

# MISSION ATLAS PROJECT

## WESTERN EUROPE

### ICELAND

#### Snap Shot

**Name:** Republic of Iceland; Lydhveldidh Island

**Founded:** 1918

**Population:** 299,388 (July 2006 est.)

**Government:** Constitutional democracy

**Location:** Northern Europe, island between the Greenland Sea and the North Atlantic Ocean, northwest of the UK. The capital Reykjavík is the northern most capital in the world

#### Map:



#### Flag:



**Languages:** Icelandic, English, Nordic languages, German widely spoken

**People Groups:** Primarily Icelanders but other groups from Demark, United States,

**Religion:** Over 85% are Lutheran. Roman Catholic, other Protestants, and various other religions represented in small numbers. Iceland has several small rather unorthodox religious groups

## **Country Profile Basic Facts**

### **NAME:**

Conventional: Republic of Iceland; Local: Lydhveldidh Island  
Capital Reykjavik

<http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/ic.html>

### **Population:**

Total population 299,388 in July 2006.

Growth rate: 0.73%. Population density stands at 2.88 persons per sq. kilometer (7.49 persons per sq. mile)

Age structure – 0-14 years: 22.1%; 15-64 years: 66.2% and 65+: 11.7% (2005 est.)

Birth rate stands at 13.73 births per 1,000 population; death rate at 6.68 deaths per 1,000 population; infant mortality at 3.31 deaths per 1,000 live births (all 2005 est.)

Life expectancy for the total population: 79.8 years (male: average 78 years, female: average 82 years)

<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3396.htm>

<http://www.iceland.is/government-and-politics/>

<http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/ic.html>

[http://www.hagstofa.is/template\\_lb\\_frameset\\_en.asp?PageID=325&intPXCatID=194&ifrmsrc=/temp\\_en/mannfjoldi/trufelog.asp](http://www.hagstofa.is/template_lb_frameset_en.asp?PageID=325&intPXCatID=194&ifrmsrc=/temp_en/mannfjoldi/trufelog.asp)

### **LANGUAGE:**

Iceland's official language is Icelandic, but English, various Nordic languages, and German are widely spoken. Icelandic is a Germanic language.

<http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/ic.html>

### **SOCIETY/CULTURE:**

Society in General:

The arts thrive in Iceland, especially painting and literature. Reading and writing has always been the mainstay of Icelandic culture. Icelanders are such avid readers that the island has more bookstores per capita than any other country in the world and the capital city alone has four newspapers. It is also estimated that during the course of their lifetimes, one out of every ten Icelanders will have something published.

Manuscript illumination, woodcarving, and folk music are also very popular. There is a National Theatre and in Reykjavík there is a symphony orchestra, an opera house, and a ballet company. International performers make regular visits, especially to the biennial Reykjavík Arts Festival.

Swimming is perhaps the most popular recreational sport due to the abundance of geothermal water and the numerous open-air swimming pools throughout the country that are open year-round. Icelanders also enjoy fishing, hiking, and horseback riding. Like most European countries, the main spectator sports are soccer, handball, basketball, and field athletics. The Icelandic national handball team is of international standard. Chess is also very popular and Iceland has more grandmasters per capita than any other country in the world.

Iceland utilizes a state-sponsored healthcare system and most all medical issues (over 90%) are covered by public insurance. The Icelandic constitution provides for free speech and a free press and the government respects these rights in practice.

The days are very short in mid-winter and for two to three months in summer there is continuous daylight. Early spring and late autumn enjoy long twilight.

#### Religious Holidays:

Religious holidays include Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Easter Sunday, Easter Monday, Ascension Day, Whit Sunday, Whit Monday, Christmas Eve on December 24th (from noon), Christmas Day December 25th, Second Christmas Day December 26th.

#### Cultural Anomalies:

Icelandic society has a relatively casual attitude toward marriage and divorce. Over 70% of firstborn children are of illegitimate birth and there are no social stigmas to illegitimacy. Iceland is generally a matriarchal society, due in part to the men traditionally being fishermen and their tendency to be gone for long periods of time. Almost 90% of women work outside the home yet they tend to earn one-third less than their male counterparts for equivalent work.

In 1980 Iceland elected the world's first female head of state. Married women usually keep their maiden names and most Icelandic surnames are based on patronymy or the adoption of the father's first given name, followed by "son" or "daughter". For example, if a man named Jon Stefansson (literally "Jon, son of Stefan") marries Kristin Magnúsdóttir ("Kristin, daughter of Magnus") their son and daughter (say, Gunnar and Juliana) would traditionally have the names Gunnar Jónsson ("Gunnar, son of Jon") and Juliana Jónsdóttir ("Juliana, daughter of Jon") which would remain her name forever regardless of marriage. Since names are essentially only a designation of fatherhood, the phone directory lists people by their given name first, patronymic name second. Use of the patronymic system is required by law, except for the descendants of those who had acquired family names before 1913 (about 10% of the population), but it is legally possible to modify the patronymic into a matronymic, replacing the father's name with the mother's.

The Icelandic Sagas written in the 12<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> centuries remain Iceland's best known literary accomplishment and they have no existing equivalent anywhere in the Nordic world. These great sagas are based on Norwegian and Icelandic histories and genealogies, and they present views of Nordic life and times

up to 1100 A.D. The Saga writers sought to record their heroes' great achievements and to lionize the virtues of honor and nobility, courage, and pride.

