

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.



Laos

Population: 6.8 millions (#104 out of countries)

By David Stewart and Matt Martinich

Geography

Area: 236,800 square km. Laos is landlocked in Southeast Asia and borders Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, Myanmar, and China. Tropical monsoon occurs between May and November followed by a dry season from December to April. Most of the landscape is mountainous with few plains. The Mekong River flows along the Thai border. Floods and droughts are natural hazards. Environmental issues include refuse from war, deforestation, lack of potable water, and soil erosion. Laos is administratively divided into seventeen provinces and one prefecture.

Peoples

Lao: 53.2%

Khmu: 11.0%

Hmong: 9.2%

Phouthay: 3.4%

Tai: 3.1%

Makong: 2.5%

Katong: 2.2%

Lue: 2.0%

Akha: 1.8%

Other: 11.6%

The majority of the population is Lao. Khmu primarily reside in north central Laos. The Hmong also reside in northern areas. Other ethnicities include over one hundred different groups. There is also an ethnic Vietnamese community in Vientiane.

Population: 7,234,171 (July 2018)

Annual Growth Rate: 1.48% (2018)

Fertility Rate: 2.65 children born per woman (2018)

Life Expectancy: 62.9 male, 67.1 female (2018)

Languages: Lao (55%), Khmu (10%), Hmong dialects (7%), Thai Don (5%), Phu Thai (4%), Lu (3%), Kataang (2.5%), Phuan (2.5%), So (2.5%), other (8.5%). Lao is the official language. Eighty-four native languages are spoken in Laos, most with 1,000 to 100,000 speakers. Only Lao has over one million native speakers (3.43 million).

Literacy: 84.7%

History

In the fourteenth century, the Lan Xang kingdom was established in present-day Laos. Lan Xang ruled the area for three centuries and influenced the Southeast Asia region. The kingdom divided into three states and eventually assimilated into Thailand later and became part of French Indochina in the late 1800s. France regained control of Laos following a brief hiatus in World War II. Independence occurred in 1949, but France continued to exert influence on the region for the following decade. Laos played an integral part of the Vietnam War, as it experienced civil war between the communist Pathet Lao rebels and the Royal Laotian government. The United States heavily bombed Laos to fight the North Vietnamese assistance of the Pathet Lao. Communists took control in 1975 and continued strict socialist policy until 1988. For the past two decades, Laos has allowed more privatization to occur within the economy and has shown a less isolated stance but remains a communist state.

Culture

Lao culture is an amalgam of indigenous tradition as well as Cambodian, Indian, and Chinese influence. Buddhism strongly influences culture. Buddhist festivals are widely celebrated, and temples are widespread. Luang Prabang was the historic capital of Laos and is a World Heritage Site. The Khene, a mouth organ of ancient origin from Laos, is celebrated as the national instrument. Rice is the primary food staple. Tobacco cigarette and alcohol usage are comparable to world averages.

Economy

GDP per capita: $7,400 (2017) [12.4% of U.S.]

Human Development Index: 0.601 (2017)

Corruption Index: 29 (2018)

Laos is one of the few remaining one-party communist states. Foreign investment began in the mid-1980s and has contributed to steady economic growth that has been sustained for several consecutive decades. The landlocked position of Laos has isolated it from international trade. The infrastructure remains underdeveloped, particularly with electricity and roads. Poverty has been reduced in the past two decades; 22% now live below the poverty line. Agriculture employs for 73.1% of the workforce and produces 20.9% of the GDP. Primary agricultural products include sweet potatoes, vegetables and corn. Industry and services account for 33.2% and 45.9% of the GDP respectively. Mining is the largest industry and exploits copper, tin, gold, and gypsum resources. Timber and hydroelectric power are other important industries. Primary trade partners include Thailand, China, and Vietnam.

Corruption rates are among the highest in Southeast Asia. Bribery is widespread. In government, there are few checks and balances to prevent corruption among officials or address its occurrence. There has been no measurable improvement with the reduction of perceived corruption in Laos during the past decade.

