



# 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.



## Malawi

Population: 17.38 millions (#64 out of countries)

By David Stewart and Matt Martinich

### Geography

**Area:** 118,484 square km. Nicknamed "the warm heart of Africa", Malawi is landlocked in Southern Africa and borders Tanzania, Mozambique, and Zambia. Most of Malawi sits on a high plateau. Northern Malawi has some mountains whereas the south consists of a mixture of valleys, plateaus and mountains. The climate in Malawi is tropical with wet and dry seasons. Resulting from the Great Rift Valley, Lake Nyasa forms most of the boundary between Malawi and Tanzania and Mozambique. Deforestation, land degradation, pollution, improper disposal of sewage, and siltation in Lake Nyasa are environmental issues. Malawi is divided into 28 administrative districts.

**Population:** 15,879,252 (July 2011)

**Annual Growth Rate:** 2.763% (2011)

**Fertility Rate:** 5.43 children born per woman (2011)

**Life Expectancy:** 50.93 male, 52.48 female (2011)

### Peoples

Chewa

Nyanja

Tumbuka

Yao

Lomwe

Sena

Tonga

Ngoni

Ngonde

Asian

European

The Chewa people are the largest ethnic group, concentrated in the center of the country. The Nyanja reside in the south around Blantyre, the Tumbuka are found in northern Malawi, and the Yao live to the south of Lake Nyasa. The Lomwe are found south of Blantyre and the Tonga live north of Lilongwe.

**Languages:** Chichewa (57.2%), Chinyanja (12.8%), Chiyao (10.1%), Chitumbuka (9.5%), Chisena (2.7%), Chilomwe (2.4%), Chitonga (1.7%), Other (3.6%). Chichewa is the official language of Malawi. English is also spoken and is the language government has adopted. 16 native languages are spoken in Malawi. Native languages with more than one million speakers include Chichewa and Chinyanja (7.0 million), Tumbuka (1.0 million), and Yao (1.0 million).

**Literacy:** 62.7% (2003)

## History

Bantu tribes occupied Malawi before the arrival of Europeans in the nineteenth century. The Portuguese were the first to explore the area but no major European contact occurred. The British began colonizing Malawi in the late nineteenth century, establishing a protectorate named Nyasaland. Malawi joined neighboring Zambia and Zimbabwe to create the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland in 1953 which was still under British control. Independence was granted to Malawi in 1964 and which was followed by three decades of one-party rule. President Hastings Kamuzu Banda ruled Malawi from independence to 2004 and held the first multiparty elections in 1994. President Bingu wa Mutharika has focused on improving economic development and reducing corruption since coming to office in 2004. Political problems have limited progress in improving government functionality, living conditions, and economic development, but have not resulted in instability and violence as seen in many other African nations.

## Culture

Malawi maintains much of its African heritage and culture despite 73 years of British colonial rule. The country is well known for its tribal dances and woodcrafts. Like many African countries, polygamy is practiced by many. Polygamous marriages are not legally recognized, but local African laws recognize some aspects of polygamous relationships. An estimated 20% of married women in Malawi have a polygamous spouse.[\[1\]](#) Cigarette and alcohol consumption rates are low compared to the worldwide average.

## Economy

**GDP per capita:** \$900 (2010) [1.9% of US]

**Human Development Index:** 0.493

**Corruption Index:** 3.4

Poverty is a major problem in Malawi as 53% of the population was estimated to live below the poverty line in 2004. Little economic development has occurred in Malawi due to its landlocked location, corruption and lack of government initiative until the past decade. The economy is agriculturally driven, with 90% of the Malawian workforce laboring in agriculture. Agriculture and services each account for about 40% of the country's GDP whereas industry constitutes the remaining 20%. Economic growth has recently occurred in Malawi, with the GDP increasing by over 7.9% since 2006. Primary agricultural products in Malawi are tobacco, tea and sugar. Malawi's largest import/export partner is South Africa. Countries which receive the most exports include Egypt, Zimbabwe, the United States and European nations. China, India, Tanzania, and the United States also import into Malawi.