Icelandic food is unique, to say the least. Some of the traditional dishes include the unique "súrmatur", or whey-pickled foods, which is relished by Icelanders, especially in the period from January to March. Seytt rúgbrauð (cooked rye bread), harðfiskur (dried fish), and slátur (blood pudding) are common fare, while hangikjöt (smoked lamb) on flatbrauð (rye pancakes), hakarl (raw shark), graflax (raw salmon with herbs), hangikjot (smoked mutton), skyr (a type of yogurt) are also popular. Many of the vegetables and fruits are locally grown in greenhouses heated by hot springs. Caution! – If you see svid on a menu, be forewarned – it is boiled sheep's head served with mashed turnips. In Reykjavik, though, there is a variety of international cuisine, including Spanish, Indian, and Thai restaurants. Pizza is widely available. In restaurants, tipping is unnecessary – in general bartenders and waitpersons receive good wages and don't expect tips. The only exception is at the end of a long tour, it is considered appropriate to tip your guide and driver.

Everyone, friends and strangers alike, use first names in greeting and Icelanders sometimes welcome each other with a kiss on the cheek. Appointments and punctuality are not emphasized in Iceland, because a strong tradition of "dropping in" prevails. Only two people in Iceland are addressed formally: the President and the Bishop of Iceland.

It is common to invite guests to one's home instead of to a restaurant, more so perhaps than in most other countries. It is customary to remove one's shoes in the hallway before entering a home. When invited for the first time to an Icelandic home, it is common courtesy is to bring along a bouquet of flowers or some other small gift, or at least send flowers the day after with a card. The dress code is usually casual except at formal affairs, in which the invitation will specify what is expected. Formal occasions usually end around 11:30, but it varies. Gifts are brought to wedding parties, and at christenings and birthday parties the child receives gifts. When doing business it is considered bad form to discuss the weather.

Important and interesting statistics include:

- the Gross Domestic Product is \$30,071.43 per person (8<sup>th</sup> highest in the world) but the tax rate is \$12,464.47 per person (9<sup>th</sup> highest).
- The average life-expectancy is 79.8 years (12<sup>th</sup> highest) and for children the school life-expectancy is 15.8 years (9<sup>th</sup> highest).
- The murder rate is 1 for every 100,000 people (about 3 per year)
- The divorce rate is 39.5 per every 100 marriages (or 1.9 per every 1,000 people).
- The literacy rate is 99.9%,
- The total percentage of adult smokers is 24% (48<sup>th</sup> lowest in the world)
- In 1995 the number of abortions were 807 (0.3 % of the population) compared with 1,210,883 for the U.S. (0.5% of the population).
- Interestingly, Iceland has the world's highest breast cancer rate (39.4 per 100,000 females).

Major Similarities to Western Culture:

Icelanders value a strong work ethic. This can be attributed to maintaining a high standard of living but also as a simple virtue, what they call the "Protestant work ethic". The average work week consists of over 46 hours and many Icelanders hold more than one job. Children commonly work during their vacations

and in the evenings after school. Unemployment usually remains under 3% – a very low figure for any nation.

Icelanders wear modern, Western-style clothing just as in other parts of developed European countries. Women have traditional costumes that they may wear for festivals or other special events. The outfit consists of a white blouse with a black vest laced in the front, a black ankle-length skirt with a long white apron, black shoes and a black cap.

The legal driving age is 18 years old. Seatbelt use is mandatory in both the front and rear seats, and children under the age of six must be fastened in an appropriate car seat designed for their size and weight. Drivers are responsible for any passenger under the age of 15 who is not wearing a seatbelt. No one who is less than 140 centimeters tall, weighs less than 40 kilograms, or is under the age of 12 is allowed to ride in the front seat of any vehicle equipped with an airbag.

The legal drinking age is 20 years old.

#### Current Events:

The annual celebration of Independence Day (from Denmark in 1944) is June 17<sup>th</sup>.

<http://www.iceland.is/government-and-politics/>

<http://worldatlas.com/webimage/countrys/europe/is.htm>

WorldMark Encyclopedia of the Nations

WorldMark Encyclopedia of Cultures and Daily Life

<http://www.iexplore.com/dmap/Iceland/Dining>

<http://www.divorcereform.org/gul.html>

#### **GOVERNMENT:**

Iceland is a constitutional republic with a written constitution and a parliamentary form of government.

The president is elected by direct popular vote for four-year terms, with no term limits. Most executive power rests with the Government, which is elected separately from the presidential elections every four years.

Iceland boasts the world's oldest functioning legislative assembly, the Althingi, established in 930 A.D. It is a unicameral parliament consisting of 63 members elected for four-year terms by popular vote. Anyone who is eligible to vote, other than the President and the judges of the Supreme Court, can stand for parliament. After every election, the President gives one of the parliamentary leaders of the political parties the authority to form a cabinet, usually beginning with the leader of the largest party. If he is not successful, the President will ask another political party leader to form a government. This cabinet of ministers stays in power until the next general election or a new government is formed.

Judicial power rests with the Supreme Court and the lower district courts. Anyone over the age of 18 may vote. Iceland has a regular police force and Coast Guard but has no armed forces. Any military presence in Iceland is provided by the United States.

<http://www.iceland.is/government-and-politics/>

<http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/ic.html>

## **ECONOMY:**

The Gross Domestic Product was \$9.373 billion (est. in 2004).

Iceland's economy is principally capitalistic, yet provides for a broad welfare system (including generous housing assistance). They have low unemployment and a remarkably even income distribution. The two main natural resources are abundant geothermal power and a heavy dependence on the fishing industry, the latter which provides 70% of export earnings and employs 8% of the work force.

Its main exports are agricultural products (mostly fish and fish products but with potatoes, green vegetables, mutton, and dairy), aluminum smelting, and ferrosilicon production.

The government remains opposed to EU membership, primarily because of their concern about losing control over their fishing resources and because of the constant fluctuation of the fishing industry, Iceland's economy has been diversifying into manufacturing and service industries in the last decade. New developments in software production, biotechnology, and financial services are now taking place.

With the recent trends in ecotourism and whale watching, the tourism trade is also expanding. Overall, employment breaks down into: agriculture, fishing and fish processing, 10.3%; industry 18.3%, services 71.4% (2003).