Faiths

Buddhist: 64.7%

Christian: 1.7%

Other: 2.2%

None: 31.4%

Christians

Denominations – Members – Congregations

Lao Evangelical Church – 200,000

Evangelicals – 170,215

Roman Catholic – 55,000

Seventh Day Adventists – 1,429 – 14

Latter-day Saints – 270? – 2

Religion

Theravada Buddhism is the most followed religion; there are over 4,000 temples. Many of the small ethnic groups in rural areas practice ancestor worship and animism. Very few do not practice a religion albeit government census data report nearly one-third of the population does not identify with a religious group. Estimates for the number of Christians in Laos vary from as low as 1.7% (government census data from 2015) to as high as 3.2% (Christian NGO estimate).[1] Catholics are concentrated in the center and southern portions of Laos, where they worship openly, but face restrictions in the north. The Lao Evangelical Church is sanctioned by the government and has caused friction with Protestants who want to start independent denominations. Protestants are growing steady. The Lao Evangelical Church (LEC) reports 200,000 members, whereas Roman Catholics report 55,000 members.[2] There are approximately 8,500 Baha'is.[3]

Religious Freedom

Persecution Index: 19th (2019)

The constitution allows for religious freedom, but government restricts its practice. Only four religions are recognized by the government: Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and the Baha'i Faith. All religious groups must operate under one of these four categories. A 2016 government degree has clarified some aspects of laws that govern religious activity, and there has been improvement in religious freedom in some urban areas. Nevertheless, religious minority groups, particularly Christians, continue to experience government and societal persecution. Mistreatment and coercion of Christians to renounce their faith frequently occurs in rural areas. The operation of congregations, travel for religious purposes, and construction of meetinghouses require government permission. Christians have faced limitations or are prohibited from importing Bibles and religious materials, whereas Buddhists do not have restrictions. Violators can face fines and have materials confiscated. Proselytism is forbidden, particularly by foreigners. Christians in some provinces face harassment, even when they assemble in private homes.[4]

Largest Cities

Urban: 35.6% (2019)

Vientiane**, Savannakhet, Pakxe, Luangprabang, Phonsavan, Thakhek, Oudomxay, Phiang, Xayabury, Phonhong.**

Cities in **bold** do not have congregations of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

One of the ten largest cities has a Church congregation. Fifteen percent (15%) of the national population lives in the ten largest cities.

Church History

The first Laotian members likely joined the Church in the 1970s in the United States. Several Laotian-speaking congregations were organized, most of which were in California. In the 2000s, a missionary proselytizing area opened in Nong Kha in Thailand, just across the Mekong River from Vientiane. A branch was organized in Vientiane in June 2003. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland dedicated Laos for missionary work in February 2006.[5] Full-time young missionaries served for a brief time in 2006. In early 2013, four young missionaries were assigned to Vientiane on service and education assignments. Young, full-time missionaries have generally been consistently assigned to Vientiane since 2013. Generally, the Church assigns four young male full-time missionaries who operate as service missionaries and teach English. These young missionaries also provide member support, teaching, and prebaptismal preparation to prospective converts, albeit these activities are limited to Sunday church meetings to comply with government restrictions on religious freedom. No government recognition has been secured for the Church, but the Church operates as an NGO called Deseret International Charities.

Membership Growth

Church Membership: 270? (2018)

Many coverts have been baptized in the Thai border town of Nong Khai. Members reside in Vientiane and its surroundings. In 2010, the Church reported 200 members in the Vientiane Branch.[6] In 2012, there were over 4,500 members who spoke Lao in Laos, Thailand, the United States, and Canada.[7] In 2014, Lao and Hmong ethnicities comprised the majority, with small numbers of foreigners comprising the remainder of church membership. In 2018, Church membership appeared to number approximately 270.

In 2018, one in 26,793 was estimated to be a Latter-day Saint

Congregational Growth

Branches: 2 (2019)

A second branch was organized in mid-2015. Both Vientiane branches meet in the same meetinghouse and pertain to the Udorn Thailand District.

Activity and Retention

Over half the active membership has historically resided on the outskirts of Vientiane. Local leaders use buses to help transport many of the members to the meetinghouse due to distance and travel constraints. In 2009, there were ten active Aaronic Priesthood holders. In 2014, one local member reported that 30-39 converts had joined the Church in Laos that previous year, and 80-89% of the converts remained active one year after baptism. At the time, approximately 65% of total church membership regularly attended sacrament meeting services. In late 2017, full-time missionaries reported approximately twenty prospective members who attended Church services in Vientiane, and there were as many as 150 who attended church services at the time. In 2019, full-time missionaries reported that each Vientiane branch averaged eighty people in attendance for Church on Sundays.

