

Reaching the Nations International Church Growth Almanac

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



Lesotho

Population: 1.94 millions (#149 out of countries)

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Geography

Area: 30,355 square km. Lesotho is nestled in the mountains completely surrounded by South Africa. Due to a lack of low altitude areas, it is the highest country in the world. The climate is temperate, with hot, wet summers and cool, dry winters. Grassland and forest cover much of the country. Higher mountains can experience year-round snowfall. Soil erosion is a major environmental problem that has degraded once agriculturally productive lands. There are 10 administrative districts.

Population: 2,130,819 (July 2009)

Annual Growth Rate: 0.116% (2009)

Fertility Rate: 3.06 children born per woman (2009)

Life Expectancy: male 41.18, female 39.54 (2009)

Peoples

Sotho: 99.7%

Other (mainly European and Asian): 0.3%

Lesotho is one of the most ethnically homogenous countries in the world.

Languages: English and Sesotho are national or official languages, but Sesotho is most spoken by over 80% of the population. Five languages are spoken in Lesotho. Zulu is the most spoken minority language (12.5%), with speakers concentrated in the north. Sesotho is the only language with over one million speakers (1.77 million).

Literacy: 74.5% (2003)

History

Hunter-gatherer tribes lived in the area before the arrival of the Sotho people around 1,000 years ago. Fighting occurred between the Sotho and Europeans during the 1800s, resulting in Lesotho becoming a protectorate to the British and named Basutoland. During the first half of the 20th century, much of the country's autonomy was retained. Independence was granted from the United Kingdom in 1966 and the name was changed to Lesotho. Political instability arose between the Basotho National Party to the Basotho Congress Party in elections in 1970. Tensions between the two groups continued and a military coup overthrew the government in 1986. Poor relations with South Africa were experienced during this time period. Democratic rule was reestablished in 1993 following elections. South African and Batswana military forces intervened in 1998 when lawlessness after elections overtook the country. Since then greater stability has returned.

Culture

Health and economic problems have plagued the population. In 1999, 49% of the people lived below the poverty line. There is great inequality in the distribution of wealth. Lesotho has the third highest percentage of people with HIV/AIDS, accounting for 23.2% of the population. Local laws and customs have endured British rule. Polygamy is legal but not widely practiced. Women are always considered dependents of their fathers, husbands, or brothers.[1]

Economy

GDP per capita: $1,600 (2008) [3.4% of US]

Human Development Index: 0.514

Corruption Index: 3.2

Lesotho suffers from a small amount of territory landlocked in South Africa. Most of the labor force works in agriculture (86%), but around 35% of men work across the border in South Africa. Most of the country's GDP comes from industry (46%) and services (38.5%). Hydroelectric power generates most of the country's electricity. Dams also supply water to South Africa, adding additional revenue to the government and improving relations with South Africa. Unemployment is high (45%). Nearly all of exports go to the United States or Belgium and primarily consist of clothing, wool, and livestock. Major import partners include China and South Korea. Economic growth is steady, but tax system problems and high dependence on customs duties lessen growth. Although corruption levels are less than many other poor African nations, the greatest corruption occurs with Lesotho's water projects which provide water and electricity to South Africa.

Faiths

Christian: 80%

Indigenous beliefs: 20%

Christians

Denominations Members Congregations

Catholic 1,342,415

Seventh Day Adventists 6,531 37

Jehovah's Witnesses 3,555 75

Latter-Day Saints 606 1

Religion

Most Basotho identify as Christians and retain many of their cultural traditions with music and medicine. Christian denominations have been tolerant of integrating local culture with Christian worship. Ancestor worship is prevalent among indigenous beliefs and some Christians.

Religious Freedom

Persecution Index:

The constitution protects religious freedom, which is upheld by the government. There are no reports of any persecution of any religious groups.[2]

Major Cities

Urban: 25%

Maseru, **Mafeteng**, **Maputsoa**, **Teyateyaneng**, Hlotse, **Mohale's hoek**, **Quthing**, **Butha buthe**, **Qacha's nek**, **Mokhotlong**

Two of the ten largest cities have an LDS presence. The ten largest cities account for 15% of the national population.