Humanitarian needs might include poor road conditions in rural areas due to the harsh climate. Potholes dot many of the nations numerous dirt and gravel roads and some road sections have even been blown away due to high winds. Human rights groups have become concerned with Iceland's use of solitary confinement in their prisons and the fact that studies have shown women earn about 30% less than men for comparable work. Between 1983 (when Iceland first began to report AIDS statistics) and 2003 there were 171 reported HIV infections, 52 reported with AIDS, and 35 deaths associated with AIDS in those 21 years. Illiteracy is almost nonexistent. There is always the threat of earthquakes and/or volcanic eruptions.

<http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/ic.html>

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## **LITERACY:**

Amazingly, the literacy rate of those aged 15 and older is 99.9% (est. 1997). Reading and literature is a very large part of Icelandic culture. The Icelandic language has changed very little over time and to this day Icelanders can read their classic 13<sup>th</sup>-century sagas without special study.

<http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/ic.html>

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## **LAND/GEOGRAPHY:**

Iceland has a total area of 103,000 sq. kilometers (39,600 sq. miles) and is roughly the size of Kentucky. It is an island in the North Atlantic Ocean northwest of the United Kingdom. The weather is

generally temperate and moderated by the North Atlantic Current which leads to mild, windy winters and damp, cool summers. The land is mostly plateau interspersed with mountain peaks and ice fields. In fact, Iceland has more land covered by glaciers than in all of continental Europe. The coast is severely indented by bays and fiords. The two main natural hazards are earthquakes and volcanic activity. The two main environmental issues are water pollution from fertilizer runoff and insufficient wastewater treatment.

The urban /rural division stands at 92.9% urban (2005). The largest cities are the capital Reykjavik (pop. 113,288), Kopavogur (25,352), Hafnarfjordur (21,207), Akureyri (16,086). These four cities consist of roughly 60% of the population of the entire island.

<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3396.htm>

[http://www.geographyiq.com/countries/ic/Iceland\\_map\\_flag\\_geography.htm](http://www.geographyiq.com/countries/ic/Iceland_map_flag_geography.htm)

<http://www.unhabitat.org/habrdd/conditions/northeurope/iceland.htm>

## History

Iceland was settled in the late 9th and early 10th centuries, mostly by people of Norse origin. The first known settler was *Ingolfur Arnarson* who sailed from Norway to Iceland in 874 and inhabited what is now the capital of Reykjavik. Other settlers arrived principally from Norway and other parts of Scandinavia (who were fleeing from oppressive rule in their homelands), but also from settlements in the British Isles, namely Irish monks who later abandoned the isle after the Norse occupation.

The predominate language then became Scandinavian, but there were also traces of Celtic influence – especially in the arts. In 930 A.D., the ruling chiefs established a republican constitution and a uniform set of laws. Also established was a general assembly called the *Althingi*. Although Iceland was the last European country to be settled, the *Althingi* is the oldest parliament in the world. Christianity was introduced around 1000 but some earlier pagan religions survived and influenced Icelandic literature for the next two hundred years. Many of the early settlers were great seafarers and continued on exploring westward. Most famously were *Eric the Red* who discovered Greenland in 982 and his son *Leif Ericsson* who in AD. 1000 may well have discovered and landed on the North American continent.

Iceland remained autonomous until 1262, when it entered into a union by treaty with the king of Norway. Norwegian rule brought order but also high taxes and an imposed judicial system – causing much discontent. Politically, Iceland became a feudal state, and was marked by bloody civil wars of rival chieftains. When, with Norway, Iceland passed in 1380 under the Danish crown, the Danes showed even less concern for Icelandic welfare yet held a complete monopoly of trade; a national decline (1400-1550) set in and Lutheranism (still the official state church today) was imposed by force in the mid 1500's.

The last part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century was a difficult one for Iceland. Poor harvest, economic hardship, and volcanic eruptions all contributed to the population being reduced by almost one-half of the number of people during the period of independence. In the early 19th century, however, a revival of national consciousness. The *Althingi*, which had been abolished in 1800, was reestablished in 1843 as an advisory assembly arose.

In 1874, Denmark finally granted Iceland a limited home rule, which was extended again in 1904. A constitution was finally written in 1874, was revised in 1903, and a minister for Icelandic affairs, residing in Reykjavik, was made accountable to the *Althingi*. In 1918, an agreement with Denmark, called The Act of

Union, at last recognized Iceland as a fully sovereign state united with Denmark under a common king. Iceland created its own flag, but still relied on Denmark to represent Icelandic foreign affairs and defense interests to the world. When Germany invaded and occupied Denmark in 1940, communications between Iceland and Denmark were severed. Iceland then moved immediately to assume control over its own territorial waters and foreign affairs.

In May 1940, in order to protect from possible German attack, the British military occupied Iceland but by July 1941 that responsibility was shifted to the United States. In 1944 Icelanders overwhelmingly voted to terminate the union with Denmark and the sovereign kingdom of Iceland was proclaimed an independent republic on June 17 of that year. In 1946 Iceland gave the United States the right to use the American-built airport at *Keflavík* for military as well as commercial use, although defense responsibility again returned to Iceland. Iceland joined the Marshall Plan and was admitted to the United Nations in 1946.

In 1949 Iceland became a charter member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. However, after outbreak of war in Korea in 1950, and in accordance with the request of NATO authorities, the United States and Iceland agreed that the United States should again be responsible for Iceland's defense and a bilateral defense agreement was signed on May 5, 1951, allowing U.S. military presence there. Iceland is the only NATO country with no standing military of its own.

In 1970 Iceland joined the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) and by 1973 a tariff agreement was ratified with the European Commission (EC). Iceland unilaterally extended its fishing zone in 1958, in 1972, and again in 1975 and all three times provoked conflict with the United Kingdom. In late 1975 a 'cod war' broke out with the UK which resulted in casualties but an agreement signed in June 1976 began to improve relations. Tensions with Norway over fishing resources have also arisen from time to time but each country finds itself an ally in their opposition to the international ban on whaling.

