

Religion in Honduras

Country Overview

The Republic of Honduras, formerly known as Spanish Honduras to differentiate it from British Honduras (now Belize), is about the size of Ohio, just over 110,000 km² (43,278 sq mi). It is located in Central America and has an estimated population of almost 7.5 million (2007). The country is bordered on the west by Guatemala, on the southwest by El Salvador, on the southeast by Nicaragua, on the south by the Pacific Ocean at the Gulf of Fonseca, and on the north by the Gulf of Honduras, which is part of the Caribbean Sea.

The nation's capital is the Central District, which is composed of the twin cities of Tegucigalpa-Comayagüela (founded in 1578 and the capital since 1880), located in the department of Francisco Morazán, in the south-central mountain region. According to 2005 estimates, approximately 1.25 million people live in the Central District.

Honduras has three distinct topographical regions: an extensive interior highland area and two narrow coastal lowlands. The interior, which has approximately 80 percent of the country's terrain, is mountainous and contains extensive woodlands, mainly pine forests. The larger Caribbean lowlands in the north and the Pacific lowlands bordering the Gulf of Fonseca are characterized as alluvial plains.

One of the most prominent features of the interior highlands is a depression that runs from the Caribbean Sea to the Gulf of Fonseca, which splits the country's mountains into eastern and western parts and provides a relatively easy transportation route across the isthmus. The nation's second largest city and its most important commercial center, San Pedro Sula, with an estimated population of one million in 2007, is located at the northern end of the depression in the Caribbean lowlands.

Today, Honduras is the second poorest country in Central America and has an extraordinarily unequal distribution of income and high unemployment. The economy relies heavily on a narrow range of exports, notably bananas and coffee, making it vulnerable to natural disasters and shifts in commodity prices.

In mid-2000, the national literacy rate was 80 percent and the total population was very homogeneous. Approximately 5,517,000 or 90 percent of its population was *Mestizo* (mixed Spanish and Indian blood), about seven percent Amerindian (Lenca, Chorti, Chorotega, Pipil, Miskito, Pech, Sumo and Tol), about two percent Afro-Caribbean (Garifunas and Creoles), and about one percent Caucasian (including U.S. citizens, Canadians, Jews, Arabs and Lebanese). There are smaller numbers of Asians (Asian-Indians, Chinese, Japanese and Koreans). Honduras has the distinction of having the largest Garifuna (Afro-Amerindian origins, also known as Black Caribs) and Arabic (predominantly Palestinian, but mistakenly called Turks) populations in Central America.

Current Religious Situation

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion and the government generally respects this right in practice. Although there is no state religion, the Honduran Armed Forces has an official Catholic patron saint. Government officials consult with Catholic Church officials and occasionally appoint Catholic clergy to quasi-official commissions on key subjects of mutual

concern. Prominent Catholic and Protestant clergymen have been represented on more than a dozen governmental commissions, including the National Anticorruption Council.

In May 2007, a national public opinion poll conducted by CID-Gallup that measured religious affiliation reported the following: Roman Catholics, 47 percent; Protestants, 36 percent; and “other religions” and those claiming “no religion” (or providing “no answer”), 17 percent. Previous polls reported that about four percent of the population was affiliated with “other religions” and about 12 percent claimed “no religion” (or “no answer”).

The Roman Catholic Church has been the most affected by competition with other religious movements and by the process of secularization within Honduran society since 1950. Despite the historical ties of Hondurans to the Catholic Church, national public opinion polls taken by CID-Gallup between 1997 and 2007 in Honduras revealed a steady decline in the number of Catholic adherents and a significant increase in Protestant adherents, while those affiliated with “other religions” and those claiming “no religion” remained proportionally about the same. On the one hand, Catholic adherents declined from about 95 percent in 1950 to 63 percent in 1997, and to 47 percent in 2007, or less than half of the total population. On the other hand, Protestant adherents increased from less than five percent in 1950 to 21 percent in July 1997, and to 36 percent in May 2007. *According to many observers, this represents the most significant increase in Protestant adherents in Central America during the past several decades.*

Historical Overview of Social and Political Development

Prior to Spanish colonization, the Caribbean coast was populated by the Miskito, Sumo, and Rama peoples of Macro-Chibchan origin (the predominant group in Colombia) who lived in scattered fishing villages on the coast and along the inland waterways, whereas the Pacific coast was largely home to ethnolinguistic groups that migrated south along the Pacific coast from present-day Mexico as early as 1,000 B.C.E.: Lenca, Chorti (Mayan), Chorotega, Pipil, Pech and Tol. The Mayan civilization in Central America stretched from southern Mexico into Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras. The ethnic Maya of western Honduras have managed to maintain substantial remnants of their ancient cultural heritage. The Chorti (also known as Ch'orti') language is spoken today by approximately 15,000 people, but many are bilingual in Spanish also.

Spanish Admiral Christopher Columbus explored the northern coast of Honduras and landed on the mainland, near modern Trujillo (Colón department), in 1502. The country was named Honduras (“depths”) for the deep waters off its coast, known today as the Bay of Honduras. In 1532, the Province of Honduras consisted of one Spanish settlement on the Caribbean coast at the port of Trujillo, which was founded in May 1525 by Juan de Medina. During the period leading up to the Spanish conquest of Honduras by Pedro de Alvarado y Contreras in 1536, many Amerindians living along the northern coast of Honduras were captured and taken as slaves to work on Spain's Caribbean island plantations.

