



Reaching the Nations International Church Growth Almanac

Country reports on the LDS Church around the world from a landmark almanac. Includes detailed analysis of history, context, culture, needs, challenges and opportunities for church growth.



Kiribati

Population: 0.1 millions (#199 out of countries)

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Geography

Area: 811 square km. Sitting on the equator between Hawaii and Australia, Kiribati consists of 33 coral atolls spread out over 3.5 million square kilometers in the Pacific Ocean. Most of the islands are concentrated in three island groups: Kiribati (Gilbert Islands), Rawaki (Phoenix Islands), and Kiritimati (Christmas and Line Islands). The flat, coral atoll islands enjoy a hot, humid tropical climate heavily influenced by the surrounding ocean. Typhoons pose the greatest natural hazard. Each of the 21 inhabited islands has an island council, which in pertain to the regional administration of one of the three island chains.

Population: 112,850 (July 2009)

Annual Growth Rate: 2.235% (2009)

Fertility Rate: 4.04 children born per woman (2009)

Life Expectancy: male 60.14, female 66.45 (2009)

Peoples

Micronesian: 98.8%

Other: 1.2%

Languages: Kiribati (97.2%), English and other (2.8%). Kiribati and English are official languages.

Literacy: 92% (2001)

History

Micronesians first settled the island chains thousands of years ago and were later influenced by surrounding Polynesian cultures. European discovery occurred in the late 18th century and explorers named the islands the Gilbert Islands. British settlers came in the 19th century. The islands were incorporated as a British protectorate in 1892 and later as a colony in 1915. Japanese forces captured and controlled the Gilbert Islands in World War II between 1941 and 1943. Like the neighboring Marshall Islands, some islands experienced nuclear testing by the United Kingdom and United States following World War II. The United Kingdom administered the Gilbert Islands and gave greater autonomy in 1971 and independence in 1979. The name was changed to Kiribati at independence, which is the local spelling of Gilbert. The Phoenix and Line Island Groups were previously under United States control and were integrated into the new nation. Overcrowding on the main island of Tarawa has led to the government relocating some inhabitants to more sparsely populated islands or asking larger, nearby nations to accept some as permanent refugees.

Culture

Dance and music are highly esteemed among I-Kiribati. The people depend greatly upon coconut trees for food and shelter. Women are typically subordinate to men. Education is in great demand and difficult to obtain.

Economy

GDP per capita: \$5,300 (2008) [11.3% of US]

Human Development Index: 0.515

Corruption Index: 3.1

Kiribati's remote location in the Pacific and few natural resources limit economic growth and trade. The country's phosphorus deposits were exhausted prior to independence. Fishing and agriculture account for the majority of exports. The most widely grown crops include copra, taro and breadfruit. Tourism is an expanding sector of the economy which receives considerable attention from government. Two-thirds of the workforce is employed in services while the remaining third works in industry. Between 20-25% of the GDP comes from foreign aid. Corruption can be found throughout society. Large amounts of public

money has gone unaccounted for.

Faiths

Christian: 97%

Bahai: 2%

None: 1%

Christians

Denominations Members Congregations

Catholic 50,875

Kiribati Protestant 33,300

Latter-Day Saints 13,475 26

Seventh-Day Adventists 2,121 11

Jehovah's Witnesses 90 1

Religion

Christianity has spread rapidly, and almost the entire population belongs to a Christian denomination. Half the population is Catholic and a third belong to the Kiribati Protestant Church, which is declining in membership. The LDS Church is the third largest Christian denomination. Northern islands are predominately Catholic and southern islands are mainly Protestant.

Religious Freedom

Persecution Index:

Kiribati experiences great religious freedom and tolerance. The constitution protects religious freedom which is also upheld by the government. Religious minorities are not discriminated against and government does not favor a particular religious group.

[\[1\]](#)

Largest Villages

Urban: 44%

Bairiki, Bonriki, Taburao, Buariki, **Temaraia**, Butaritari, Tabukiniberu, Utiroa, Rawannawi, **Tabiauea**.

Eight of the 10 largest villages have a congregation or missionaries serving. 60% of the national population lives in the 10 largest villages.

Membership Growth

LDS Membership: 13,475 (2008)

Waitea Abiuta, a school teacher and headmaster of a school in Kiribati, requested several of his graduated students to go to the Church-run Liahona High School in Tonga. In September 1972, the mission president in Fiji visited and approved 12 students to attend Liahona High School. The 12 students joined the Church in Tonga and some later returned to Kiribati in 1975 as missionaries. Several more joined the Church and Church educators from Liahona High School were later assigned to teach at the school the original 12 students graduated from. Enrollment increased and the Church purchased the school, naming it Moroni High School.[\[2\]](#) By 1980 there were 500 members.