In 1985, the parliament unanimously voted to ban all deployment of nuclear weapons and the capital *Reykjavik* hosted the famous 1986 summit on arms control and nuclear disarmament between then-US president Ronald Reagan and then-Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev.

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<http://www.iceland.is/government-and-politics/>

[http://www.encyclopedia.com/html/section/iceland\\_history.asp](http://www.encyclopedia.com/html/section/iceland_history.asp)

<http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/ic.html>

## **Christian History**

Iceland was settled by Norsemen who it is believed were escaping the callous rule of their Norwegian king – thus introducing Norwegian and Celtic influence into the island. There is evidence of Irish monks having already settled there but little is known about them except that they moved away when the Vikings started to arrive. The first credited settler was a Norwegian chieftain named *Ingólfur Arnarson* in 874. Following Ingólfur, many more pioneers arrived expecting an improved life as well. Although it may sound like a harsh name for a country, Iceland was actually a tranquil place to move to for those who wished to escape persecution or harm in their homeland. Iceland gave them a new chance to live in peace and avoid oppressive kings and the constant war and plundering that was rampant during this time period in Northern Europe.



When the *Althingi* was created, it became a forerunner of what has been called the Icelandic free-state, which lasted from 930 to 1262. It was a time when every free man could get his voice heard and major disputes were settled by the letter rather than by force. However, violent incidents certainly did occur.

Up until the year 1000, Christianity had been making slow, but certain inroads into Icelandic society, which at the time practiced the pagan religion of the Vikings. Major unrest seemed all but certain if the matter was not resolved. Somehow, there needed to be a way to allow the two religions to at least coexist peacefully. In the year 1000, the matter was brought before the *Althingi*, and according to the literature of the day, the decision was left to one man. Again, according to the sagas, the man took refuge under a piece of animal fur, where he lay for one day and one night, as he was deeply burdened. The next morning, he stood up, walked back to the assembly, and pronounced his decision: Iceland was officially to accept Christianity as the country's religion with the provision that the people would still be allowed to practice their old pagan religions in private.

The decision, against all odds, satisfied the two rival groups, who had come to the annual assembly ready to make war. This extraordinary event makes Iceland one of the few countries, if not the only one, to have been peacefully "Christianized." It stands to note, however, that the pagan religions did not just fade away but instead continued to influence Iceland's extraordinary literature for another three centuries. The Christianization of the nation in no way proves that all the citizens became committed followers of Jesus Christ.

The Protestant Reformation of the mid 1500's found its way into Iceland and Lutheranism replaced Roman Catholicism as the primary religion. Lutheranism is still the official state religion of Iceland today. According to the 1999 report by the US State Department's Bureau for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, freedom of religion in Iceland is still very much observed. The Icelandic Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government respects this right in practice. Because the official state religion is Lutheranism, each year the church receives a tax payment from each person age 16 years and over Icelanders are automatically assumed to be members of the state church unless they specifically opt out in writing. If they do so, they are permitted (but not required) to cite another religious preference. In doing so, they can have their tax portion go directly to that sect or religion. In 2004, it seems the number of people who opted out of having their taxes earmarked for the state church totaled 42,630. It is interesting to note, that the salaries of state church ministers are paid by the State, whereas any other denomination's ministers' salaries are not. Those who do not belong to any other specific, organized religious group pay their religion tax to the University of Iceland.

All faith-based organizations other than the state church must be acknowledged and registered as such by the Ministry of Justice and Ecclesiastical Affairs in order to collect their per capita tax funds, if they should receive any. The established requirements for recognition are based on Law No. 18 of 1975. The Ministry of Justice and Ecclesiastical Affairs handles applications for recognition by relying on professional advice from theologians and social scientists. There actually have been requests in which persons have tried to obtain recognition of a religious organization simply as a money-making scheme.

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<http://www.iceland.is/government-and-politics/>  
[http://www.encyclopedia.com/html/section/iceland\\_history.asp](http://www.encyclopedia.com/html/section/iceland_history.asp)  
<http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/ic.html>

## Religions

About 85 percent of the population is registered as members of the state Lutheran church, a significant proportion of which does not actively practice their faith. The majority of the state church's registered adherents, though, do observe traditional Lutheran rituals to mark baptisms and confirmations, as well as in weddings and funerals. Those Christians who do practice their faith actively are by-and-large members of other Christian groups or organizations.

There are also religions, like Judaism, which have been practiced in the country for years but have not requested official recognition. These religions are officially listed in the registry as "other and non-specified." Churches and religious organizations other than the state church which are formally recognized by the Government are registered in the National Register of Persons. According to the latest National Register of Persons (2004), the membership breakdown of religious organizations is as follows:

### Non-Christian

#### *Buddhist Association of Iceland*

Buddhism was not officially recognized by Iceland (or Buddhist leaders did not register themselves) until 1995, with an initial head count of 230 people. There are now 544 official members comprising 0.19% of the population.

<http://www.zen.is/>

#### *Bahá'i Community*

There are 373 official adherents to the Bahá'i faith in Iceland comprising 0.13% of the population. According to The Office of The National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'i of Iceland (who responded via e-mail) most adherents are Icelandic but in 1970 the majority of the Bahá'i in Iceland were "pioneers from other countries". This religion was first noticed in the early 1900s and one book was published in 1930 but the Bahá'i community didn't start operating officially until in 1960. The National Spiritual Assembly was not founded until 1972. They are located in downtown Reykjavík.

<http://www.bahai.is/>

#### *Muslim Association*

There are 321 registered Muslims in Iceland comprising 0.11% of the population. They are headquartered in *Reykjavik*. There are no Islamic schools or colleges.