Language Materials

Languages with Latter-day Saint Scripture: Lao, Hmong, Vietnamese.

All Church scriptures are available in Lao and Vietnamese. In 2012, the Church published a translation of the entire Book of Mormon into Lao.[8] Lao translations of the Doctrine and Covenants and the Pearl of Great Price were published in 2019.[9] The Hmong translation of the Book of Mormon has been available since 2000, and in 2017 the Church announced plans to translate the Doctrine and Covenants and the Pearl of Great Price into Hmong.[10] Some Church materials are available in Lao, Hmong, and Vietnamese, including family history, scripture study, missionary, priesthood, young women, Sunday School, Relief Society, temple, and unit audio/visual resources.

Meetinghouses

Meetings have historically been held in a clean, modern rented space. Branches were unable to meet in a meetinghouse for several months in approximately 2018 until a new meetinghouse space was approved by the government.

Health and Safety

Laos has one of the highest numbers of unexploded ammunition and bombs worldwide. Risk for spread of infectious diseases is high, and medical infrastructure is limited.

Humanitarian and Development Work

The Church has conducted 214 humanitarian and development projects in Laos as of 2018, which have included clean water projects, community projects, emergency response, maternal and newborn care, vision care, and wheelchair donations.[11] In 1994, the Church delivered donated rice sent by a three-truck caravan from Thailand to Vientiane. The Church also contributed to costs for transporting rice to the needy within Laos.[12] Humanitarian senior couples have served in Laos teaching English since the early 2000s.[13] The Church's worldwide clean water programs began from a single clean water project in Laos in 2002.[14] Neonatal resuscitation training has been sponsored by the Church.[15] Senior missionaries continue to conduct clean water and sanitation projects and donate school supplies. Wheelchairs were donated in 2008.[16]

Opportunities, Challenges, and Prospects

Religious Freedom

The Church faces many restrictions that severely limit missionary work. Young full-time missionaries do not proselyte. Individuals interested in joining the Church are located entirely by native Laotian members. Full-time missionaries are only permitted to teach others within the Church's meetinghouse, and these activities are strictly limited to the two-hour block of church meetings on Sundays. The Church's branches in Vientiane must utilize the building at the same time, and the congregations switch rooms in the building after the first hour of meetings concludes. It is unclear whether the current meetinghouse is able to accommodate any more branches due to limited space and time constraints for meetings. Full-time missionaries in late 2019 noted there are plans to seek official government recognition in Laos, which would permit publication of the Church's meetinghouse location and meeting times on the internet and elsewhere. Thus far, no public information is available regarding the location of the Church meetinghouse in Vientiane. Many of the members are picked up by a bus to go to Church given long distances to the meetinghouse as a consequence of the limited space and times available to the Church by government officials. In 2009, police told the bus driver he was not allowed to transport members from outside the city into Vientiane for Church services. However, it appeared that these difficulties were later resolved. Religious freedom conditions are worse outside of Vientiane, and present nearly insurmountable barriers to the expansion of the Church elsewhere in the country.

Cultural Issues

Buddhism strongly influences culture. Buddhist persecution of Christians appears minimal, and Christians face the greatest pressure from government officials. The Church will likely continue to experience some opposition for holding worship services. However, pressure will likely not be nearly as severe as on many minority Laotian Christians who have not only been persecuted because of their religious belief but also their ethnic minority status.

National Outreach

The Church has a tiny presence in Laos, as only Vientiane (9% of the national population) has a congregation and no foreign missionaries may proselyte. The majority the inhabitants in Vientiane are unaware of the Church. The only opportunity for Laotians to join the Church is through personal contact with a Church member. Local members will be instrumental in expanding the Church's national presence. Outreach to northern provinces appears the most difficult, as these regions experience greater intolerance toward religious minorities. Cities along the Thai border appear most likely to have a Church presence given proximity to Thailand. The fortuitous relocation of active members to additional cities appears the best apparatus to expand the Church's presence.