After Pedro de Alvarado defeated the Amerindian resistance headed by chief Çiçumba near Ticamaya in the lower Ulua river valley in 1536, the Spaniards began to dominate the entire country. Alvarado, on behalf of the Governor of the Province of Honduras, divided up the native towns and gave their labor force to his soldiers and some of the colonists in *repartimiento*. The “repartimiento de labor” was a colonial labor system imposed upon the Amerindian population of Spanish America whereby the natives were forced into low-paid or unpaid labor for a portion of each year on Spanish-owned farms, in mines and workshops, and on public projects such as

building roads and buildings. By 1540, the colonial towns of Gracias, Comayagua and San Pedro Sula were founded.

During the Spanish colonial period (1525-1821), Honduras came under the control of the Captaincy General of Guatemala and the towns of Comayagua (1540) and Tegucigalpa (1578) emerged as mining centers in the central mountain region. When the Spanish authorities began mining both gold and silver on the mainland, they enslaved the native peoples (Amerindians) and brought Negro slaves from Africa and from other Spanish provinces to work in the mines. They also established cattle ranches to provide food for the miners. However, Honduras remained a backwater province during most of the colonial period.

Beginning in the mid-1600s, the British claimed a Protectorate over the Mosquito Coast, which today forms part of the Republics of Honduras and Nicaragua. Trading settlements were established by the British in the 1730s at several key locations along the Caribbean coast. The Miskito Indians were armed by the British to protect the Mosquito Coast from Spanish penetration, while the British engaged in illegal trade with the Spanish and with Amerindians in the interior. The Miskito Kingdom successfully resisted Spanish conquests and allied its self with the British for self-protection and trade benefits.

The Bay Islands (Guanaja, Roatán and Utila) of Honduras were first discovered by Columbus on his fourth voyage to America in 1502. They were later claimed and successively held by Great Britain, Spain and the Dutch United Provinces. Britain finally took control of the Bay Islands in 1643 and administered them as a Crown Colony, dependent on Jamaica, until the mid-1800s. It was not until 1860 that Great Britain recognized Honduran sovereignty over the Bay Islands and ceded possession of them. The Department of “Islas de la Bahía” was officially incorporated into the nation of Honduras on March 14, 1872.

Honduras gained its Independence from Spain in 1821 but was briefly annexed to the independent Mexican Empire. In 1823, Honduras joined the newly-formed United Provinces of Central America. Soon, social and economic differences between Honduras and its regional neighbors created harsh partisan strife among regional leaders, which brought about the federation's collapse in 1838-1839. Gen. Francisco Morazán, a Honduran national hero, led unsuccessful efforts to maintain the federation. Restoring Central American unity was the officially-stated chief aim of Honduran foreign policy until after World War I.

Marco Aurelio Soto became the nation's first Liberal president and governed between 1876 and 1883. In 1888, the builders of a projected railroad line from Puerto Cortez on the Caribbean coast to Tegucigalpa in the central highlands ran out of money when construction reached the coastal city of San Pedro Sula, which benefited that city's growth; it became the nation's main industrial center and is the second largest city today.

Since the early 1900s, the nation's economy has depended primarily on the export of bananas (called “green gold”), while it's political history has been shaped by the profiteering and corrupt practices of the banana companies. Traditionally lacking both an economic infrastructure and social and political integration, Honduras' agriculturally-based economy came to be dominated by U.S. multinational companies, notably United Fruit Company and Standard Fruit Company, which established vast banana plantations along the northern coast, beginning in 1899. The economic dominance and political influence of these companies was so great from the late 19th until the mid-20th century that Honduras became known as a “banana republic.”

Gen. Tiburcio Carías Andino became the Head of State in 1932. His ties to dictators in neighboring countries and to U.S.-owned banana companies helped him maintain power until 1948. By then, provincial military leaders had begun to gain control of the two major political parties, the Honduran Liberal Party (PLN, center-left, founded in 1891) and the Honduran

National Party (PNH, center-right conservative, founded in 1918). In 1948, Carías Andino stepped down and Juan Manuel Gálvez became President (1948-1954). Between 1954 and 1957, there were a series of power struggles between civilian and military leaders. In 1957, Ramón Villeda Morales was elected President but was overthrown before finishing his term in office.

All democratic elections in Honduras have been dominated by two major political parties, the PLN and the PNH. The PNH dominated the country between 1933 and 1957. In 1963, a military junta overthrew the democratically-elected government of President Ramón Villeda Morales (1957-1963) and established an authoritarian regime that held power until 1982, when Roberto Suazo Córdova (PLH) became President.

In 1969, the so-called “Soccer War” erupted between Honduras and El Salvador over the alleged mistreatment of Salvadorans in Honduras; the conflict lasted four days. In 1976, an ongoing border conflict with El Salvador required intervention by the Organization of American States (OAS) to resolve the situation.

The administration of Gen. Policarpo Paz García (b. 1932, president from 1978 to 1982) was noted for its corruption and military repression, including the activities attributed to infamous Battalion 3-16, a secret right-wing paramilitary death squad trained by the CIA that kidnapped, tortured and assassinated many political dissidents of the military dictatorship. The military had ruled Honduras almost continuously since 1963, and Paz García was the last of the generals to rule the country.