Corruption is widespread in Malawi. Several government officials have had corruption charges. Offenses appear most serious

with customs and taxes.[\[2\]](#)

Faiths

Christian: 79.9%

Muslim: 12.8%

Other: 3%

None: 4.3%

Christians

Denominations Members Congregations

Catholic 2,000,000

Seventh-Day Adventists 294,202 1,247

Jehovah's Witnesses 70,382 1,158

Latter-Day Saints 925 7

Religion

Christians account for approximately 80% of the national population. Most Christians adhere to the Catholic and Church of Central Africa Presbyterian Churches. Smaller Christian groups include Anglicans, Baptisms, evangelicals, and Seventh Day Adventists. Most Muslims are Sunni Muslims. Few practice indigenous beliefs.[\[3\]](#)

Religious Freedom

Persecution Index:

Religious freedom is protected by the constitution and respected by the government. To register with the government, religious groups must submit an application and pay a nominal fee. There have been no recent reports of the government refusing to register a religious group. Foreign missionaries may operate but must have employment permits. Public schools teach religious classes. There have been no major societal abuses of religious freedom reported in recent years.[\[4\]](#)

Major Cities

Urban: 19%

Blantyre, Lilongwe, **Mzuzu, Zomba, Karonga, Mangochi, Kasungu, Salima, Nkhotakota, Nsanje**

Cities listed in **bold** have no LDS congregations.

Two of the ten largest cities have an LDS congregation. 10% of the national population resides in the 10 largest cities.

LDS History

The first members of the Church in Malawi were expatriates living in Lilongwe in the early 1990s. Paperwork was submitted for official recognition of the Church in 1991. The first convert baptisms occurred in the country in July 1992. Later that year, Malawi was included in the Zimbabwe Harare Mission and the first missionaries to visit were a senior couple. They baptized

many Malawians, some of which waited many years to join the Church. The Church was officially registered with the government in 1995. The first missionaries to live in the country arrived in 1999 and resided in Blantyre and visited the Sitima weekly.<sup>[5]</sup> Seminary and institute began in 2002. In late 2010, full-time missionaries serving in the Zimbabwe Harare Mission reported that in 2011 a new mission headquartered in Lusaka, Zambia would administer Malawi.

## **Membership Growth**

**LDS Membership:** 925 (2010)

In 1991, there was only a small group of foreign members meeting in Lilongwe. 74 Malawians joined the Church in 1992. By the end of 2000 there were 274 members in Malawi, with over 200 members in the Sitima Branch and around 60 in the Blantyre Branch.<sup>[6]</sup>

Membership growth increased more rapidly as the Church became more established in Blantyre. By the end of 2002 there were 377 members. In 2004 membership increased to 480. Membership continued to steadily increase, reaching 600 in 2006 and 742 in 2008.

Since 2000 membership growth rates have ranged from 5-19% a year. Annual membership growth rates were typically over 10% and membership increased annually by 40 to 100 members during the 2000s. In 2010, one in approximately 17,200 was LDS.

## **Congregational Growth**

**Branches: 6 Groups: 1**

Sometime before 2000 a branch was created in Lilongwe, but was later discontinued in 2002. A second branch was created in May 1999 in Sitima Village, located around 100 miles north of Blantyre. A second branch was created in Blantyre in July 2000.

The Blantyre Branch was divided in 2005 to create the Blantyre 2nd Branch bringing the total number of branches in Malawi to three. A branch was recreated in Lilongwe in the fall of 2007.<sup>[7]</sup> The Sitima Branch was discontinued in 2008 due to challenges meeting its administration needs and its remote location, reducing the total number of branches in Malawi to three. In 2009, all three branches reported directly to the mission in Zimbabwe and were not part of a district or stake. In 2010, a second branch was organized in Lilongwe (Kauma Branch), increasing the number of congregations to four. In early 2011, two new branches were organized in Blantyre, the Zingwangwa and Ndirande Branches, and the first district in Malawi was organized in Blantyre to administer to the four branches in the city. In 2011, a group began functioning in Liwonde which included some of the members of the former Sitima Branch.

## **Activity and Retention**

In 2006, there were between 75-120 active members in each of the branches in Blantyre. In late 2009, missionaries serving in Lilongwe reported that sacrament attendance was usually around 30. 51 were enrolled in seminary and institute during the 2009-2010 school year. Active membership in Malawi is estimated at 400, or 40-45% of total church membership.

## **Language Materials**

**Languages with LDS Scripture:** English

LDS materials translated into Chichewa include the Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith, the Articles of Faith, and Gospel Principles.