LDS History

Few families from the United States began living in Lesotho in the 1980s. There were 15 in attendance when the first group was organized in 1988. Legal recognition was granted in July 1989, the same year the first baptisms occurred.[3] The country was dedicated for missionary work by Elder Neal A. Maxwell in February 1990.[4] Missionaries were first sent in 1989 and the first missionary to serve from Lesotho was called to the South Africa Durban Mission in 1993.[5] The seminary program began in the early 1990s. In 1996, an area conference was held with 5,000 members in attendance from Botswana, South Africa, Lesotho, Namibia and Swaziland.[6] In 2009 the Church celebrated 20 years in Lesotho with an open house which was attended by more than 350 people. Lesotho was part of the South Africa Johannesburg Mission until 2010 when it was transferred to the South Africa Durban Mission.

Membership Growth

LDS Membership: 673 (2009)

There were 100 members in the early 1990s and 300 by the mid-1990s. By the end of 2000 there were 413 members. Slow, steady growth in membership continued, with membership reaching 525 by 2004 and 606 by 2008. Between 2002 and 2008, membership growth rates have fluctuated between 2% and 5.5%. In 2009, membership grew by over 11%, the highest percentage increase since 2001.

Congregational Growth

Branches: 2 Groups: 1

The first group was created in Maseru in July 1988 and became an independent branch in the early 1990s. A second branch was created outside of Maseru in Mazenod in 1993, but was soon discontinued because a meetinghouse was unavailable.[7]

Another branch was created in Lesotho in 2009, named the Masianokeng Branch. The new branch was created in the same vicinity as the Mazenod Branch in 1993. When the Bloemfontein South Africa District was created in June 2009, both the Maseru and Masianokeng Branches were included in the new district. In early 2010, full-time missionaries opened were assigned to Leribe (nearby Hlotse) and organized a group.

Activity and Retention

Lesotho has one of the lowest activity rates in Africa as there was only one branch until 2009. In 2008 the sole Maseru Branch had nominal membership of over 600. Many of the membership records are outdated; many members cannot be located and some have even started their own churches. Problems in member activity increased shortly after the creation of the Masianokeng Branch, posing risk that the branches would need to be recombined. These issues have since improved and the Masianokeng Branch has experienced greater member activity. Renewed interest in member missionary work came as result of preparing for the celebration of the 20th anniversary of the establishment of the Church in Lesotho in 2009. 39 were enrolled in seminary or institute during the 2008-2009 school year. In mid-2010, the Leribe Group had fewer than ten active members and over a dozen investigators attending church. Active membership in Lesotho is around 150-200, indicating activity rates of 25-30%.

Language Materials

Languages with LDS Scripture: English, Zulu

Church materials translated into Sesotho are limited to Gospel Principles, The Prophet Joseph Smith's Testimony, and the sacrament prayers. Church meetings are conducted in English and Sesotho. The Book of Mormon has been translated into Zulu along with basic missionary, priesthood, and Relief Society materials.

Meetinghouses

When Church members first arrived in the country, the first Church meetings were held in members' homes. A house in Maseru was purchased in the early 1990s which was remodeled and used as a chapel.[8]

Public Health

Living conditions are poor and result in inadequate health care. Widespread promiscuity in particular has contributed to Lesotho having the third highest percentage in the world for those infected with HIV/AIDS. The disease has also spread through contaminated needles, drug use, and birth to HIV-positive mothers. Sanitation is often poor, health infrastructure is limited, and access to care is uneven.

Humanitarian and Development Work

A workshop on neonatal resuscitation techniques was held for local doctors in the 2000s.[9] Thousands of boxes of food items were provided for drought relief in 2004.[10] A large Mormon Helping Hands service project was completed in Lesotho in 2009 in which 125 members from both branches cleaned and repaired a local hospital. Missionaries in 2009 taught English and personal ethics to children at schools.