In 1980, the military junta headed by Gen. Paz García decided to restore the nation to civil rule under a new Constitution, and subsequently Roberto Suazo Córdova (b. 1927) was elected president in 1981 for the period 1982 to 1986. Suazo won the elections with a promise to carry out an ambitious program of economic and social development in order to tackle the country's growing recession. Suazo counted on receiving substantial U.S. financial aid to implement his plans, because Honduras was very important for U.S. interests in the region at that time due to the fall of the Somoza regime in Nicaragua as a result of the leftist-Sandinista insurrection.

Rafael Leonardo Callejas Romero (b. 1943) of the PNH was president from 1990 to 1994. Callejas presided over a liberal reformist government, opened the Honduran economy to local and foreign investment, and managed steady growth during the first three years of his presidency, although during the fourth year the lack of fiscal discipline led to a new set of economic measures being imposed by the following government. Poverty was reduced by eight percent under his tenure. Infrastructure was a priority and large investments were made in the fertile Sula Valley area, where more than 90 km of four-lane highways were constructed. The Callejas government made some important accomplishments in the social area, such as the creation of the Family Assistance Program and the Honduran Fund for Social Investment. Expatriates of the previous military and Liberal governments were allowed to return to Honduras, with no risk to their lives, and the irregular Nicaraguan Contra forces, organized and supported by the U.S. government in an attempt to overthrow the Sandinista government, were required to leave Honduras in April 1990 after intense negotiations.

Carlos Roberto Reina Idiáquez (b. 1926 – d. 2003) of the PLH was president from 1994 to 1998. Reina inherited a relatively difficult economic situation from the previous administration. The foreign debt service represented 40 percent of Honduran exports. Even though approximately 700 million dollars of the foreign debt was condoned by creditor nations, the debt was still higher than at the beginning of the 1990s.

President Reina launched a “moral revolution” to defeat corruption and mismanagement, and most of his reforms were realized by the end of his first year in office. One of his main objectives was to reform the Armed Forces by transferring all power in the hands of military men

to civilian authorities, followed by the abolition of compulsory military service. These and other reforms to the military have been considered controversial, because many Honduras believe these reforms helped the proliferation of street gangs by eliminating military service as a source of employment and education for young men.

In 1998, Hurricane Mitch caused such massive and widespread loss that Liberal President Carlos Roberto Flores Facussé (born in 1950 of Palestinian immigrants), who governed from 1998 to 2002 for the PLH, claimed that fifty years of progress in the country were reversed. The powerful hurricane obliterated about 70 percent of the crops and an estimated 70-80 percent of the transportation infrastructure, including nearly all bridges and secondary roads. Across the country, 33,000 houses were destroyed, an additional 50,000 were damaged, some 5,600 people were killed, 12,000 were injured, and the total loss was estimated at \$3 billion. It was estimated that it would take nearly two decades for Honduras to fully recover from such a severe blow to its feeble economy.

Ricardo Rodolfo Maduro Joest (b. 1946 of the PNH) was president from 2002 to 2007. José Manuel Zelaya Rosales, known as Mel Zelaya (b. 1952), is now the President of Honduras (2006-to date), representing the PNH, which currently has a majority in Congress due to an alliance with the Christian Democratic Party (known as DC).

The Roman Catholic Church

Roman Catholicism arrived in Honduras with the early Spanish explorers and settlers, and it dominated the religious life of the country until the 1950s, when Protestant groups began to multiply rapidly throughout the country. The first Franciscans arrived in 1521, followed by Mercedarian missionaries in 1548, to begin the task of evangelizing and baptizing the Amerindians, and subsequently forcing them to build churches and convents in the settled communities across the land. The Franciscans were given the difficult and risky task of evangelizing Amerindians in unconquered lands, whereas the Mercedarians worked mainly among subjugated Amerindians in the *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. Convents were established by the Mercedarians in Comayagua, Tegucigalpa (Francisco Morazán department), Gracias (Lempira department), Tenoa (Santa Barbara department) and Choluteca.

The first Catholic bishop of Honduras was friar Cristóbal de Pedraza (1485-1553) who arrived in 1539 and settled in the town of Trujillo (founded in 1525), which is located on a bluff overlooking the Bay of Trujillo; this area has a very hot and humid climate, which created unhealthy living conditions. In addition, the British, Dutch and French pirates took their toll of destruction on Trujillo during the 16th thru 18th centuries. Bishop Pedraza was succeeded in 1555 by Gerónimo de Corella who chose the town of Nueva Valladolid (now, Comayagua) as his seat, due to its central geographical location in the interior, its relative safety from pirate attacks, and its more favorable climate. The Diocese of Comayagua was established in 1561 from the Diocese of Santiago de Guatemala, under Bishop Corella. In 1601, Catholic missions among the “savage Indians” on the north coast were attacked by English pirates, and the Spanish colonists and missionaries were scattered. Consequently, most Amerindians in that region “relapsed into their original savagery.”

The revolution of Independence from Spain in 1821 did great damage to the Catholic Church. Before that time there were more than 300 Catholic churches and missions (called “ecclesiastical foundations”) and public worship was conducted nearly everywhere with some

dignity. All foreign priests were expelled in 1821. The revolutionary government, by 1842, had confiscated most of the property owned by the Church. Since then the parishes depended on precarious voluntary offerings to support public worship, and the number of clergy diminished in number by 1902. The episcopal city of Comayagua suffered greatly from the civil wars during the period of the Federation (1823-1839), and by 1902 had not regained its former size or prosperity.

