

Profile On Chile

Written and submitted by Chris Dyck.

Chile is a country of incredible geographical beauty and variety as a result of its huge span of latitude (4270 km) and the fact that it is bordered to the West by the Pacific Ocean and the East by the Andes mountains. The separation between ocean and mountains averages a mere 177 km down the entire length of the country. In fact, many of the Earth's climates are represented in Chile - desert lands in the North that some years receive zero precipitation, rainforest in the Near North, and agricultural plains in Central Chile bordered to East and West by mountain ranges. The far South consists of thousands of islands accented by vast fjords stretching high into the sky straight out of the ocean, making for breathtaking scenery.

Chile's Cape Horn is the Southernmost point in South America, where the waters of the Pacific and Atlantic oceans meet with ferocious turbulence, making navigation treacherous. To the West lie Chile's Pacific Islands, the best known of which is Easter Island with its 867 monoliths. Another of Chile's Pacific Islands is where Alexander Selkirk was marooned for four years, inspiring the novel Robinson Crusoe. So varied is Chile's geography that the writer Benjamín Zañartu once described the country's geography as *loca* (crazy)!

The indigenous population of Chile began to mix with European soldiers and settlers starting in the sixteenth century with the Spanish conquest. Most of the settlement took place in Central Chile where the climate closely resembles that found in Spain. This central nucleus of settlement grew and eventually expanded into Northern and Southern parts through a series of wars and conquests over the ensuing three hundred years. Spain continued to send ships full of soldiers and settlers throughout this period, so the proportion of European characteristics are higher in Chile than in many other South American countries where native peo-

ples typically outnumbered Spanish settlers throughout the colonial period.

In 1818, Chile declared its independence from Spain, and opened its doors over the next century to immigrants from a large number of countries, including Germany, Italy, France, Switzerland, and Croatia. The twentieth century consisted politically of a long period of democracy (1932-1973), followed by Augusto Pinochet's brutal military rule (1973-1990) in which many types of organizations such as trade unions and political parties were dismantled by the regime. Since 1990 the country has seen a slow return to full democracy accompanied by extensive reorganization of societal institutions attacked under Pinochet.

The 1833 constitution of an independent Chile enshrined the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) as the official church of state. At first, all other religions were banned from the country and the RCC assumed control of all education, civil registrations, cemeteries, and had a large influence over law. Political conditions led to great conflict between church and state over the division of civil responsibilities and some of the restrictive religious laws that were in place, and fault lines began to devel-

op. In 1865, a new law was enacted that allowed private practice of non-Catholic religions in the country, which opened the door for missionaries from a wide range of protestant denominations.

From about the 1870s, missionaries began arriving in greater numbers, beginning with the Presbyterians, who established missions widely throughout the country and represent a large fraction of practicing Chilean Protestants to this day. Anglican missionaries also began arriving in the late 1800s, placing a primary focus on ministering to the Mapuche ("people of the land"). Many of these missions are still in



active operation to this day, and with over 300,000 Mapuche on reservations in Chile, there is a large demand for the message of the Gospel. Beginning also in the 1880s were the American Methodist missionary schools, which gave education alternatives to Chilean parents. Many of these missionary schools are still active.

Central Chile is home to most of Chile's 16 million inhabitants. The major city of Santiago contains well over 1000 churches planted since the wave of missionaries began arriving in the late 1800s. Two of SAMS Canada's missionaries, Tim and Peti Webster, are currently in Santiago working on expanding one such parish to include a youth centre.

In 1925, President Arturo Alessandri Palma managed to establish a separation between church and state. This relieved most of the church-state friction that had been building and made it easier for missionaries from other denominations to come into the country and continue to spread the Gospel with a large degree of religious freedom. Interactions between denominations increased and this was instrumental during the rule of Pinochet, when the RCC, many Protestant denominations and Jewish leaders came together to form an office for the defense of human rights. This office was able to monitor and systematically document human rights abuses of the regime. Lawyers employed by this office defended many political prisoners. The combined forces of the churches in Chile consistently spoke out in favour of and prayed for a return to democracy during the 17 years of military rule.

Today, less than one quarter of Chileans attend any kind of church worship services. This low level indicates an increasingly high level of secularization and the rise in atheism and indifference particularly among the younger generations. In Chile, the harvest is truly plentiful but the workers are few. If you feel called to go to Chile to share the good news of the Gospel, please contact SAMS Canada.

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