



# 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.



**Gabon**

Population: 1.67 millions (#154 out of countries)

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## Geography

**Area:** 267,667 square km. Located in Central Africa on the equator, Gabon borders Equatorial Guinea, Cameroon, the Republic of Congo, and the Atlantic Ocean. Tropical and humid climate continue year-round. Flat terrain covers most of Gabon, with some hills in the southern interior. Mangroves dominate coastal areas and most of the interior is tropical rainforest or savannah. High biodiversity and protected natural resources attract tourism. Gabon is divided into nine administrative provinces.

## Peoples

Fang: 40%

Punu: 8%

Njebi: 8%

Other native tribes: 34%

Other Africans and Europeans: 10%

The Fang is the largest tribe, followed by small tribes, most notably the Punu and Njebi. Other Africans arrived for employment from neighboring nations. Europeans remained from colonial times or arrived more recently with many working in the oil industry.

**Population:** 2,284,912 (July 2021)

**Annual Growth Rate:** 2.41 (2021)

**Fertility Rate:** 3.36 children born/woman (2021)

**Life Expectancy:** male: 67.66 years female: 71.14 years (2021)

**Languages:** Fang (17%), Punu (7%), Njebe (6%), other and unknown (70%). French is the official language and widely spoken as a second language. Almost half of Gabonese speak French as a second language. Forty native languages are spoken. No native languages are spoken by over one million speakers.

**Literacy:** 84.7% (2018)

## History

Native peoples populated Gabon for centuries prior to European exploration in the fifteenth century. The Portuguese first arrived and named the area from the Portuguese word for cloak, Gabão. Libreville was founded by liberated slaves in the mid-nineteenth century and later became the capital. The French arrived in the late nineteenth century and established Franceville in the interior and Port-Gentil along the coast. Between 1910 and 1959 Gabon pertained to French Equatorial Africa. Independence from France occurred in 1960. President Bongo ruled Gabon for forty years and died in June 2009. During his presidency, political conditions were sometimes unstable, and following his death, his son took power. The parliament building was burnt after controversy resulted from the results of President Bongo's reelection in 2016. Gabon has transformed itself into one of the most stable and developed nations in Central Africa with high inequality of wealth.

## Culture

The Fang and several other ethnic groups are known for performing traditional ceremonies with wood carved or metal masks. Music and oral tradition for folk stories is also important. Women's rights are limited. Widows cannot own land, and a married man may practice polygamy without the consent of his first wife.<sup>[1]</sup> Cigarette consumption rates are low compared to world averages, whereas alcohol consumption rates appear average compared to world averages.

## Economy

**GDP per capita:** \$14,950 (2019) [23.9% of U.S.]<sup>[MM1]</sup>

**Human Development Index:** 0.703 (2019)

**Corruption Index:** 30 (2020)

Gabon enjoys a GDP per capita among the highest in Africa, yet wealth is very unequally distributed, as most government earnings come from oil exploitation. Mismanagement of natural resources and corruption are major barriers towards greater economy development, particularly for most Gabonese. Unemployment was as high as 28% as of 2015. One-third of the population lived below the poverty line as of 2015. Services account for 50% of the GDP, whereas industry accounts for 45% of the GDP. Approximately two-thirds of the work force is employed in agriculture, a sector of the economy that accounts for only five percent of the nation's GDP, whereas 24% of the work force is employed in services. Primary agricultural products include fruit, sugar cane, and root crops. Oil is the largest industry (80% of exports between 2010 and 2016), followed by other mineral extraction (manganese and uranium). Timber is also exported. Primary import/export partners are China, the United States, and Ireland. Debt payment issues continue to impede economic growth, and Gabon recently signed a new debt repayment plan in 2017. Recently created national parks hope to draw additional revenue through ecotourism. Corruption is prevalent in the economy. There are concerns with human trafficking in Gabon for forced labor and sexual exploitation.

## Faiths

Christian: 80%

Indigenous beliefs: 10%

Muslim: 10%[\[MM2\]](#)

## Christians

### Denominations – Members – Congregations

Roman Catholic – 966,518

Seventh-Day Adventists – 2,528 – 37

Jehovah's Witnesses – 4,509 – 120

Latter-Day Saints – 300 – 2

Jehovah's Witnesses 4,509 60

Latter-Day Saints 300 2

## Religion

Most of the population is Christian. Two-thirds of Christians are Roman Catholics, whereas the remaining one third of Christians is primarily Protestant.[\[2\]](#) Indigenous beliefs are followed by many and influence Christianity. Muslims are a small yet growing minority.

## Religious Freedom

The constitution allows religious freedom, which is honored by the government. Religious groups are allowed to assemble, teach, and proselyte without restrictions.[\[3\]](#)

## Largest Cities

**Urban:** 90.1% (2020)

Libreville, **Port-Gentil**, **Franceville**, **Owendo**, **Oyem**, **Moanda**, **Ntoum**, **Lambarene**, **Mouila**, **Akanda**.[\[MM3\]](#)

Cities listed in **bold** have no congregations of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

One of the ten most populous cities has a Church congregation. Sixty-six percent (66%) of the national population lives in the ten largest cities.