Between 1878 and 1880, the new president of Honduras, imposed by the Liberal government of Guatemala, confiscated some of the Church's resources – parochial properties (including church buildings) and residences of the clergy – and abolished the payment of tithes by the State to the Church. These oppressive acts greatly hampered the proper formation of the clergy, public worship, and the administration of the dioceses. By 1902, the Catholic seminary had been reopened, but it was subject to many governmental restrictions.

In 1908, Bishop Joseph María Martínez Cabanas (b.1841-d.1921, Bishop of Comayagua from 1902 to 1921) was assisted by five parish priests in the Department of Comayagua. Nationally, there were seventy secular priests but no foreign religious priests, because the government had not allowed them to return since their expulsion in 1821.

At that time, the wealthier classes of the Diocese of Comayagua, with very few exceptions, were indifferent to religion. There were no parochial schools, because the people of the pueblos were unable to support them after paying taxes for the public schools. Moreover, the clergy were unable to conduct parochial schools because of their obligation at all times to move about from one small town to another among the widely scattered villages in mountainous terrain.

In 1902, the Diocese of Comayagua, which included the entire Republic of Honduras, had a population (exclusive of “uncivilized Indians”) of 684,400 inhabitants, mostly baptized Catholics, except on the northern coast and in the Bay Islands, among the Creoles, Garifunas and Miskitos. In 1916, the Diocese of Comayagua was relocated and renamed the Diocese of Tegucigalpa, and it was elevated to an archdiocese under Archbishop Santiago María Martínez y Cabanas (1842-1921).

The current Archbishop of Tegucigalpa (appointed in 1993) is Cardinal Oscar Andrés Rodríguez Maradiaga, S.D.B. (b. 1942, became a bishop in 1978 and a cardinal in 2001); he was ordained a priest of the Salesians of Saint John Bosco in 1970. Archbishop Rodríguez is Cardinal Titular of the Church of Santa Maria della Speranza in Tegucigalpa. Today, the Honduran Catholic Church is divided administratively into eight dioceses (the percentages are the proportion of Catholics in relationship to the total population in each diocese): Tegucigalpa (75 percent), Comayagua (92.2 percent), Choluteca (87.4 percent), Juticalpa (90.9 percent), San Pedro Sula (66.7 percent), Santa Rosa de Copán (90 percent), Trujillo (67.1 percent) and Yoro (82 percent). This reveals that the dioceses of San Pedro Sula, Trujillo and Tegucigalpa have the lowest proportion of Catholic adherents in the country, in that order. It is assumed that the proportion of Protestant adherents is higher in those three dioceses than in the others.

During past centuries, the Roman Catholic Church in Honduras failed to develop into a strong national institution. In 1970, 86.3 percent of the religious priests in Honduras were expatriates (mainly from Spain), nine percent were from other Latin American countries, and only five percent were Hondurans. As late as 1990, the Honduran Catholic Church was one of the most dependent national churches in Latin America, with a large number of expatriate priests, lay brothers and nuns. In fact, Honduras still has a very high proportion of expatriate religious priests. In 2002, the Archdiocese of Tegucigalpa reported 168 diocesan priests and 214 religious priests (a total of 382), 255 non-ordained male religious and 561 female religious (nuns), distributed among 168 parishes in seven dioceses in the whole country.

Several diverse tensions arose within the Honduran 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), with an emphasis on apostolic authority, orthodox theology, the sacraments and personal piety. *Reformers* generally supported the Church's post-Vatican II stance of modernization and toleration of diversity based on its official Social Doctrine. *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 Honduran 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 military 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.

Since 1925, the patron saint of Honduras has been the Immaculate Virgin of Suyapa. Her statue (only 2.3 inches tall), which allegedly was discovered in 1747 and was credited with her first miracle in 1768, normally resides in the small *Iglesia de Suyapa*. However, during the week of her feast day on February 2, the statue is moved to the much larger *Basilica de Suyapa* to accommodate the crowds of pilgrims who travel from all over Central America to pray and ask her for a miracle. Each town and city has annual celebrations (*fiestas patronales*) for its patron saints, and special religious celebrations are held all over the country during Holy Week that ends of Easter Sunday.

The Protestant Movement

Between 1768 and 1950, Protestantism in Honduras experienced slow but steady growth. The first Anglican missionary, Christian Frederick Post (1768-1785) from Philadelphia, was sent out by the **SOCIETY FOR THE PROPAGATION OF THE GOSPEL IN FOREIGN PARTS (SPGFP)**. Post arrived at the Black River settlement in 1768, and additional Anglican chaplains followed. In spite of their troubles with the climate, Anglican schools and chapels were established among the Amerindians and Negroes, but few converts were made among the whites.

Anglican chaplains and missionaries continued to serve on the Miskito Coast until the mid-20th century. Anglican work in Honduras was transferred to U.S. jurisdiction in 1947, eventually becoming a missionary district of the **EPISCOPAL CHURCH** with headquarters in the Panama Canal Zone. In 2000, there were 41 Episcopal congregations (churches and missions) in Honduras, with about 2,900 members.

Protestant missionary activity increased during the 19th century with the arrival of **British Wesleyan missionaries** in the Bay Islands, where the first Methodist society was formed during 1844-1845. Between 1887 and 1892, missionaries of the **Belize District of the Wesleyan Methodist Church** formally entered the mainland of Honduras, where English-speaking congregations were established among Belizean and West Indian (Creole) migrants. During the 1930s, these congregations were taken over by a new mission agency from the U.S., the

AFRICAN METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH. In 1949, the **United Brethren in Christ Mission** (UBCM) arrived on the Caribbean coast of Honduras, and soon absorbed the remaining English-speaking Methodist congregations. In 1952, the UBCM began work among the Spanish-speaking population in central Honduras, and by 1986 the work had grown to 34 churches, eight missions, and 1,677 members. In 2005, this denomination had an estimated 67 churches and 2,880 members.