## **Public Health**

Poverty and an undeveloped economy result in poor health conditions and low life expectancies. Malawi has a high rate of HIV/AIDS with about 12% of the adult population infected. Sexual promiscuity and drug use are societal problems which challenge Church teachings. Tropical diseases are endemic, medical infrastructure is underdeveloped, and health care access is limited.

## **Meetinghouses**

The first meetinghouse built by the Church was dedicated in 2005 in Blantyre. The meetinghouse was built by the Church to

handle future growth in the city and be a stake center once a stake is organized.<sup>[8]</sup> Congregations in Lilongwe meet in a rented space or a renovated facility. Newly organized congregations in Blantyre and Liwonde meet in renovated buildings or rented spaces.

## **Humanitarian and Development Work**

The Church was undertook a campaign to vaccinate Malawians against measles in 2008.<sup>[9]</sup>

## **Opportunities, Challenges and Prospects**

### **Religious Freedom**

No government regulations limit Latter-day Saints from proselytism, assembly, or worship. Foreign full-time missionaries report few challenges obtaining needed documentation to serve in Malawi.

### **Cultural Issues**

Widespread Christian beliefs with little syncretism with indigenous beliefs reduces cultural challenges that are often apparent in many African countries. High rates of church attendance and religious activity in the general population benefit LDS mission outreach efforts as many have developed personal, regular religious habits. Those who practice polygamy and want to join the Church must end their polygamous relations in divorce and be interviewed by a member of the mission presidency. Tobacco is one of the most widely produced crops. Those who grow tobacco and join the Church may be pressured to change their vocation or grow a different crop.

### **National Outreach**

Notwithstanding the Church's presence in Malawi for nearly twenty years and missionary presence for over ten years, outreach is limited to only the two largest cities. About eight percent of the population is accessible to the Church, assuming meetinghouses are easily reached in Blantyre and Lilongwe. There has been no effort to establish the Church in northern Malawi or central Malawi between Blantyre and Lilongwe with the exception of the organization of a group in Liwonde in 2011.

Opportunities exist to establish the Church in remaining large cities, many of which are not distant from Blantyre and Lilongwe. Malawi likely receives few mission resources because of its isolation from the rest of the Zimbabwe Harare Mission, but the organization of the Zambia Lusaka Mission will likely increase the mission resources dedicated to Malawi in the coming years. In the past, Zambia and Zimbabwe have required greater mission assistance and resources due to their larger church memberships and more widespread Church presences. Rural areas in Malawi are largely untouched and will likely remain unreached until great emphasis is placed on expanding national outreach and member-missionary programs.

### **Member Activity and Convert Retention**

Activity and retention appear to have stayed constant or have slightly worsened since the creation of the first branch in 1999. The creation several new branches in recent years indicates increases in active membership capable of fulfilling leadership responsibilities.

### **Ethnic Issues and Integration**

Due to the small church membership concentrated in only the two largest cities in Malawi, ethnic diversity has not caused integration issues as of early 2011. Ethnic issues may arise when multiple ethnic groups met in the same congregation or if branches speaking different languages pertain to the same district. As Malawi has seen few ethnic tensions, it does not appear that difficulties are likely to arise in integrating different ethnic group into the same congregations.

### **Language Issues**

The Church has been established primarily among those who speak English and Chichewa as these are the only languages in which any Church materials have been translated. Half of the population speaks Chichewa, providing great opportunities for the Church to reach a large portion of the population with limited language translations. Once more Church materials are translated into Chichewa, the Church will be able to reach the majority of the population more efficiently. Other languages such as Lomwe, Tonga and Yao will likely have some basic church materials translated once congregations are established where these

languages are widely spoken. Like many other African countries, requirements may exist in Malawi for those who join the Church to have a certain degree of competency in English or Chichewa before baptism.

## **Missionary Service**

Few Malawians have served missions. Malawi heavily depends on foreign missionaries to staff its missionary force as there were few if any Malawian missionaries serving in their home country in 2010. In 2005 there were six missionaries and one senior couple serving in Malawi.<sup>[10]</sup> Missionaries were assigned for the first time to Lilongwe in the fall of 2008. In 2009, Malawi was a missionary zone in the Zimbabwe Harare Mission. Prospects appear high for the assignment of additional missionaries to Malawi in the near future due to Malawi's low levels of self-sufficiency in local leadership and a large, unreached, receptive population.

