangelical and Catholic laymen and laywomen. In addition to regular weekly luncheon meetings, both of these organizations also sponsored small Bible study groups in private homes for men and women as well as for couples. These small group meetings, directed by lay leaders, became an important part of the development of CRM movement in Costa Rica, not only in the Central Valley but also in other parts of the country.

Additional influences that positively impacted the early development of the CRM in Costa Rica were the participation of numerous Costa Rican Evangelical leaders in the "First Latin American Congress on Charismatic Renewal" held in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in December of 1972; the visit of Father Francis Corbett (a Charismatic priest from Central Illinois) to Costa Rica in January-February and July of 1973; as well as the ministry of Pentecostal Evangelist T. L. Osborn who led a "Divine Healing Campaign" in San José during February of 1973.

However, following the Osborn Campaign, a negative backlash soon developed among many non-Pentecostal Evangelical pastors, denominational leaders and missionaries, who were strongly opposed to the Pentecostal and Charismatic (also called neo-Pentecostal) teachings concerning the baptism of the Holy Spirit, speaking in tongues, prophecy, faith healing and casting out of evil spirits. The Fundamentalists, who are strong advocates of dispensationalism, were particularly antagonistic toward Pentecostals and Charismatics (especially the Catholic variety) and toward non-Pentecostals who were sympathetic to the CRM. During the 1970s and 1980s, within some non-Pentecostal denominations, pastors and laypeople who became Charismatics were publically rebuked and shunned, which resulted in an exodus of thousands of Evangelicals from those denominations to Pentecostal and Charismatic groups.

## **Other Religions**

Although the Protestant population grew significantly between 1960 and 1990, this period also witnessed the arrival, numerical growth and geographical expansion of other religious movements. Today, about three percent of the population belongs to "**other religions**," which in the context of Costa Rica includes independent Western Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions, non-Protestant Christian-based groups (also called "marginal" Christian groups), and non-Christian religions.

The existence of **independent Western Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions** in Costa Rica is a recent phenomenon. Independent Western Catholic jurisdictions include the following:

- Ecumenical Catholic Church of Christ, Diocese of Our Lady Mother of God, Apostolic Administration of Central America, Panama and Cuba. It traces its apostolic succession through the Syrian Jacobite Orthodox Church and the Old Catholic Church of Utrecht. This denomination is led by Mons. Sebastián Herrera Plá in Costa Rica and Mons. Karl Raimund Rodig, Ecumenical Archbishop of Miami, Florida.
- **Community of Communities of Our Lady of Guadalupe** is led by Mons. Higinio Alas Gómez in Urbanización La Aurora, Heredia; and there is an affiliated church in Panama.
- **Reunited Apostolic Catholic Church**, Diocese of Central America, Panama and the West Indies. The church in Costa Rica is led by Archbishop Mons. Pablo José de Jesús María (secular name: Francisco Eduardo de la Espriella Torrens) and Assistant Bishop Mons. Rodrigo Antonio López Chaves, with headquarters in the suburb of Desamparados, Province of San Jose. The international headquarters are in the Archdiocese of Ciudad de Guarulhos, Sao Paulo, Brazil, founded by Mons. Carlos Duarte Costa, Obispo de Maura (1888-1961), of the Brazilian Apostolic Catholic Church, which is also known as the Free Orthodox Church of Ibero-America. These ecclesiastical bodies are also affiliated with the Sacramental Apostolic Church (Mons. Bishop

Jordi Alejandro Von Jesus in Vienna, Austria), One Holy Catholic Apostolic Orthodox Church (Miami, Florida) and the Byzantine Catholic Church, Inc. (BCCI), led by Patriarch Mar Markus I (Mark I. Miller in Los Angeles, California).

Independent Eastern Orthodox jurisdictions include the following:

- **The Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (ROCOR)** began in 2004, when the Russian immigrant community (about 1,000) began to hold monthly services in private homes in the San José metro area, led by visiting priests from the USA: Daniel MacKenzie or Georgio Salatanov. In 2008, construction began for the country's first Russian Orthodox chapel in San Isidro de Coronado, Province of San José, under the auspices of the Russian Orthodox Association of Costa Rica.
- **The Autocephalous Orthodox Archdiocese of Costa Rica, Byzantine Rite**, is led by Mons. Nicolás I (secular name: Carlos Alberto Gómez Herrera) in San Jose, with chapels in Ulloa de Heredia and San Isidro, Vásquez de Coronado. This denomination is affiliated with the Orthodox Apostolic Catholic Church (ICAO) and the Orthodox Church of Latin America, Diocese of Central and South America (IOLA), with International headquarters in Huntington Beach, California, under Archbishop Jorge Rodríguez-Villa of the Archdiocese of Our Lady of Guadalupe, which is part of the Old Catholic Orthodox Church.
- **Orthodox Church of Costa Rica, Byzantine Rite** (also known as Asociación Iglesia Misionera Apostólica Ortodoxa de Costa Rica) is led by Bishop Mons. Pancracio de San Procopios (secular name: Carlos Retana) in the city of Guápiles, Limón province. This small denomination is a split from the group led by Mons. Nicolás I (secular name: Carlos Alberto Gómez Herrera) in 2003.

**The following “marginal” Christian groups that emerged from the Protestant movement are:** the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons, founded in 1946; one temple, 76 congregations and 35,647 members in 2007), the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society (also known as Jehovah's Witnesses: 272 congregations and 21,024 adherents in 2005), Christadelphians, Unity School of Christianity, Mita Congregation, People of Amos Church, Voice of the Chief Cornerstone, Light of the Word Church, God is Love Church, Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, and other groups.

The **non-Christian religions** (about 80 distinct groups) include the following: Amerindian religions (seven ethnolinguistic groups), Baha'i Faith (3 groups), Buddhism (5 groups), Hinduism (at least 25 groups), Chinese religions (10 groups), Islam (2 groups), Judaism (5 groups), and Western Esoteric groups (more than 25). The small **Jewish** community (2,500) is centered in San José and includes Orthodox, Reform and Messianic Judaism.

The older **Western Esoteric groups** are: **Freemasonry**, established in Costa Rica in 1865 by Dr. Francisco Calvo; the **Theosophical Society** (1890s, Tomás Povedano de Arcos); **European Spiritualism** (1908, Ofelia Corrales); **Liberal Catholic Church** (1920s, José Basileo Acuña Zeledón); and **Grand Universal Fraternity-Mission of Aquarius** (1950s).

In addition, **Myalism and Obeah** (introduced by Jamaican immigrants during the 1870s) are still practiced by some West Indians (Creoles, Afro-Americans) on the Caribbean coast, and more recently a small group of **Boboshanti Rastafarians** appeared in San José among non-black *mestizos*. Also, there are small groups of **Wiccans** and **Satanists** in the Central Valley. Among practitioners of **Amerindian religions** and **Popular Catholicism** there are “specialists” who practice witchcraft (*brujería*), shamanism (*chamanismo*) and folk healing (*curanderismo*), while 43 percent of the population admitted to believing and participating in such practices, as reported by Demoscopia in a national poll conducted in November of 2001.

Another public opinion poll conducted in 2002 by IDESPO, a research institute of the National University in Heredia, showed that between 1995 and 2001 about eight percent of the population of the San José Metropolitan Area (population 1.1 million) had “changed their religion,” with Catholic adherents declining and Protestants increasing as well among those identified with “**no religion**” and “**other religions.**”

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