Another Methodist missionary society entered Honduras in 1957, the **Wesleyan Methodist Church** (now the **WESLEYAN CHURCH**), which also began work among the English-speaking population on the Caribbean coast. By 1978, six churches had been established, with about 260 members. In 1986, most of the English-speaking Methodists in the country were affiliated with the **CONFERENCE OF THE METHODIST CHURCH IN THE CARIBBEAN AND THE AMERICAS**. In 2005, there were an estimated 12 Methodist churches and 750 members in Honduras.

The Baptists in British Honduras (now called Belize) responded to invitations from West Indian Baptists in the Bay Islands to come and help them, and the first **Baptist missionaries** were sent from Belize to the Bay Islands in 1846. Although in 1978 there were only 7 churches and 110 members in the **Baptist Association of the Bay Islands**, by 2005 the work had grown to an estimated 82 churches and 4,550 members.

Baptist work on the mainland, begun by the **Conservative Baptist Home Missionary Society** in 1951, grew to 66 churches and 1,470 members along the Caribbean coast by 1978. In 1986, there were 119 congregations with 2,269 baptized members affiliated with the **CONSERVATIVE BAPTIST ASSOCIATION** in Honduras, mainly resulting from the efforts of U.S. missionary George Patterson in the port city of La Ceiba. By 2005, there were an estimated 190 churches and 3,960 members in this Baptist association.

Three other Protestant groups entered Honduras during the latter part of the 19th century, the **SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH** (1887), the **Central American Mission** (1896) and the **CHRISTIAN BRETHERN** (1898). Initially, the Adventists concentrated their efforts on the English-speaking population of the Bay Islands and on the coastal mainland. By 1978, Adventist work in Honduras was equally divided among Spanish-speakers in the interior and English-speakers on the north coast and the Bay Islands. At that time, the Adventist Mission included 55 churches, 97 mission stations and about 18,400 baptized members. In 2000, Adventist work had grown to an estimated 100 churches and 22,200 members, which made this denomination one of the largest Protestant groups in the country. Also present in Honduras are the **Church of God (Seventh-Day)** and the **SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH REFORM MOVEMENT**.

Missionaries of the **Central American Mission** (now called CAM International) entered Honduras in 1896 with the express purpose of evangelizing the Spanish-speaking population, mainly in the nation's interior regions. Five CAM missionaries launched a pioneer effort in the mountain villages, while others concentrated their efforts on regional market centers. By 1985, CAM reported 154 churches and 21 mission stations with about 7,600 baptized members. In 2000, CAM work had grown to 270 churches and missions with 8,130 members, affiliated with the **Association of Central American Churches of Honduras**.

The Christian Brethren (the Open Brethren branch of the Plymouth Brethren movement from England) began work in the San Pedro Sula area in 1898 led by Christopher Knapp and, after 1911, by Alfred Hockins, an agent for the **British and Foreign Bible Society**. Hockins later became a missionary affiliated with **Christian Missions in Many Lands** (1919) and remained in active ministry with the Christian Brethren in Honduras until his death in 1978. By 1936, 12 small congregations, called Gospel Halls, had been established in the San Pedro Sula and Trujillo regions on the north coast. About 1950, missionary efforts were started in the interior

of the country, and the Christian Brethren almost doubled their membership during the next decade. From 164 congregations and about 15,000 members in 1985, the Association of Gospel Halls grew to 250 congregations and an estimated 23,000 members in 2000.

During the 20th century, Protestant mission efforts in Honduras increased significantly with the arrival of dozens of new mission agencies and hundreds of new missionaries, mainly from the USA following World War II. **The California Yearly Meeting of Friends** (Religious Society of Friends, or Quakers) established mission work in Guatemala in 1902, and by 1912 their activity had spread across the border into northwestern Honduras, based in San Marcos de Ocotepeque. Soon Quaker missionaries and national workers were active throughout the departments of Copán, Gracias and Ocotepeque. However, due to the war between Honduras and El Salvador in 1969, the work of the Friends Mission in northwestern Honduras was severely affected, because many of the church members were Salvadorans who were forced to return to their own country during the conflict, while other members fled to Guatemala and to the interior of Honduras. In 1985, the Friends Church Association reported 61 congregations with only 1,185 members, but by 2000 the total membership had increased to 2,240.

Although, in 1914, the Quakers also began work in the nation's capital of Tegucigalpa, located in the south-central region, this field of service was administered separately and included mission stations in La Esperanza, Marcal, La Paz and Juticalpa. However, in 1944 the **Tegucigalpa Friends Mission** was transferred to the supervision of the **National Holiness Missionary Society** (now called the **World Gospel Mission-WGM**), due to serious financial and personnel shortages during World War II. At the time of the transfer, there were five Quaker churches, but by 1985 the Honduras Holiness Church reported about 2,400 members in 98 congregations. In 2005, this denomination had grown to an estimated 3,490 members in 130 congregations.