<http://www.islam.is/>

#### *Zen in Iceland - Night Pasture*

This church has 48 registered members comprising 0.02% of the population. According to them, only half of their adherents practice Zen on a regular basis but all have Icelandic citizenship even though they are not all natural-born citizens. Zen came to Iceland in 1986 through a student that had gone to Sonoma Mountain Zen Center in California and a year later their leader, *Jakusho Kwong-roshi*, came for his first annual visit to Iceland. At this time he gave a lecture and formed a group of beginners to practice Zen. He pays at least one visit to Iceland each year (in 2005, it will be his 28th visit to Iceland. Zen in Iceland – Night Pasture was officially recognized as a religious organization by the Icelandic government in 1999. It now gets support from the State.

*Jewish* Jewish religion has never asked for recognition in Iceland

### *Non-religious*

The government has 8733 people registered in this category comprising 2.98% of the population.

Citizens have the authority to willingly and voluntarily exclude themselves from any religious organization whatsoever and there have been no recorded incidents in which the Government has restricted organized religions in establishing places of worship. The Buddhist Association of Iceland was once refused license for environmental reasons to construct a worship center because the selected area was a breeding ground for some protected bird species. Because of immigration into the country, and foreigners being granted residence permits, there has been an increase in the number of different religious organizations.

The government does not participate in or coordinate any known interfaith dialog or programs. It does, however, require instruction in religion and ethics based on Christianity in public elementary schools, according to the 1995 “Law on Elementary Schools No. 66”. Although there had been a debate whether this instruction should be specifically "Christian" or just "religious" instruction, the traditionalist view has prevailed.

Most schools are public but there are a few Roman Catholic parochial schools located in Reykjavik, where the vast majority of the country's small Roman Catholic community resides. All schools are subject to Law No. 66 with respect to the compulsory curriculum but the precise content of this instruction can vary; religious instruction at the Catholic school follows Catholic rather than Lutheran teachings. Students can also be exempted from Christianity classes, if they object.

According to Law No. 66, the Minister of Education has the formal authority to exempt pupils from instruction in compulsory subjects but in actuality individual school authorities issue exemptions informally. The schools are not obligated, though, to offer other religious or secular instruction in lieu of Christianity classes. Secondary education contains material on different religions is part of the compulsory syllabus and with religion being a component of culture, pupils learn about religions other than Christianity in history and social science classrooms. The curriculum is not inflexible and teachers often are given leeway with some placing greater emphasis on ethical and philosophical issues rather than on religious instruction per se. There have been no reports of religious detainees or prisoners and no reports of any forced religious conversions. Religious relations generally are amicable.

## **Christian Sects and Cults**

### *The Way, Free Church*

The Way has 693 registered members comprising 0.24% of the population.

<http://www.vegurinn.is/>

<http://www.carm.org/list/way.htm>

### *Jehovah's Witnesses*

The group is divided into seven units throughout the island. They have 655 registered members comprising 0.22% of the population. According to their own literature, Icelanders are not very receptive to this cult, judging by the number of preaching and publishing hours they claim it takes for just one convert.

<http://www.jwic.com/stat.htm>

### *The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons)*

This church has 185 registered members comprising 0.06% of the population. The Mormon mission in Iceland had its beginnings in Denmark. Baptized in Copenhagen in 1851, the Icelanders *Thorainn Halflidason* and *Gudmund Gudmundson* served as missionaries in their native country. Gudmundson reported that the laws, the priests, and the press were against the Latter Day Saints in Iceland from the beginning. Mormonism had a few converts but many of them left for the United States. According to Mormon newspaper reports, a total of 114 Icelanders were converted between 1850 and 1904. Of these, a small number disaffected and seventy-two emigrated. According to the U.S. State Department, the Mormons are the only significant foreign missionary group in Iceland at this time. There is an Icelandic National League.

<http://www.xmission.com/~nelsonb/nebraska.htm>

<http://www.inl.is/>

### *Asa Faith Society*

This is the fastest growing religion in Iceland. There are 872 official members (and counting) comprising 0.30% of the population. *Asatru* (otherwise known as Heathenism, the Northern Tradition, and occasionally Odinism) is a reconstruction of the pre-Christian religion of the northern regions of Europe. The word *Asatru* is an Icelandic word meaning "loyalty to the gods" or "faith in the Asa". It is a polytheistic faith, believing in numerous gods and goddesses, and in an underlying, all-pervading divine energy or essence which is generally hidden from humanity and is beyond our immediate understanding. The gods are divided into two groups, the *Aesir* and *Vanir*. The *Aesir* are the gods of "human-influenced things" such as carrying out justice, making war, and societal behavior and manners. The *Vanir* are the gods of "nature-influenced things" like fertility, prosperity, and sexuality. They believe the *Vanir* act as intermediaries between humans and nature but the *Aesir* are more often favored in worship, as they are believed to be really more interested in humanity. Reverence is also paid to the spirits of the land, and the souls of the ancestors, both those who they believe remain to guard and guide in this world, and those who pass on. *Asatru* further believes that spiritual reality is interdependent with humanity - that we affect it, and it affects us. A priest is referred to as a *Gothi*, a priestess as a *Gythia*.

Asatru practices *runic* magic and *seidhr*. *Runes* are the domain of the god *Odin*, and are used for divination and spell casting. *Seidhr* is the Nordic form of heathen shamanism, originally practiced by women, and is under the dominion of their goddess *Freya*. When in trance, the woman's soul is said travel to the other worlds for knowledge, and she can predict the future. Asatur also teaches the story of the world tree, *Yggdrassil* that connects the nine worlds of existence, from *Asgard* to *Midgard* (our world) to Hell.

Focusing on self-responsibility, Asatru rejects dogma and instead has a set of ethical suggestions called the Nine Noble Virtues. These are a guide for living the best life possible, and while these suggestions are a modern invention they have caught the attention of many *Asa Faith groups*. The exact terms differ a little from group to group, but the most common are as follows: courage, truth, honor, fidelity, discipline, hospitality, industriousness, self reliance and perseverance. They do not accept the idea of "original sin, as does Christianity, thus they do not believe they need "saving."