Opportunities, Challenges and Prospects

Religious Freedom

No obstacles prevent proselytism or Church activities. The LDS Church has yet to make full use of the opportunities for proselytizing in Lesotho. Senior missionaries have maintained positive relationships with the king and queen, inviting them to Church events and open houses.

Cultural Issues

The Church benefits from the absence of some African cultural traditions, like polygamy, which are contrary to Church teachings. Immorality is a major obstacle which is against Church teachings The status of women may negatively affect Church growth as women who have joined the Church are sometimes unable to attend regularly because of a husband who opposes. Indigenous beliefs involving ancestor worship may pose misinterpretations of Church doctrine related to proxy ordinance work.

National Outreach

The majority of the population in Lesotho remains unreached by the Church. Only two congregations meet in Maseru, which accounts for less than eight percent of the national population. Missionaries stationed in Leribe likely reach less than one percent of the population. Most of the inhabitants in Maseru have likely had little exposure to the Church due to its presence for only twenty years and small active LDS membership. Greater effort to reach more of the population appears forthcoming due to the creation of the Lesotho Zone in the South Africa Johannesburg mission and the division of the Maseru Branch in 2009.

One of the obstacles which have limited outreach into towns outside Maseru and rural areas is the country's remoteness and dispersed population. Mountainous areas which are densely populated will continue to present challenges for Church outreach and the establishment of an enduring presence due to separation from local Church leadership in Maseru and South Africa. Until mid-2010, the South Africa Johannesburg Mission had to allocate missionaries, mission president visits, and other mission resources over a large area of South Africa and Botswana, both of which have more pressing needs and experience stronger retention and membership growth. The South Africa Durban Mission also had challenges administering Lesotho due to distance and administration needs in Swaziland and southeast South Africa. Rural areas in Lesotho also have few competent English speakers, which challenge the Church's limited Sesotho language resources. The Church typically expands into smaller towns

or rural areas as local members move to these locations. It is likely unknown whether any members live outside of Maseru in unreached areas due to outdated records.

The Church has a great opportunity to conduct missionary work among the Zulu. The Butha-Buthe District and nearby districts in northern Lesotho have hundreds of thousands of Zulu. Missionary success among Zulu has occurred in the South Africa Durban Mission. Zulu leadership in South Africa could assist in introducing the Church into the northern areas of Lesotho. More Church materials are available in Zulu than Sesotho, which would further assist in the establishment of the Church among the Basotho Zulu.

Member Activity and Convert Retention

The low LDS convert retention and member activity in Lesotho has resulted from two decades of little mission involvement due to political instability and the country's remoteness. Other possible reasons for low activity and retention include the lack of Sesotho language Church materials, low literacy and lack of strong habits of church attendance among the local population, mission practices that have historically emphasized quick baptism of investigators who have often not developed firm gospel habits, limitedinvolvement of local membership in missionary work. The Masianokeng area experienced stagnant growth for years and many members with complacent attitudes towards missionary work which was not reversed until recently. Overall activity is difficult to assess due to outdated membership records. In 2009 missionaries began an increased effort to teach and baptize families with a father present during lessons.

Ethnic Issues and Integration

The Church has likely not experienced any ethnic integration issues due to the country's lack of ethnic diversity. Potential integration issues could occur in the north due to the mixture of Zulu and Sotho peoples once the Church is established there.

Language Issues

Little amounts of Church materials and no LDS scriptures have been translated into Sesotho. This has likely resulted from few Sotho joining the Church, remaining active, and possessing language abilities capable of producing scripture translations. Low rates of functional literacy also present challenges. Limited language materials have slowed growth since English is not spoken in rural areas. Limited Sesotho language Church materials are not well utilized. Most Basotho members did not know that any translations of Church materials were available in their language in 2009.

Membership and congregation growth among the Sotho in South Africa that is concentrated in the Free State Province has also been limited, but appears to have increased in the 2000s. This is evidenced by additional branches created and the organization of the district in Bloemfontein. Additional translations of Church materials and scriptures will become more likely due to the growth among Sotho speakers in South Africa, which would greatly benefit Basotho member Gospel understanding and member missionary activities.