Other non-Pentecostal churches established in Honduras included the **Evangelical and Reformed Church** (now an integral part of the **UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**) in 1935, with headquarters in San Pedro Sula; the **Moravian Church** began work in 1930 in the Mosquitia region among the Miskito Indians, as an extension of their older work in Nicaragua (begun in 1847); missionaries of the **SOUTHERN BAPTIST CONVENTION** first arrived in 1946 in Tegucigalpa, and in 1958 the **National Convention of Baptist Churches of Honduras** was organized with four churches and 22 missions; and the Eastern Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities began work in 1950 on the Caribbean coast and later in Tegucigalpa.

Several other Baptist missions entered Honduras during the 1950s and 1960s: Baptist International Mission, BAPTIST BIBLE FELLOWSHIP INTERNATIONAL, Grace Baptist Churches, Baptist Mid-Missions, the Good Samaritan Baptist Mission, and a dozen independent Baptist groups. Also present in Honduras are the CHURCH OF THE NAZARENE, the LUTHERAN CHURCH-MISSOURI SYNOD, the independent CHURCHES OF CHRIST, and several other small denominations.

In 2005 (according to estimates by Peter Brierly), the largest of these Protestant Separatist-Free Church groups included the Moravian Church (110 churches and 9,620 members), Baptist Convention (100 churches and 7,830 members), Bible Baptist Fellowship (58 churches and 6,600 members), Baptist Association of the Mosquitia (110 churches and 5,620 members), Evangelical Mennonite Church (100 churches and 3,710 members), and Evangelical and Reformed Church (100 churches and 2,610 members).

The first known Pentecostal missionaries in Honduras visited the Bay Islands in the early 1900s, but it was not until 1931 that Frederick Mebius, an independent Pentecostal missionary working in El Salvador (he arrived there in 1904), crossed the border and helped established the first Pentecostal churches in western Honduras.

Early Pentecostal leaders in western Honduras requested help from the **ASSEMBLIES OF GOD** in El Salvador during the mid-1930s. Several national workers soon arrived from El Salvador, but the first Assemblies of God missionaries did not enter Honduras until late 1940. From the very beginning, the work in Honduras was indigenous and self-supporting, although the Assemblies of God Board of Missions has aided the work by sending missionaries and funds for special projects. By 1985, the Assemblies of God had 392 churches with 10,156 members in Honduras, but many local churches suffered considerable damage from Hurricane Mitch in October 1998. However, due to a generous response from the international community, the denomination was able to rebuild many of these damaged church buildings. In December 2000, when the Assemblies of God celebrated their 60th anniversary in the country, the number of churches had grown to over 700, in addition to over 320 preaching points; there were a total of 1,050 national pastors and 90,285 adherents (about 30,000 baptized members). There is an Assemblies of God mega-church in Tegucigalpa with more than 10,000 members. Also, this denomination operates three Bible institutes in Honduras.

The CHURCH OF GOD (CLEVELAND, TENNESSEE) arrived in the Bay Islands in 1944, when Fred and Lucille Litton went to Roatán and Utila to hold revival meetings among the English-speaking West Indian (Creole) population. Spanish-speaking work was begun in the 1950s in the interior of the country through the efforts of Mexican evangelist Josué Rubio, who established the first church in Tegucigalpa in 1951 with 53 members. By 1985, there were 371 churches with about 14,000 members; and in 2005 there were an estimated 690 churches with 21,200 Full Gospel Church of God members in Honduras.

The INTERNATIONAL CHURCH OF THE FOURSQUARE GOSPEL began work in Honduras in 1952 with the arrival of missionaries Edwin and Vonitta Gurney. Evangelistic efforts were launched in the capital city and in the departments of Cortés, La Paz, Santa Barbara and Valle, in addition to other parts of department of Francisco Morazán, where Tegucigalpa is located. This denomination had numerous divisions and little church growth until the mid-1980s. Since then, several Foursquare evangelists have held citywide crusades in stadiums around the country, with attendance numbering 10,000-50,000 for each event and with thousands of reported conversions. *La Cosecha* (Harvest) Foursquare Church in San Pedro Sula is acclaimed as the “largest evangelical church in Honduras,” with 20,000 attending weekly. In 2006, this denomination recorded 20,000 “decisions for Christ” and 13,000 water baptisms, and planted 17 new churches. There were a total of 250 Foursquare churches with 57,000 members in 2006.

The Prince of Peace Pentecostal Church, founded in Guatemala City by José María Muñoz in 1956, began its ministry in Honduras during the 1960s, mainly as a result of the influence of Muñoz’ extensive radio ministry and the reputation of the large mother church in Guatemala. In Honduras, Prince of Peace experienced rapid growth in the mid-1970s, increasing from about 50 churches in 1974 to 125 in 1979. In the early 1980s, it declined due to dissension from within and the formation of splinter groups. However, in 1985, this denomination reported 143 churches and about 2,000 members. In 2005, there were an estimated 210 churches and 15,200 members in the Prince of Peace Church Association.

Other Pentecostal denominations in Honduras include (2005 estimates by Brierly): the UNITED PENTECOSTAL CHURCH INTERNATIONAL (220 churches and 13,400 members), PHILADELPHIA CHURCH from Sweden (130 churches and 7,090 members), the Church of God of Prophecy (230 churches and 6,410 members), Center for Christian Formation (18 churches and 6,470 members), the Great Commission Churches (110 churches and 5,500 members), Elim Christian Mission (59 churches and 4,460 members), the Pentecostal Church of God from Puerto Rico (170 churches and 4,200 members), the independent Living Love Church (29 churches and

4,350 members), the Congregational Holiness Church (200 churches and 3,680 members), Gospel Crusade Honduras (about 200 churches), and several dozen smaller groups with fewer than 3,000 members each in 2005.