They have a religious ceremony called a *blot* (rhymes with float), and means 'blessing.' In its simplest form, the *blot* is an offering ceremony, but can become very elaborate, involving invocations, holy readings, and drama. It is usually done to honor a particular deity or a group of beings such as land spirits. There is also a drinking ritual called the *sumbel*, where participants take turns drinking from a horn amongst religious toasting. Oaths, bragging, and thanks are common forms of toasts.

The symbol of modern Asatru is a *Thor's* hammer, or *Mjollnir*, and many devotees will wear such a pendent. The hammer has historical roots in the resistance of the heathens to the influx of Christianity brought by forced conversions by the kings of the time, and was possibly inspired by the use of the Christian cross. Some sources trace it to *King Harald Fairhair*, who in a meeting with some of his heathen nobles made the sign of the cross over a cup of mead before drinking it. This incensed his nobles so one of the king's aids spoke up, saying that he had really made the sign of the *Mjollnir* over it. After that, it became a form of resistance, showing allegiance to the old gods over the new one.

As a religion that places much importance on heritage, there are some within Asatru who have embraced strong racist tendencies. They see Asatru as a religion for only people of Northern European descent. For this reason, they do not claim to be a universal religion. They do not even believe such a thing is possible or desirable. Asatru teaches that different races have different ways of looking at the world, each of which is valid for them. To them, it is only right that there are different religions. Those who take to the neo-Nazi extreme are not the norm but they do exist.

<http://www.pagan.net.nz/asatru.html>

<http://www.apologeticsindex.org/a84.html>

WorldMark Encyclopedia for Cultures and Daily Life

<http://www.iceland.is/government-and-politics/>

<http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/ic.html>

[http://www.state.gov/www/global/human\\_rights/irf/irf\\_rpt/1999/irf\\_iceland99.html](http://www.state.gov/www/global/human_rights/irf/irf_rpt/1999/irf_iceland99.html)

[http://www.hagstofa.is/template\\_lb\\_frameset\\_en.asp?PageID=325&intPXCatID=194&ifrmsrc=/temp\\_en/mannfjoldi/trufelog.asp](http://www.hagstofa.is/template_lb_frameset_en.asp?PageID=325&intPXCatID=194&ifrmsrc=/temp_en/mannfjoldi/trufelog.asp)

<http://www.alfa.is/>

<http://iceland.vefur.is/Organizations/Religion/>

<http://bustada.kirkja.is/>

<http://www.brudkaupsvefur.is/english/planning.php?page=denominations>  
<http://www.vegurinn.is/>  
<http://www.kristur.is/>  
<http://www.kristur.is/info.html>  
<http://www3.domsmalaraduneyti.is/raduneyti/starfssvid/kirkjumal/upplýsingar/nr/795>

## **Catholic and Orthodox**

### *Roman Catholic Church*

Catholics officially regained their freedom in 1874 (the nation was Catholic until the Protestant Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century) but the first diocese was not established until 1968. The church has one of the larger denominations in Iceland with 5,775 registered members comprising 1.97% of the population. In 2002 there was only one bishop for the whole of the island, 11 priests in 4 parishes, and one Catholic school. The church recognized 82 baptisms that year.

The Christ the King Cathedral in *Reykjavík* is the largest Catholic church in Iceland and it observes daily mass. There are churches in *Hafnarfjörður* and *Keflavík* as well. All masses are held in Icelandic. Over half of all Icelandic Catholics are foreign-born, many of them Filipino.

### *Serbian Orthodox Church*

The Birth of the Holy Mary, a Serbian Orthodox Church was officially recognized in 2002. The church has 157 registered members comprising only 0.05% of the population.

### *Parish of St. Nicholas of the Russian Orthodox Church*

The first ever Russian Orthodox Easter service was celebrated in 2002 in Reykjavík, where their only church is located. They have 113 registered members comprising 0.04% of the population.

<http://www.russian-orthodox-church.org.ru/ne205061.htm>  
<http://www.stnicholascenter.org/Brix?pageID=490>

## **Christian/Protestant/Pentecostal**

### *Lutheran Church of Iceland*

The official Icelandic State Religion has 250,661 members (85.46% of the population). See section on Christian history for more information on Iceland's state church.

### *Lutheran-Free Church*

Many Icelanders who are dissatisfied with the state church have become part of one of the Lutheran-Free churches such as: Reykjavík Free Church - 6,202 members (2.11), Hafnarfjörður Free Church – 4,365 members (1.49), and Reykjavík Independent Church – 2,588 members (0.88).

### *The Icelandic Christian Church*

The Icelandic Christian Church was 213 members comprising 0.07% of the population. The church is located in the capital city of *Reykjavik* and the pastor, *Fridrik Schram*, is Youth with a Mission's leader in Iceland. This church is part of the charismatic renewal that started in Iceland in 1972. In 1976, local believers started YWAM in Iceland and hundreds of people got saved in the following years. Originally, this group operated within the state church and attempted to assist local Lutheran parish pastors but met with only moderate success. These believers sincerely desired to see a spiritual renewal within the state church but became disillusioned with the Lutheran Church being more often "interested in gaining social respect than following Christ". These believers were soon branded "fanatics" so in 1997 they believed God was telling them it was time to exit the state church and start a new charismatic Lutheran-Free Church that would become a home for the spiritually homeless, the hurting and the seeking.

<http://www.kristur.is/info.html>

### Pentecostal Church

The Pentecostal Church has 1800 registered members comprising 0.61 % of the population.

