

Introduction

Sometimes referred to as the Essence of Europe, Belgium is an often understated country, whose old-world charm, medieval wonders and influence make it a country of rich cultural and historic significance. Famous for its chocolate, lace shops, Hercule Poirot, comic hero Tintin and 450 different kinds of beer, Belgium is a multicultural, multilingual nation. As the capital of Europe it is home to, amongst others, the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Nato); it is a base for many international businesses and draws immigrants from many countries.



History

Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg and northern France make up a region known as the Low Countries. The Romans invaded this area in the first century BC, imposing their language and culture on the inhabitants. Four centuries later the Franks took control. The demise of Charlemagne led to the break up of the Low Countries into independent territories, including Brabant and Luxembourg.

By the 14th and 15th centuries the whole region came under the control of the Dukes of Burgundy. At different periods during the ensuing centuries Spain, Austria and France ruled the territory. With the fall of Napoleon in the early 19th century, European powers enforced the re-unification of the northern and southern provinces. This was highly unpopular in the southern provinces who were unwilling to accept Dutch authority. Things came to a head in 1830 when Belgian workers in Brussels

and Liege took up arms against the Dutch. As the conflict spread the European powers were forced to recognise the independence of the southern province, thereby establishing modern Belgium. Belgium became a monarchy with a parliament made up of two legislative houses. Prince Leopold was chosen as the first monarch.

During the First and Second World Wars German-occupied Belgium forced the country to participate in the conflicts. After the First World War, the former German colonies of Ruanda-Urundi (now called Rwanda and Burundi) were given to Belgium by the League of Nations. Congo gained independence in 1960, followed two years later by Ruanda-Urundi.

In the decades after the World Wars, Belgium joined Nato and Benelux, becoming one of the founding members of the European Economic Community. Today the country hosts the European Commission, the EU Council and most of the sessions of the European Parliament.

The question about linguistic communities gathered importance during the 1960s and 70s. The increasing autonomy of Belgium's two main communities resulted in the re-organisation of the country into Dutch-speaking Flanders and French-speaking Wallonia, with Brussels as the bilingual capital in 1980.

The 1990s saw major changes in Belgium: in 1991 the swing to the political right, led to the resignation of the prime minister; the institution of a fully federal constitution in 1993 to reduce tensions between the Walloons and Flemings; the resignation of many government members after a corruption scandal in 1994; and major constitutional change in 1995 which turned Belgium into a federal state with three Regional Assemblies.

Current challenges

- ▶ Historically Belgium has been split between the French-speaking Walloons and the Flemish community, with violent clashes erupting during the Second World War. This age-old rivalry expresses itself throughout society, including politics and media. Although the Flemish and French Belgians try to avoid each other, tensions remain between them.
- ▶ People are distrustful of political, legal and religious leaders due to the exposure in the

1990s of murderous paedophile rings, in some cases with satanic practices, which stretched to the top levels of society. This has largely been responsible for the growing skinhead fascist movement.

BMS involvement in Belgium

The Belgian Baptist Union (UBB) is one of the smaller European Unions with 31 churches and meeting points. The Union itself has just one full-time paid staff member and there is a lack of trained, full-time leadership in the churches. BMS has five supported partner workers involved in church planting in the country. There is currently one BMS couple working in Belgium – Phillip and Vivienne Hatton in Brussels. BMS is involved in the following project:

Church planting in Brussels

Phillip and Vivienne Hatton are helping to bring people of all ages and nationalities into a relationship with Christ in a deprived area of Brussels.

Background information

The land

One of the smallest countries in Europe, Belgium's landscape naturally divides along the central valley of the Meuse river with lowlands to the north, the Plains of Flanders, and uplands to the south, rising to 700 metres on the Ardennes Plateau. Bordering with France, Germany, the Netherlands and Luxembourg, Belgium's prosperity rests on trade. The country is a major industrial centre, importing most of its raw materials. Heavy industry is found near the old coalfields of the Sambre-Meuse valley and, whilst the ancient craft of lacemaking has been revitalised in Flanders, new industries have been developing rapidly since the late 1960s.

Dutch, French and German are Belgium's three national languages, with English as the unofficial fourth.

Religion

Most Belgians are Roman Catholic with a small Protestant minority and a growing Muslim community. Even though Belgium is a growing secularised country, the north has seen evangelical church growth in the last ten years. In addition, there is growing unity between the Protestant and

evangelical churches throughout Belgium.

Currently there are 32 Baptist churches in Belgium with 1,200 members.

Prayer points

- ▶ Deep divisions exist between the different sections of society – the immigrants, Flemings and Walloons. Pray for reconciliation between the divided communities; that the people of Belgium will work together for unity and embrace diversity.
- ▶ With the growing secularisation of the country, there is increasing scepticism and cynicism towards religion. Pray for the Holy Spirit to revive the Church in Belgium and to open the hearts and minds of Belgians to the truth of who Christ is.
- ▶ Brussels is a strategic and truly international city, bringing together members of Nato and the nations of Europe. Pray that the decisions made in the city will have a positive, transforming effect on the continent and the rest of the world.

FURTHER INFORMATION

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