In May 1988, 230 members attended the first shown General Conference session in English in Tarawa.[\[3\]](#) By 1996 membership reached 4,600, half of which lived in Tarawa, and activity had reached the point to where a stake could be created. Elder L. Tom Perry dedicated Kiribati for missionary work in August 1996.[\[4\]](#)

President Hinckley briefly visited 1,500 members in early 2000 on a refueling stop.[\[5\]](#) By the end of 2000, membership had increased to 8,633. Membership continued to increase rapidly to 10,019 in 2002, 11,771 in 2006, and 13,475 in 2008.

President Hinckley visited the Christmas Island branch in 2003 and promised the members that if they stayed true to the Gospel marvelous things would happen.[\[6\]](#) Membership grew in Christmas Island from 100 in 1999 to 280 in 2006[\[7\]](#).

Membership growth rates have varied since 2000 from 2% to 9.5%, with more rapid growth occurring in the early and late 2000s. In 2008, there was one member per every eight people.

Congregational Growth

Wards: 11 Branches: 14

The Fiji Suva Mission administered Kiribati when the Church was first established in the 1970s. The first missionaries arrived in 1975 and in late 1982 there was one branch. Congregations significantly increased the following decade to 17 by March 1996. Elder Perry created the first stake in Tarawa from the Kiribati Tarawa District in August 1996. The new stake included the Bairiki, Betio 1st, Betio 2nd, Bikenibeu, Eita, and Teaoaraereke Wards, and the Bonriki and Moroni Branches.[\[8\]](#) Congregations began to be organized in more remote areas, such as Christmas Island, during the 1990s. An additional district for many of the isolated branches outside of Tarawa,[\[9\]](#) but was discontinued in the 2000s. By the end of 2000 there were 11 wards and 16 branches.

In 2006, the Church created the Marshall Islands Majuro Mission which included Kiribati.[\[10\]](#) A second stake (Tarawa Kiribati East) was created in 2007. The number of branches within stakes increased from two in 2001 to six in 2007. Two branches were discontinued in 2009. Several dependent branches or groups function throughout the islands, including two on Christmas Island, one of which, the Banana Unit, was preparing to become the second branch on the island in late 2009.

Wards only meet in the south and middle portions of Tarawa. Northern Tarawa has several branches. Mission branches include the Aranuka, Baretoa, Kabuna, Rawannawi, Utiroa, and Fanning Island Branches. Missionaries also serve in groups reporting to the mission or branches part of stakes in Abaiang, Butaritari, Marakei, and Tab North. About 40 full-time missionaries served in Kiribati in late 2009, including eight on remote islands.

Activity and Retention

Member activity was strongest in the earlier years of the Church in Kiribati. High inactivity is evidenced by no increase in congregations since 2000. Growth in activity and retention occurs in spurts. In a district conference held in early 1996, 80 men were sustained to receive to the Melchizedek Priesthood.^[11] The ratio of members to congregations has increased dramatically from 319 in 2000 to 518 in 2008. The average number of active members per congregation appears to be between 100 and 150, for a total of 3,000 and 4,000 active members, or 25% of total membership. Because of relatively low member activity, Kiribati, like many other Pacific nations with a high proportion of Latter-day Saints, also experiences a high rate of "double affiliation:" members claimed by the Church but who do not identify the LDS Church as their faith of preference and who are also claimed by other denominations.^[12]

Language Materials

Languages with LDS Scripture: English, Kiribati

The Book of Mormon is the only LDS scripture available in Kiribati. The Church has translated a wide body of materials, especially for youth, missionaries and primary. General conference and leadership trainings are translated in Kiribati.

Meetinghouses

The first Church-built meetinghouse was built in the 1980s in Tarawa; additional meetinghouses have subsequently been constructed throughout the islands. A few congregations may meet in renovated spaces.

Humanitarian and Development Work

Missionaries cleaned and painted a local hospital as a helping hands service project in late 2009. Moroni High School has hundreds of students attend every year and provides basic education and vocational training.

Opportunities, Challenges and Prospects

Religious Freedom

Government does not restrict religious freedom. The Church maintains positive relations with the government. In 1994, the president spoke at the graduation ceremony at Moroni High School in Tarawa.^[13]

Cultural Issues

Economic and living conditions challenge the Church's development. On Fanning Island, members do not have access to medical care and receive a limited training from mission leadership due to distance and hardships. Some members who moved to remote islands attend their former church due to pressure from their families. Interest in religion and the Church remain high, providing great opportunity for further growth.

National Outreach

Most populated islands have a Church presence. Moroni High School has greatly facilitated the Church's outreach throughout the many small islands and islets. Missionaries have utilized proselytized at public events and member-missionary programs are active.^[14] Distance and poor transportation impede outreach outside of Tarawa.

The first branch on Christmas Island came as a result of many joining the Church in Tarawa and later returning to their home villages. A few active families petitioned the Church for a branch to be created. More than 100 members were found to be living on the island and 58 attended the first sacrament meeting held in 1999.^[15] Similar opportunities may exist on other, unreached islands which likely have numerous inactive members.