Missionary Service

In mid-2009 there were six young missionaries serving in the country. Missionaries have had problems getting legal residency and sometimes have had to live across the border in the South African town of Ladybrand. These problems were resolved in 2009. Additional missionaries and attention came with the creation of the Lesotho Zone for missionaries in the South Africa Durban Mission. A senior missionary couple has been assigned since late 2008. In late 2010, the Lesotho Zone consisted of missionaries assigned to Bethlehem (South Africa), Leribe, Maseru, Masianokeng, and Phuthaditjhaba (South Africa)

Leadership

Local leadership appears limited with only two branches functioning in the country. Few have served missions or attended the temple. Low activity and retention have resulted in few men in the Church who can lead congregations or hold callings. Lack in leadership may have contributed to the small amount of language materials in Sesotho.

Temple

Lesotho is part of the Johannesburg South Africa Temple District. Close proximity to Johannesburg and lack of border crossing complications provide the opportunity for the small Church membership to participate in temple ordinances which are usually only available to members living in countries with larger memberships. Temple trips occur regularly for both branches and members sacrifice much of their money and time to attend.

Comparative Growth

Lesotho has experienced some of the slowest membership and congregational growth in Africa. Only a few other African nations have had a continuing Church presence first established in the early 1990s with as many or fewer members than Lesotho. The Church was first established in Botswana around the same time, yet has twice as many members and three times the number of congregations.

Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh Day Adventists have seen limited, yet far stronger growth than the LDS Church. Both denominations have memberships in the thousands that meet in dozens of congregations. These and other Christian denominations have been able to develop self-sustaining leadership and a strong membership base which has spread their beliefs in Sesotho to other areas of the country even during times of political instability.

Future Prospects

National outreach appears likely to increase in the coming years due to the creation of the Lesotho Zone in the South Africa Johannesburg Mission. Missionary work continues to be driven by full-time missionaries and not local leadership. Future membership and congregational growth will likely continue to be limited to Maseru and its surroundings until these areas become more self-sustaining. Isolated members living in rural areas may be found and utilized to spread the Church to unreached areas.

The Bloemfontein South Africa District will likely become a stake in the early 2010s considering the district had over 2,000 members, 600 of which attended the first district conference at the district's creation in June 2009. The Maseru Branch may become a ward once the district becomes a stake. Lesotho could also become its own district once additional branches are organized in the country. A third branch appears likely to be organized in Maseru due to a member mapping project by senior couple missionaries in late 2009 and 2010.

[1] "Lesotho," Social Institutions and Gender Index, retrieved 7 December 2010. http://genderindex.org/country/lesotho

[2] "Lesotho," International Religious Freedom Report 2009, 26 October 2009. http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2009/127239.htm

[3] "Missionaries serving in tiny African kingdom," LDS Church News, 2 December 1989. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/19328/Missionaries-serving-in-tiny-African-kingdom.html

[4] "Six lands are dedicated: 'New day dawning' in 2 small African mountain kingdoms," LDS Church News, 10 March 1990. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/19958/Six-lands-are-dedicated--New-day-dawning-in-2-small-African-mountain-kingdoms.ht

[5] "Lesotho," Country Profile, retrieved 7 December 2010. http://beta-newsroom.lds.org/country/lesotho

[6] http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/27515/5000-attend-conference-in-South-Africa-example-of-growth-of-the-Church.html

[7] "Lesotho," Deseret News 2003 Church Almanac, p. 364

[8] "Lesotho," Country Profile, retrieved 7 December 2010. http://beta-newsroom.lds.org/country/lesotho

[9] "Projects - Lesotho," Humanitarian Activities Worldwide, retrieved 7 December 2010. http://www.providentliving.org/project/0,13501,4607-1-2008-180,00.html

[10] Weaver, Sarah Jane. "Nature's blows softened by aid in Africa, Peru," LDS Church News, 31 June 2004. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/45903/Natures-blows-softened-by-aid-in-Africa-Peru.html