<http://www.fortunecity.com/meltingpot/zimbabwe/1054/iceland.html>

<http://www.gospel.is/>

### *First Baptist Church*

According to a fundamental Baptist website ([www.swordoftheLord.com](http://www.swordoftheLord.com)), there is one Baptist church located in *Njardvik*. This city is just outside *Reykjavik* and houses the Naval Air Station. There are many American military who serve at this base and the church ministers to them. According to Baptist Bible Fellowship, there are four missionaries to Iceland, not including the pastor, who is also an American. Although there are only 10 officially registered members of First Baptist Church but their own webpage seems to indicate a larger membership.

<http://www.icelandforchrist.org/>

<http://www.fbciceland.org/>

<http://bbfi.org/missions/europe.asp>

### *Seventh-Day Adventists*

The Seventh-Day Adventist Church has 746 registered members comprising 0.25% of the population. There exist six churches, one each in Reykjavík, Hafnarfjörður, Suðurnes, Árnes, Vestmannaeyjar, and Akureyri. The church's Icelandic website mentions adhering to the apocalyptic "Patmos Papers". According to Adventist literature, Icelanders have always been interested in the unknown and therefore are fascinated by prophecy. The local church is therefore utilizing Biblical prophecy to reach lost Icelandic people who "hunger for truth". There is also a media influence where Adventist programs are making it onto the airwaves via satellite, with results.

### Church Type Sectarian Groups

Note: There are other denominations which may or may not fall into the category of “Christian” and there seems to be little or no information about their particular beliefs, i.e. whether they should be classified as evangelical or cultic (at least in Iceland):

<http://www.sda.is/>  
<http://news.adventist.org/data/2003/02/1046787838/index.html.en>

### *The Cross (or “Krossinn”)*

This is an independent, fundamentalist, Pentecostal Christian group branched in 1979 from a local Assemblies of God congregation. Like most Christian churches, it espouses a set of doctrines known as the Apostles' Creed. Like most Pentecostal groups, the church believes in the baptism of the Holy Spirit with the evidence of speaking in other tongues. They have 629 registered members comprising 0.21 of the total population of Iceland. The Cross meets in Kopavogur, a suburb of Reykjavik. Worship services are exuberant and the musical style utilizes drums, guitars, saxophones as well as traditional church instruments accompanying traditional church hymns, country gospel music, black gospel music, and classical music. Worship services are taken very seriously.

The *Cross* (or “*Krossinn*”) teaches that they are just one of many Christian groups spreading the gospel. They hold the Bible to be true and profitable for all things spiritual, and are opposed to and speak out against the legalization of homosexuality, abortion, and drug abuse. In 1986, a mission was started to help Icelanders beat drug addiction. The church does not discriminate and people are free to come and go as they wish. The church cooperates with Good News Today, an international non-profit organization whose goal is to provide assistance to pastors and local assemblies.

Caution: this is a direct quote from their website: “Like other major religions in the world, we at *Krossinn* believe that the ultimate experience of human beings is *to achieve total oneness with the Divine* (italics added); consequently, the church's teachings involve helping Christians grow spiritually until Christ totally fills their lives.” Take it for what it is.

### *Betania*

*Betania* is a Catholic Church-approved apparition site where they claim the Virgin Mary appeared to hundreds of persons in *Betania, Venezuela*. There was also a supposed private message given to Maria Esperanza but that has not yet received official approval (nor disapproval). How exactly this religion arrived in Iceland is unknown. There are 144 officially recognized adherents comprising 0.05% of the population.

### *Kefas - Christian Community*

Kefas is the Aramaic word for “rock” or more commonly today, “Peter”. They have 137 registered members comprising 0.05% of the population and are headquartered in Kópavogur.

[http://www.kefas.dk/Kefas\\_in\\_english.1141.0.html](http://www.kefas.dk/Kefas_in_english.1141.0.html)

### *The Church of Evangelism*



This church has 90 registered members comprising 0.03 % of the population and is headquartered in *Kópavogur*

*Sjónarhæð Congregation*

This church has 54 registered members comprising 0.02 % of the population and is headquartered in *Akureyri*

*The Believer's Fellowship*

This church has 39 registered members comprising 0.01 % of the population and meets in *Reykjavik*.

### **People Groups**

(all population numbers are from the 2004 Iceland National Registry of Persons – denoted as “population by country of birth”)

**Icelandic Peoples** (These first four nations are the only ones recognized on the [www.peoplegroups.org](http://www.peoplegroups.org) website)

Iceland (272,908)  
PopEntID – 290

See country history and cultural anomalies/similarities for background. Icelanders are natural-born citizens of Iceland. They share many similarities with other Scandinavian countries, with which they also share a heritage – the earliest settlers of Iceland came from Norway and other Norse countries. Most people speak Icelandic, a Germanic language, but English and Danish are both taught in schools. Icelanders are a religious people, most of the population claims some church affiliation, but not many are actively involved in any evangelical Christian sense. They are very interested in spiritual things, especially the miraculous or fantastic. The Bible has been translated in Icelandic and there is some Christian radio presence on the island (mostly broadcast from other countries). There is also a Jesus Film in Icelandic.

**United States** (1,568)  
PopEntID – 293

Americans in Iceland are generally military stationed in Keflavík, businesspersons working abroad, or are married to native Icelanders.

**Denmark** (2,590)  
PopEntID – 289

There is a Danish Embassy in Reykjavik. Because Iceland and Denmark are both Nordic nations there is an easy integration process between the two countries. Until 1918 Iceland was under Danish rule. From 1918 to 1944 Denmark and Iceland had a common king but since then Iceland has been totally

independent from Denmark. Until 1940 Danish was the language of power in Iceland and those who went to school at that time were taught Danish. After 1945, though, those immigrating to Iceland were expected to learn and speak Icelandic. Not long after that it was decided that Danish no longer should be the first foreign language taught in school, but the second after English. Although Iceland's Danish heritage may seem to lessening, there seems to be no real animosity between the two peoples.