During the 1970s, when the **Catholic Charismatic Renewal Movement** began to grow among the upper classes in Tegucigalpa, several new "ecumenical" groups were formed (fellowship groups of Catholics and Protestants combined), and some Evangelical groups began to take on a Charismatic flavor. Some of these groups experienced significant growth, especially among young people and families involved in the business community.

The Christian Love Brigade Association, led by Cuban pastor Mario Fumero, had four churches, four missions and about 500 members in 1978. Fumero arrived in Tegucigalpa in 1971 and began offering seminars on how to work with troubled youth, based on his previous experience in New York City where he worked in a rehabilitation center for drug addicts. During 1971 he began to develop "Christian Love Brigades" in different churches, starting with the Holiness Church in Tegucigalpa, where he provided spiritual formation and practical training for a core of workers to assist him in his ministry with troubled teenagers.

Due to criticism and opposition from some Evangelical pastors, Fumero decided to start his own organization: *Asociación Brigadas de Amor Cristiano*. In June 1973, Fumero and a small group of his committed disciples began working with troubled youth in Colonia Kennedy in Tegucigalpa, which evolved into an initial group of 12 young people and then hundreds of teenagers. During one of their spiritual retreats several members of the leadership team began "speaking in tongues," which added a new spiritual dimension to the work.

Whereas Fumero's original idea was to train and motivate Evangelical leaders for ministry among troubled youth as an outreach from many local churches of different denominations, as well as to send rehabilitated young people to those same churches, the reality was that not many local churches were willing to support Fumero's ministry and to receive former drug addicts into their churches out of fear of contaminating their own young people. In 1974, Fumero and his associates established an "Evangelistic Center" in Colonia Kennedy with a "half-way house" for new converts. Following the disaster caused by Hurricane Fifi on September 18-19, 1974, Fumero began organizing teams of workers to provide disaster assistance to squatters living along the banks of a large river that flows through Tegucigalpa-Comayagua. Most of the squatters had lost their humble dwellings (shacks made of pieces of wood, cardboard, tin and other materials) and most of their possessions due to severe flooding caused by an associated tropical depression that followed the hurricane.

The Cenáculo Christian Center of Charismatic Renewal, pastored by Fernando Nieto, had two centers and 410 members in 1978; this group is affiliated with the Assemblies of God.

Living Love Groups ("Grupos de Amor Viviente"), led by missionary Edward King is affiliated with the Eastern Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities, had 13 Bible study and fellowship groups that ministered to about 700 people in 1978. Some Mennonite groups in San Pedro Sula and La Ceiba also had a Charismatic emphasis.

Since 1973, King and his team of co-workers in Tegucigalpa demonstrated how Charismatic renewal can be combined with social concern and action in a "coffee house" and rehabilitation program (called "Vida Nueva") for delinquent youth. Over a dozen of these Charismatic discipleship groups were established in the capital, where they had far-reaching effects among Honduran young people and their families. As more and more young people were converted and incorporated into the movement, they in turn shared this experience with their families and friends, which brought many more people. Now, a special lay program of Bible instruction and discipleship (called "Living Word Bible Institute") had been developed by King to train young

people in an informal Bible institute setting. His goal was to teach new converts how to follow Jesus Christ as obedient disciples.

In 1977, King and his associates began a missionary outreach in Puerto Cortés, followed by Danlí in 1978, Choluteca in 1979 and San Pedro Sula in 1980. In 1980, René Peñalba became the pastor of “Amor Viviente” in Tegucigalpa, while King dedicated his efforts to providing pastoral leadership to the new congregations.

Abundant Life Christian Church (“Iglesia Cristiana Vida Abundante”) was founded in 1972 in Tegucigalpa by several families who had been active members of the Friends Church (Quakers) in the western departments of Ocotepeque, Lempira and Copán. After relocating in the capital city, these families began meeting together on Sundays for worship and fellowship in various locations: rented facilities, public schools, private homes and sometimes outside in the open air. Between 1972 and 1979, basically the same group of people met regularly and continued their traditional Quaker practices. However, sometime in 1979 during special meetings held with fasting and prayer (extended prayer meetings, called “vigilias”), some members of the group began “speaking in tongues.”

This and other Charismatic experiences transformed their worship and prayer services into something quite different from the traditional Quaker meetings, which created problems for them with the Friends denomination in western Honduras. In 1980, the Friends group in Tegucigalpa – originally known as “Iglesia Amigos de las Colinas,” became “Iglesia Amigos en Restauración,” and later “Abundant Life Christian Church” – decided to become independent of the Friends denomination, under the leadership of their pastor, Evelio Reyes. The new Charismatic church grew from about 30 people in 1977 to several hundred by 1980 – in 1991, Mario René López reported an attendance of about 3,400 in the main worship services.

Overall, according to a socio-religious study of Honduras conducted by World Vision International in 1986, the Protestant movement in Honduras included an estimated 2,644 churches and 645 missions, for a total of 3,289 congregations. The total membership was reported to be 149,313, with a Protestant community estimated at 450,000 or about 11.7 percent of the national population of 3,838,031 (1985 estimate). Although no national church growth studies have been conducted in Honduras since 1986, it is estimated that Protestant adherents increased from about 12 percent of the total population in 1985 to 21 percent in July 1997 (CID-Gallup poll), and to 36 percent in May 2007 (CID-Gallup poll).