Members who travel to meetings by bus provide opportunity for expanded outreach outside of Vientiane. If government restricts the movement or logistics of Church members traveling to attend church services, this may result in the creation of small groups or branches in lesser-reached communities with some LDS members. However, worship in member homes appears difficult and may be subject to government interference and disapproval.

Member Activity and Convert Retention

High activity and retention appear the result of most converts seriously investigating the Church over a longer period of time and developing a habit of regular Church attendance prior to baptism. Furthermore, local members have been intimately involved in the teaching and fellowshipping process, which has also led to better retention and activity rates. Investigators have often overcome significant cultural pressures and opposition before joining the Church and tend to be strongly committed. However, many active members rely on Church-provided transportation to travel to Sunday meetings. If transportation is not provided to

members outside Vientiane, many may be unable to actively participate.

Ethnic Issues and Integration

Geography mitigates many ethnic issues. The Church has not faced ethnic integration issues in its Vientiane branches thus far. Some issues may arise once congregations start meeting in areas with greater ethnic diversity.

Language Issues

Laos experiences high linguistic diversity for an Asian country with a small population. Language barriers between commonly spoken languages by Church members and the rest of the population leave many ethnic groups without a gospel witness. Most of the indigenous non-Lao peoples have no Church materials translated into their native languages, such as Khmu.

Missionary Service

The Church in Laos has had significant numbers of local members serve full-time missions despite the small size of Church membership and significant government restrictions. The first two missionaries to serve from Laos received their mission calls in early 2006. In 2014, the Vientiane 1st Branch had seven recently returned missionaries, four members currently serving missions, and five members preparing to go on missions in the near future. In 2019, there were multiple members serving full-time missions, as well as additional members who were preparing to serve missions. In addition to two young missionary companionships, a senior missionary couple has historically resided in Vientiane and conducts humanitarian work.

Leadership

Local leadership has developed following the recent arrival of the Church. In 2006, the Vientiane Branch had native members serving in the branch presidency.[17] In 2009, members conducted home teaching visits after Church meetings due to government restrictions. At the time, the branch had twelve home teaching companionships. Priesthood advancements appear to occur regularly. Some mentoring by the mission president and service missionaries to Laotian Church leaders occurs.

Temple

Laos is assigned to the Hong Kong China Temple District. Laos will likely be assigned to the Bangkok Thailand Temple once it is completed. Temple excursions rarely occur. A temple preparation course was taught in 2009, and members prepared names of ancestors to submit for temple work.

Comparative Growth

Laos is one of the most recently reached countries for the Church in Asia and has experienced growth greater than many nations that also have limited religious freedom. The Church has had a presence in Bangladesh and Nepal at least a decade longer than in Laos, yet the Church in Laos has two branches with eighty active members each, whereas there is only one branch each in Bangladesh and Nepal and both of these branches have significantly smaller active membership than either branch in Laos. The Church in Laos has achieved similar growth to the Church in Myanmar as the Church in Myanmar also has two branches and approximately 150-200 active members. Both Laos and Myanmar had full-time missionaries permanently assigned in the 2010s, albeit full-time missionaries in Myanmar operate under far fewer restrictions than full-time missionaries in Laos.

Other Christian groups have had more rapid growth than The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in membership and national outreach. Seventh Day Adventists have experienced rapid growth from 137 members in 1998 to over 1,800 a decade later. Congregations have also reached outside of Vientiane to several provinces. Evangelicals have also reported steady, rapid growth in many areas of the country.

Future Prospects

Government restricts international missionary outreach, requiring local members to be self-sufficient in ecclesiastical duties and member-missionary work. This has led to intimate involvement of Laotian members in missionary work, and has yielded good convert retention and member activity rates. The two Vientiane branches appear likely to become wards if the Udorn Thailand District becomes a stake Government recognition may occur in the near future, which would permit the publication of the meetinghouse location in Vientiane. However, government recognition does not appear to currently provide any other benefits to the Church in Laos in regards to proselytism freedoms or expansion into additional cities. Returned missionaries present good leadership development prospects as long as these members do not emigrate. Growth in membership on the outskirts of Vientiane may result in the formation of groups or small branches to serve members in these locations if permitted by

government officials. Members who relocate to other cities in the country may also permit the expansion of the Church.

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