## **Latter-day Saint History**

The first members in Gabon arrived in 1980 and consisted of Gabonese baptized abroad and returning to their homeland, mainly from Europe. The first counselor of the Embassy in Gabon visited Salt Lake City and met with Church officials in 1990.<sup>[4]</sup> When the Cameroon Yaoundé Mission was created in 1992, Gabon and Equatorial Guinea were included in the new mission. Members relied on Church magazines in French for instruction and awaited formal Church establishment. Permission for the Church to enter Gabon came in 1992<sup>[5]</sup>. In 1998, the Africa Area split, resulting in the formation of the Africa West Area, which included Gabon. Gabon and several neighboring nations were transferred to the Africa Southeast Area in 2003. The Church obtained formal permission to establish the Church in Gabon in 2013. That same year, Apostle Elder David A. Bednar dedicated Gabon for missionary work.<sup>[6]</sup> In January 2014, the first young proselytizing missionaries were assigned to Gabon. Gabon originally pertained to the Democratic Republic of the Congo Kinshasa Mission until July 2014 when the Republic of the Congo Brazzaville Mission was organized. Gabon was reassigned to the Cameroon Yaoundé Mission in 2020; the same year Gabon was included in the newly organized Africa Central Area..

## **Membership Growth**

**Church Membership:** 302 (2020) When the Church received permission to function in 2013, membership rapidly grew from 19 members in 2013 to 150 in 2014 or a growth of 447%. Growth stayed above 20% from 2015 to 2018. As of 2020 there are 302 members in two branches.

## **Congregational Growth**

### **Branches: 2 (2020)**

The first branch was established in 2013. The second branch was created in 2016. There were plans to split the two branches into four branches prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Branches have only been established in Libreville. There are reports that a member group once operated in southern Gabon prior to a formal Church establishment. Missionaries serving in the late 2010s noted there are small numbers of Latter-day Saints who live in Port-Gentil.

## **Activity and Retention**

There are about 150 active members in Gabon indicating an activity rate of 50%. There are about 70-80 active members in each branch. According to missionary reports, convert retention after 12 months is as high as 70%.

## **Language Materials**

**Languages with Latter-day Saint Scripture:** French.

All Church scriptures are translated in French. Gospel Principles Simplified and the Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith are both available in Fang.

## Meetinghouses

There are two church meetinghouses in rented buildings in Libreville.

## Health and Safety

HIV/AIDS infects 3.6% (2019 figure) of the population. Sanitation is poor, and tropical diseases are endemic. Medical infrastructure is limited, and access is uneven.

## Humanitarian and Development Work

Sixteen humanitarian and development projects have occurred in Gabon—most of which have been community projects.[\[7\]](#) In 2015, the Church donated 330 wheelchairs to the Ministry of Health of Gabon.

## Opportunities, Challenges, and Prospects

## Religious Freedom

It took the church eight years to be recognized in Gabon after the Church began this legal process. The Gabonese government upholds religious freedom, but it is strict with granting visas and allowing foreigners into the country. The Church has had problems in the past obtaining missionary visas and allowing the mission president to visit the country. One report from prior to 2017 indicated that the mission president had to take off his missionary badge that used the title “President” because he was not allowed to have a badge that identified him as a “president.” Despite these difficulties, there are no societal abuses of religious freedom that pose barriers for Latter-day Saints to proselyte.

## Cultural Issues

According to missionary reports, the Gabonese are highly receptive to the Latter-day Saint gospel message and are interested in talking to the missionaries. Most the population identifies as Christian and has a background consistent with populations traditionally targeted by Latter-day Saint missionary efforts. Low levels of economic development, poverty, and unemployment pose challenges for Gabonese to be self-sufficient.

## National Outreach

A lack of mission resources historically allocated to Central Africa combined with difficulties with obtaining official recognition with the government appear primarily responsible for the long delays in establishing a Latter-day Saint presence in Gabon despite a predominantly Christian population and widespread religious freedom. Approximately 39% of the population lives in Libreville where there is a Church presence. Nearly three-quarters of the national population live in the ten most populous cities, so missionary work can be effectively conducted among most Gabonese with limited resources and outreach centers. Missionaries report that several Latter-Day Saint families live in the second largest city, Port-Gentil, and there could be plans in the future to establish a member group or branch and send missionaries there. With more missionary resources devoted to the country as a result of the organization of the Cameroon Yaoundé mission, more missionaries may be allocated to Libreville in preparation for the division of the branches in the city and expansion to additional cities in Gabon such as Port-Gentil and Franceville.

## Member Activity and Convert Retention

The Libreville 1st Branch, the original branch organized in 2012, has many inactive members and struggles with a lack of unity among membership. According to missionary reports, the Libreville 2nd Branch is a strong and works actively with their youth. Missionaries report that there could be greater growth and expansion when the Libreville 1st Branch is stabilized.