Although congregations function in most of the Gilbert Islands where Tarawa is located, around 16,000 or 20% live on atolls which do not have a congregation, such as Makin, Maiana, Kuria, Nonouti, Beru, Nikunau, Onotoa, and Arorae. 13% of the population of the Line Islands lives on Washington Island, which does not have a congregation. A district may someday be created from congregations meeting on Christmas and Fanning Island. The creation of the Marshall Islands Majuro Mission will allow for and create continued outreach and opportunity to more isolated areas.

Member Activity and Convert Retention

Poor convert retention since the late 1990s stunt congregational growth. The district president of the Kiribati Tarawa District reported in 1996 that members were hopeful that following the creation of the first stake, a second stake would be organized in 1997 or 1998.^[16] This did not occur until 2007. The lack of any new congregations being organized during the 2000s indicates retention problems. The dissolution of the Tarawa Gilbert Islands District points to poorer activity and retention outside of Tarawa. Locating less active members on remote islands presents logistical challenges.

Ethnic Issues and Integration

The I-Kiribati population is homogenous and ethnic issues do not appear to present barriers to growth.

Language Issues

The Church provides a large amount of materials in Kiribati for a language with so few speakers worldwide. The Doctrine and Covenants and Pearl of Great Price will likely be translated due to the large supply of English speakers from returned missionaries and graduates from BYU-Hawaii.

Leadership

Although local leadership supports two stakes, reliance on Church employees for leadership positions continues. When the Tarawa Kiribati Stake was created, the stake president and one of his counselors worked for the Church at Moroni High School.^[17] A stake reorganization in 1998 made the principal of Moroni High School the stake president.^[18] In a stake reorganization in 2002, the entire stake presidency worked for the Church at the high school. When the Tarawa Kiribati East Stake was created, the entire stake presidency worked for the Church. The new stake president of the former Tarawa Kiribati West Stake worked for the Church but neither of his counselors.^[19] Branch presidents and their counselors in mission branches are likely all native members, but distance and infrequent visits from mission leadership impede growth and development.

Temple

Kiribati belongs to the Suva Fiji Temple district. The first temple trip occurred in the late 1980s to the Apia Samoa Temple and consisted of 28 members. In order to fund the trip, members had to use savings and sell land.^[20] Temple trips likely occur to the Suva Fiji Temple for members in Tarawa. Most members living on remote islands have not attended the temple due to expense and visa restrictions. Due to distance from temples in Fiji and Hawaii and three very isolated stakes in Kiribati and the Marshall Islands, a temple may one day be announced for Tarawa.

Comparative Growth

The LDS Church has grown faster and had a greater outreach than any other Christian denomination in Kiribati over the past few decades. Since the 1970s, no other nation has experienced as substantial LDS growth as a percentage of the population as Kiribati. The only other nations in which the Church claims over 10% of the population have had a Church presence since 1952 or earlier. However, the number who actively participate is about one-fourth of this figure. Membership growth rates since 2000 for Kiribati are average compared to nations which in 2000 had five to ten thousand members.

Future Prospects

Favorable opportunities exist for continued church growth in Kiribati. Considerable number of convert baptisms are likely to continue. However, active membership is considerably smaller than nominal membership, and low convert retention limits congregational growth. Real future growth will hinge largely upon convert retention and member activity.

^[1] <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2009/127273.htm>

^[2] <http://newsroom.lds.org/ldsnewsroom/eng/contact-us/kiribati>

^[3] <http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/17975/From-around-the-world.html>

^[4] <http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/27921/Elder-Perry-creates-first-Kiribati-stake-dedicates-islands.html>

^[5] <http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/37174/Pres-Hinckley-completes-tour-in-Pacific-Rim.html>

^[6] <http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/43977/Christmas-Island-receives-honored-visitor.html>

^[7] <http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/48478/First-meetinghouse-on-Christmas-Island.html>

^[8] <http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/28233/New-stake-presidencies.html>

^[9] <http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/38013/Facts-and-figures-Suva-Fiji-Temple.html>

^[10] <http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/49194/New-missions-created-in-Brazil-Philippines-Pacific.html>

^[11]

<http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/28451/Church-continues-to-grow-in-Kiribati-4600-Church-members-now-in-country-80-recent>

^[12] Johnstone, Patrick, and Jason Mandryk. Operation World 21st Century Edition, 2005 update. Paternoster Publishers, 2005, 384.

^[13] <http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/24202/From-around-the-world.html>

^[14] <http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/45919/Celebrating-independence.html>

^[15] <http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/35998/New-branch-created-on-Pacific-isle.html>

^[16]

<http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/28451/Church-continues-to-grow-in-Kiribati-4600-Church-members-now-in-country-80-recent>

^[17] <http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/28233/New-stake-presidencies.html>

^[18] <http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/31557/New-stake-presidencies.html>

^[19] <http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/50115/New-stake-presidents.html>

^[20] <http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/17635/From-around-the-world.html>