

Introduction

Rugged and exotic, the islands of Trinidad and Tobago are bursting with tropical vibrancy in both landscape and culture. A nation with a celebrated fusion of cultures, Trinidad and Tobago is also an economic success in a region of the world where poverty and financial depression are all too common. Yet, alongside this optimistic story is another: one of ethnic conflict, drugs, violence and growing spiritual confusion.



History

Originally settled by Amerindians from South America, the islands of Trinidad and Tobago were re-discovered by Christopher Columbus on his third voyage in 1498. Although initially a Spanish colony, the islands were settled by a wide range of people from Europe as well as a large population of African slaves. The islands were ceded to Britain in 1797, and following the abolition of the slave trade in 1834 the cultural diversity was increased by the introduction of immigrant indentured labourer groups, mainly from Portugal, China and India. As a result, the people of Trinidad and Tobago draw their lively identity from many rich and varied heritages, creating unique blends of music, food, dance and tradition.

Independence from the British Empire was gained in 1962, followed by the declaration of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago in 1976. Unlike many other ex-colonies, the transition was relatively peaceful, and the region did not have to endure massive upheaval and unrest. The island

republic has since made good use of its natural resources, building a relatively stable, diversified economy on gas-based exports, despite a period of economic downturn in the 1960s. The country is currently the leading exporter of ammonia and methanol, and one of the top five exporters of liquefied natural gas.

Trinidad and Tobago has also been a strong leader in establishing greater regional co-operation, such as with the Caribbean Common Market and the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) for which the capital of Trinidad, Port of Spain, is a leading contender, alongside Miami, for the location of the Permanent Secretariat.

However, the common problems of the Caribbean – drugs, gang-related crime, domestic violence and corruption – are still present in the country.

Current challenges

- ▶ Trinidad and Tobago has an extremely high murder rate, which, coupled with over-crowded prisons and clogged-up courts, makes achieving justice seriously difficult. In response, the government reintroduced capital punishment in 1999.
- ▶ Whilst industrial development has meant prosperity, it has also created environmental hazards. Water pollution from agricultural chemicals, the dumping of raw sewage and oil spills on beaches are posing a threat to the islands' rich biodiversity. Rising deforestation is also a critical problem, bringing increased mudslides and causing soil erosion.
- ▶ Ethnic tensions between the many communities on the islands have led to some communities being isolated. There is also little co-operation between churches, often resulting in fractured communities.
- ▶ In 1990, 114 men from the Islamic organisation Jamaat al Muslimeen stormed the parliament in the Red House building and held the government hostage for six days. Fortunately, the situation was resolved, and the country has managed to avoid any other major incidents.

BMS involvement in Trinidad and Tobago

Although BMS World Mission no longer sends long-term mission personnel to the Caribbean, regular BMS Action Teams support the Union's work especially with children and young people. A partnership remains with the Baptist Union of Trinidad and Tobago – currently led by General Secretary John Bramble – which often involves the financial support of mission programmes, ministerial training and church planting.

Background Information

The land

Situated northeast of Venezuela, Trinidad and Tobago is composed of 23 islands covered predominantly in tropical vegetation, but also with significant areas of agricultural use in the hill and valley regions of Trinidad. Three impressive mountain ranges define Trinidad, with fertile alluvial plains criss-crossed with rivers and water channels. The climate is generally that of a pleasantly warm temperature with high levels of seasonal rainfall. Drought in the central areas of Trinidad is quite common during the dry season, and mudslides, flash floods and soil erosion in the wet season.

Religion

The mixed ancestry of many of the islands' populations has meant that there are a large number of religions present in Trinidad and Tobago. The largest are Roman Catholicism and Hinduism (the latter coming from the Indian migrant workers during the late 1800s), although there are significant numbers of Anglicans, Presbyterians, Methodists, and Spiritual Baptists, as well as Muslims and members of the Orisha religion.

The fastest growing religions in Trinidad and Tobago are the Spiritual Baptists, and the Orisha religion, which are rooted in traditional African beliefs.

Celebration of religion is an integral part of the culture of Trinidad and Tobago, with events such as the pre-Lenten Carnival before Ash Wednesday, and the Hindu Festival of Divali attracting thousands of celebrants and tourists alike every year. However, for many religious people in Trinidad and Tobago the carnivals and festivals are exceptions: often religions are unofficially organised by ethnic groupings, meaning very little interaction occurs between them.

The Baptist Union of Trinidad and Tobago currently has 23 congregations, which around 3,500 people regularly attend.

Prayer points

- ▶ Give thanks for the way that Trinidad and Tobago has improved in the last 40 years; for the relative stability that has allowed people to prosper. Pray that this stability would continue and that peace would endure. Pray also for the leaders of the nation, that they would be fair with all people from all backgrounds.
- ▶ Pray for the Baptist Union of Trinidad and Tobago, to be given the spiritual gifts it needs to be a voice for justice and compassion. Pray for a renewed vision of unity for the churches, and that Christians in the country would be able to meet the challenge of the growing Orisha religion.
- ▶ Pray that the cocaine transshipment and the related crime would be stopped. Pray also for the situation in the prisons, where overcrowding is a serious problem. Pray for all those working for the prison service in such difficult conditions, that they would be given patience and strength.

FURTHER INFORMATION

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