## **Norway (926)**

PopEntID – 292

Most Norwegian citizens have been in Iceland for a long time. Many are married to Icelanders and are well integrated into the Icelandic community. Both Iceland and Norway have state Lutheran churches but religion hardly played a major role as a motive for settling in Iceland. According to the Norwegian Ambassador, most of the Norwegians living in Iceland probably came because of a girlfriend or boyfriend, to find work, or for adventure. There has been a common labor market in force between the Nordic countries for more than 20 years, so there are no restrictions on movements across the borders. Many of the Norwegians in Iceland and their spouses are members of the Norwegian-Icelandic Society, which organizes celebrations on the National Day of Norway.

Somewhat surprisingly, there are about 14 times as many Icelanders living in Norway than the other way around, even though the Norwegians number more than 15 times as many people. Many Icelanders take part of their education in Norway and the other two Scandinavian countries, and some stay on after their education is completed.

According to the sagas, Norwegians were the first to settle in Iceland, at the end of the 9th century, and recent studies have shown that about 80% of the male genes in Iceland come from Western Norway, and about 50% of the female genes. Most of the remainder of the genetic material is of Celtic origin.

Note: There are other people groups represented in Iceland. Many are very small and may be only one large family. Most foreigners living in Iceland do so to either find work or to marry Icelanders. All of the largest people groups have their own Bible and Jesus Film translations but some of the smaller people groups represented do not.

## **European**

There are peoples living in Iceland from almost every European country totaling 10,527 people.

## **Americans**

Besides the United States, there are 722 people living in Iceland with North American or South American heritage. Most of them are migrant workers, students, or have married Icelandic people.

## **African**

There are 566 people of African descent living in Iceland. Most are migrant workers or have married Icelanders.

## Asian

There are 3,557 people of Asian descent living in Iceland and a large majority resides in Reykjavík. Most are either Buddhist or Catholic. The Vietnamese came to Iceland as refugees in the 1980's. Many family members or friends soon joined them. The original group received support from the government and was assisted in finding jobs and housing. Many Filipinos also live in Iceland and most are Roman Catholic.

Iceland's National Registry of Persons

([http://www.hagstofa.is/template\\_lb\\_frameset\\_en.asp?PageID=325&intPXCatID=194&ifrmsrc=/temp\\_en/mannfjoldi/trufelog.asp](http://www.hagstofa.is/template_lb_frameset_en.asp?PageID=325&intPXCatID=194&ifrmsrc=/temp_en/mannfjoldi/trufelog.asp))

<http://ahus.is/framesENG.htm?index2ENGL.htm~main>

<http://www.peoplegroups.org/MapSearch.aspx?country=Iceland>

## MISSIOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

1. Evangelical Christians should pray for and seek to aid Christians and churches in Iceland to deal with the many people who are nominal in their practice of religion in general and Christianity in particular. The majority of Icelanders are only nominally Christian. The state church is becoming increasingly secular and more and more people are drifting away from it, yet there is growing interest in occultism and New Age ideologies. More than 40% of the population has had involvement with the occult. The high level of divorce and illegitimate births is an indication that while Iceland may seem like a moral country, there is a real need for the Good News. The New Age, Spiritist, and growing Norse religion movements are ever seeking converts. Christians need to pray against these dark powers
2. Evangelical Christians and churches should strive to aid in the evangelization of Iceland—seeking to guide the people to personal saving faith in Christ. In the effort at evangelism, Christians should make full use of the freedom of religion that the people of Iceland makes possible. Evangelical must also be aware of the persistence of “cultural Christianity” among Icelanders.
3. Evangelical Christians and churches should consider the probability that humanitarian missions will open doors for evangelism in Iceland
4. Evangelical Christians and churches should strive to cooperate with local believers in evangelizing university students
5. Evangelical Christians and churches should seek to implement Christian witness through media such as radio and television as well as through materials such as the Jesus film.
6. Evangelical Christians and churches should enter what is actually an open door for evangelism and church starting in Iceland.

<http://www.telleurope.org/Iceland.htm>

<http://jesusfilm.org/progress/europe.html?type=regular&id=251>

<http://www.jesusfilmmissiontrips.org/>

## LINKS

- US State Department (<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3396.htm>)
- Geography IQ ([http://www.geographyiq.com/countries/ic/Iceland\\_map\\_flag\\_geography.htm](http://www.geographyiq.com/countries/ic/Iceland_map_flag_geography.htm))
- Iceland's own website (<http://www.iceland.is/>)
- CIA World Factbook (<http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/ic.html>)
- (<http://www.nationmaster.com/country/ic/Religion>)
- (<http://www.unhabitat.org/habredd/conditions/northeurope/iceland.htm>)
- ([http://www.encyclopedia.com/html/section/iceland\\_history.asp](http://www.encyclopedia.com/html/section/iceland_history.asp))

- U.S. Department of State Annual Report on International Religious Freedom for 1999: Iceland:  
([http://www.state.gov/www/global/human\\_rights/irf/irf\\_rpt/1999/irf\\_iceland99.html](http://www.state.gov/www/global/human_rights/irf/irf_rpt/1999/irf_iceland99.html))
- Iceland's National Registry of Persons  
([http://www.hagstofa.is/template\\_lb\\_frameset\\_en.asp?PageID=325&intPXCatID=194&ifrmsrc=/temp\\_en/mannfjoldi/trufelog.asp](http://www.hagstofa.is/template_lb_frameset_en.asp?PageID=325&intPXCatID=194&ifrmsrc=/temp_en/mannfjoldi/trufelog.asp))
- IExplore Travel Site (<http://www.iexplore.com/dmap/Iceland/Dining>)
- Absolute Astronomy website reference page (<http://www.absoluteastronomy.com/encyclopedia/I/Ic/Iceland.htm>)
- World divorce rates researched and compiled 2002 by Gulnar Nugman of the Heritage Foundation  
(<http://www.divorcereform.org/gul.html>)
- <http://www.telleurope.org/Iceland.htm>