## **Leadership**

The Church has seen some success in developing local leadership in the past decade. When the Lilongwe Branch was recreated in 2007, both the branch president and counselor were local members.<sup>[11]</sup> Stronger leadership growth has occurred in Blantyre. The delayed organization of a district and additional branches in Blantyre indicate challenges augmenting the number of active priesthood holders.

## **Temple**

Malawi is assigned to the Johannesburg South Africa Temple district. Temple trips have likely occurred from the branches in Blantyre where missionaries have focused on strengthening members and families for a decade. A potential temple in Harare, Zimbabwe appears likely in the medium term and would reduce travel costs and time for members attending the temple.

## **Comparative Growth**

Malawi experienced comparable growth to most African nations which had between 100 and 300 members in 2000. Togo and Cameroon both had less than 300 members in 2000 and had between 700 and 800 members in 2008. Other African nations with less than 300 members experienced less rapid growth, such as Namibia which grew from 274 members in 2000 to 562 members in 2008. However, Malawi has seen no increase in congregations since 2000, whereas Cameroon and Togo both saw congregations increase from one to three. Malawi has one of the lowest percentages of members per the population in Africa among countries with an official Church presence. Member activity and convert retention rates appear lower than average among African countries.

Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh Day Adventists have experienced strong growth in Malawi. These and other Christian denominations have existed for many decades in the country. Seventh Day Adventists have achieved some of the most impressive growth in recent years, with three percent of Malawians belonging to the SDA Church in some areas of the country. The LDS Church has yet to enter rural areas of the country in which most Christian denominations already have a presence.

Freedom of religion, a predominantly Christian population, and development needs have combined to create an atmosphere favorable for rapid growth among Christian denominations. Freedom of religion has eliminated government involvement in religious affairs that can limit a church's growth. Most have a background in Christianity, which usually increases the receptivity of people to the LDS Church. Interest in religion among Malawians appears widespread.

## **Future Prospects**

The creation of a new LDS mission specifically administering Zambia and Malawi in 2011 greatly increase the prospects for more rapid LDS Church growth in Malawi in the coming years as for the first time greater numbers of full-time missionaries may be assigned and additional areas of the country may open to full-time missionary work. Continued congregational growth in Lilongwe and Blantyre appear likely due to their large populations and recent successes increasing the number of branches in both cities. Additional cities will likely not open to missionary work or receive independent congregations until active members move to these locations, cities with a current Church presence experience stronger membership and leadership growth, and the number of full-time missionaries assigned to Malawi increases. An independent branch may be organized in Liwonde in the near future. Zomba and Mzuzu seem the most likely cities to have a future LDS presence due to their large populations. Malawi is in need of greater numbers of local members serving full-time missions to improve self-sufficiency and lay a foundation for future leadership development which grows at a more rapid pace.

<sup>[1]</sup> "Malawi," Social Institutions & Gender Index, retrieved 3 January 2011. <http://genderindex.org/country/malawi>

<sup>[2]</sup> "Malawi," 2010 Index of Economic Freedom, retrieved 3 January 2011. <http://www.heritage.org/index/country/malawi>

[3] "Malawi," International Religious Freedom Report 2010, 17 November 2010.  
<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2010/148702.htm>

[4] "Malawi," International Religious Freedom Report 2010, 17 November 2010.  
<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2010/148702.htm>

[5] "Enduring - Baptized after 14 years," LDS Church News, 18 November 2000.  
<http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/38907/Enduring-----Baptized-after-14-years.html>

[6] "Enduring - Baptized after 14 years," LDS Church News, 18 November 2000.  
<http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/38907/Enduring-----Baptized-after-14-years.html>

[7] "Church grows in Malawi," LDS Church News, 15 September 2007.  
<http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/51053/Church-grows-in-Malawi.html>

[8] "Meetinghouse in Malawi," LDS Church News, 20 August 2005.  
<http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/47721/Meetinghouse-in-Malawi.html>

[9] Weaver, Sarah Jane. "Fighting measles," LDS Church News, 17 May 2008.  
<http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/52000/Fighting-measles.html>

[10] "Meetinghouse in Malawi," LDS Church News, 20 August 2005.  
<http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/47721/Meetinghouse-in-Malawi.html>

[11] "Church grows in Malawi," LDS Church News, 15 September 2007.  
<http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/51053/Church-grows-in-Malawi.html>