The Evangelical Committee for Relief and National Emergency (CEDEN) was organized in 1974, following the disaster caused by Hurricane Fife, which hit the northern coast and caused widespread destruction and left 12,000 dead and an estimated 150,000 homeless. In 1985, CEDEN had the support of about 30 denominations and evangelical service agencies in Honduras. Temporary relief committees were formed by evangelicals to aid refugees during the war with El Salvador in 1969, to assist in earthquake relief in Managua in 1972, and to care for survivors of Hurricane Fife on the northern coast of Honduras in 1974. In response to these emergencies, as well as to growing social concerns among evangelicals, CEDEN was organized on a permanent basis. In 1985, its programs included agriculture and community development, well-digging, public health, leadership training, communications and audio-visual production. The organization of regional committees and offices gave CEDEN strong grass-roots support among evangelicals in San Pedro Sula, La Ceiba, Choluteca and San Marcos de Ocotepeque, in addition to the Tegucigalpa-Comayagüela area.

At least a dozen denominations and service agencies operate programs of community and/or rural development. Some denominations have developed their own programs (such as the Moravians, CAM, Evangelical & Reformed Church, Adventists, Lutherans, Friends,

Mennonites and Episcopal Church) while others work with CEDEN and, more recently, with World Vision International and the Christian Development Commission to promote agricultural and community development for the benefit of marginalized communities in Honduras.

The Evangelical Alliance of Honduras has existed since 1958, but was strongest in the early 1960s during the years of Evangelism-in-Depth. The Alliance has always been a fairly weak organization, mainly dedicated to representing the evangelical community before the Honduran government in matters relating to religious education, taxes, customs duties, etc. Prior to 1958, an inter-mission committee served a similar function.

In 2008, the Latin American Confraternity of Evangelicals (CONELA)-related groups in Honduras were associated together in the **Evangelical Confraternity of Honduras (CEH)**, which reported 212 member organizations, whereas the only Latin American Council of Churches (CLAI)-related groups in Honduras were the Evangelical & Reformed Church, the Episcopal Church, the Evangelical Mennonite Church, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church.

Other Religions

In May 2007, a national public opinion poll conducted by CID-Gallup measured religious affiliation and found that those claiming adherence to “other religions” and those claiming “no religion” (or providing “no answer”) was 17 percent of the national population, but there was no breakdown of the percentages for these two categories. According to a previous CID-Gallup national public opinion poll conducted in July 1997, those claiming affiliation with “other religions” were four percent of the total population, and those claiming “no religious affiliation” (or “no answer”) were 12 percent.

Included in the “other religions” category are **non-Protestant marginal Christian groups**, which include the JEHOVAH’S WITNESSES (231 congregations and 15,716 adherents in 2005); the Philadelphia Church of God; two Mormon denominations—the CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS (Utah Mormons: 220 congregations and 125,606 adherents in 2007) and the REORGANIZED CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS (Missouri Mormons); LIGHT OF THE WORLD CHURCH (Guadalajara, Mexico); Philadelphia Church of God; God is Love Pentecostal Church and Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (both from Brazil); Mita Congregation, the People of Amos Church, and the Voice of the Cornerstone Church (all from Puerto Rico); and Growing in Grace International Ministries (from Miami, Florida).

Also present in Honduras is **St. John the Baptist Antiochian Orthodox Church** (an autocephalous Eastern Orthodox Church with headquarters in Damascus, Syria), founded in San Pedro Sula in 1963 and composed of Palestinian Arabs (mainly from Bethlehem) who first arrived in Honduras in 1890s; the community totaled 592 in 1934, 812 in 1937, and 1,149 in 1986. A minority of the Palestinian immigrants is **Muslim**, and there is a Mosque in San Pedro Sula. A small **Jewish community** was established after World War II; today, there are two synagogues, in San Pedro Sula and Tegucigalpa.

Other world religions in Honduras include: BAHÁ’I FAITH, Buddhism (largely among an estimated 7,500 Chinese immigrants and their descendents), Hinduism (International Society for Krishna Consciousness, International Sri Sathya Sai Baba Organization, and Transcendental Meditation). The **Ancient Wisdom tradition** is represented by the Ancient & Mystical Order of the Rosae Crucis (AMORC), the Grand Universal Fraternity, and the Universal Gnostic Christian Church. **Spiritualist-Psychic-New Age groups** include: the Church of Scientology and the UNIFICATION CHURCH OF WORLD CHRISTIANITY (Rev. Sun Myung Moon).

Native American religious traditions (animist) have survived from the pre-Colombian era and have been joined by the **GARIFUNA religion** among the Black Carib who dwell in at least 50 communities on the Caribbean coast, and by **Myalism** (an African adaptation of Christianity) and **Obeah** (witchcraft) among the Creoles (West Indians) who are also concentrated on the northern coast. **“Popular religiosity” (syncretistic)** is practiced by a majority of the Hispanic Catholic population. Among practitioners of Amerindian, Black Carib and West Indian religions and Hispanic Popular Catholicism there are “specialists” who practice magic, witchcraft (*brujería*), shamanism (*chamanismo*) and folk healing (*curanderismo*). In addition, there are numerous psychics, mediums, clairvoyants and astrologers who announce their services in local news-papers. Satanic groups have been reported to exist in Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula.

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