## **Ethnic Issues and Integration**

Despite a small population, Gabon has large ethnic diversity that challenges Church resources in meeting the needs of differing ethnic groups. These ethnic groups will likely be included in the same congregations, as membership will be too small for the creation of native language specific units. The limited number of speakers of indigenous languages in Gabon challenges Church translation resources and will likely result in only Fang having Church materials translated for many years.

## **Language Issues**

Gabon benefits from a population that speaks French as a second language. French will serve as a language to unify members from differing ethnic groups. A limited number of Church materials in Fang will facilitate a formal Church establishment, as it is the most commonly spoken native language. Church material translations in Punu and Njebi appear challenging and unlikely until a strong membership presence is established.

## **Missionary Service**

In 2013 a senior missionary couple were the first missionaries in the country. In January 2014, four young missionaries began proselyting in the capital Libreville. The last senior missionary couple to serve in Gabon was in 2017. From 2013 to 2019, there were four young missionaries serving in Libreville. In March 2019, the number of missionaries increased to 8 and in January 2020, there were twelve full-time missionaries serving in Gabon. Gabon is now a part of the Cameroon Yaoundé Mission. There has not been a senior couple in Gabon since 2017, and there is an urgent need for a senior mission couple in Gabon to support the local leaders.

## **Leadership**

Local members hold callings in the branches. Since that the local leaders are young in the Church and need guidance with their callings, full-time missionaries take a large role in training the leaders in their callings and in fortifying the members. Missionaries report that some members are dissuaded from the errors of local leaders causing a lack of unity and inactivity in the branches.

## **Temple**

Gabon pertains to the Democratic Republic of the Congo Temple district. Members who may attend the temple have their temple recommends issued by the Cameroon Yaoundé Mission presidency and to go the temple individually or as families.

## **Comparative Growth**

Historically, the Church in Gabon has struggled because of lack of attention, remote location, a comparable small population, and limited mission resource availability. Gabon numbered among several Sub-Saharan African nations to have an initial Church presence established in the 2010s, such as Burundi (2010), Senegal (2016), Guinea (2017), and Mali (2017). The percentage of Latter-day Saints in the Gabonese population remains extremely small, and this percentage is comparable to Angola. Member activity and convert retention rates appear average or slightly below average for other African nations with an official Church presence of less than ten years.

Other Christian denominations have seen modest to rapid growth. Seventh-Day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses generally experience modest growth whereas Pentecostals and evangelicals experience strong growth. However, Jehovah's Witnesses reported a major increase in the number of congregations in the 2010s from approximately 30 to 120. Nevertheless, growth in most denominations had not occurred until the 1990s and outreach has been limited compared to other African nations. Islam is seen as a threat to Christian denominations' growth and outreach.

## **Future Prospects**

A highly receptive population to the Latter-day Saint gospel message, increasing missionary resources that have been allocated to Gabon in recent years, and the organization of the Cameroon Yaoundé Mission in 2020 indicate good prospects for future growth in the foreseeable future. Additional branches may be organized in Libreville if current members are further

strengthened, and leaders are adequately trained to meet the administrative demands to organize additional congregations. The new mission in Cameroon will greatly increase the allocation of more missionaries and greater attention on the church in Gabon. However, difficulties with consistently security foreign missionary visas may pose challenges with growing the Church in Gabon through traditional Latter-day Saint methods. The expansion of missionary activity outside of Libreville has yet to occur, and it is unclear whether mission leadership may open additional cities to proselytism.

[1] "Gabon," Social Institutions & Gender Index, retrieved 3 February 2021.  
<https://www.genderindex.org/country/gabon-2014-results/>

[2] "2019 Report on International Religious Freedom: Gabon." U.S. Department of State. Accessed 3 February 2021.  
<https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/gabon/>

[3] "2019 Report on International Religious Freedom: Gabon." U.S. Department of State. Accessed 3 February 2021.  
<https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/gabon/><https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/>

[4] <http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/19616/African-dignitary-visits-Church-headquarters.html>

[5] "Gabon," Deseret News 2010 Church Almanac, p.487–488.

[6] Weaver, Sarah Jane. "Elder Bednar: Church in Africa Is "Vibrant and Growing." LDS Church News. 18 November 2013.  
<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/church/news/elder-bednar-church-in-africa-is-vibrant-and-growing-?lang=eng>

[7] "Where We Work." Latter-day Saint Charities. Accessed 3 February 2021.  
<http://web.archive.org/web/20200111150925/https://www.latterdaysaintcharities.org/where-we-work>

[MM1] Be sure you get this from the CIA world factbook under the economy section. Divide the number for the country by the US, which is \$62,530 as of 2019.

[MM2] Just include major faith categories, and get data from  
<https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/gabon/>.

[MM3] List only top 10 most populous cities if 10th city is under a population of 100k