



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.



Sri Lanka

Population: 21.87 millions (#57 out of countries)

By David Stewart and Matt Martinich

Geography

Area: 65,610 square km. Sri Lanka is an island southeast of the tip of southern India in the Indian Ocean. Plains cover most of the island, with few mountains in the southern interior. Monsoons occur from December to March and June to October. Forest occupies most of the terrain. Deforestation and urbanization present the biggest environmental problems. Sri Lanka is divided into nine administrative provinces.

Peoples

Sinhalese: 74.9%

Sri Lankan Tamil: 11.2%

Sri Lankan Moors: 9.2%

Indian Tamil: 4.2%

Other: 0.5%

Ethnic groups claim ancestry from Sinhalese, who arrived from northwest India in the sixth century BC, Tamils from Southern India, or Arab traders. Sinhalese occupy the entire interior and southern and western coastal areas. Sri Lankan Tamils dominate northern and eastern shorelines and arrived several centuries after the Sinhalese, whereas Indian Tamils were brought to work on plantations by the British and populate interior northern Sri Lanka and in several scattered communities in southern areas. Sri Lankan Moors descended from Arab traders and live in scattered enclaves.

Population: 22,576,592 (July 2018)

Annual Growth Rate: 0.73% (2018)

Fertility Rate: 2.05 children born per woman (2018)

Life Expectancy: 73.7 male, 80.8 female (2018)

Languages: Sinhala (66%), Tamil (16%), Malayalam (3%), other/unspecified (15%). Sinhala and Tamil are official and national languages. English is spoken by approximately 10% of the population and regularly used in government. Languages spoken by more than one million native speakers include Sinhala (14.9 million) and Tamil (3.6 million).

Literacy: 91.9% (2017)

History

The first inhabitants arrived from northern India in the sixth century BC. Tamil settlers arrived 2,000 years ago and began inhabiting the northern areas of the island. Arab and Malay traders arrived around 1000 AD and some settled on the island. Civilizations in southern India began exerting greater influence by establishing a Tamil kingdom in the north in the fourteenth century. Portuguese and later the Dutch explored and traded in the region. The British East India Company took control in 1796, and in 1802 a crown colony was established. The entire island came under total British control shortly thereafter and adopted the name Ceylon. Plantations were established, and workers were brought from India. Independence from the United Kingdom occurred in 1948, and the name was changed to Sri Lanka in 1972. Friction between the majority Sinhalese and the northern minority Tamils erupted into civil war by 1983 and continued until rebel forces were ultimately defeated in 2009. Tens of thousands died from the fighting, and almost half a million were displaced. Political turmoil occurred in the late 2010s due to a constitutional crisis between Maithripala Sirisena and Ranil Wickremesinghe, which ended in the reinstatement of Wickremesinghe as prime minister. Hundreds were killed or injured in multiple bombings instigated by Islamist terrorists that targeted Christian churches in Colombo on Easter in 2019.

Culture

Sri Lanka's two main cultural forces are the Sinhalese and the Tamils. British cultural traditions influenced native traditions during colonial rule, especially in urban centers. Sri Lankans drink tea regularly. Festivals celebrating religious holidays are observed from Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists. Cricket is the most popular sport. Few drink alcohol or smoke tobacco.

Economy

GDP per capita: \$12,900 (2017) [21.6% of U.S.]

Human Development Index: 0.770 (2017)

Corruption Index: 38 (2018)

A civil war lasting more than two decades, policies with socialist aspects, and the 2004 tsunami limited economic growth in the late twentieth century and the 2000s. Steady growth in GDP per capita has occurred in recent years. Tourism is a growing industry. The government has sought to turn Sri Lanka into an economic hub for the Indian Ocean region. Textile exports to the EU are an important part of the economy. Services comprise 61.7% of the GDP, whereas industry and agriculture account for 30.5% and 7.8% of the GDP, respectively. Services constitutes approximately half of the workforce. Industry and agriculture each comprise approximately one-quarter of the work force. Unemployment and the percentage of the population that lives below the poverty line are low. Primary agricultural products include rice, sugarcane, grains, fruit, and tea. The largest industries are rubber processing, food processing, telecommunications, banking, and textiles. India, the United States, China, and the United Kingdom are primary trade partners. Sri Lanka's location just south of India provides accessible trade access between the Middle East and Southeast Asia.

Although corruption levels are lower than many other South Asian countries, significant corruption problems persist and government transparency is limited. There has been no significant improvement in the reduction of perceived corruption within the past decade. Human trafficking is a concern, particularly with Middle Eastern nations, Southeast Asia, and Afghanistan.

Faiths

Buddhist: 70.2%

Hindu: 12.6%

Muslim: 9.7%

Christian: 7.4%

Other: 0.1%

Christians

Denominations – Members – Congregations

Catholic – 1,370,000

Jehovah's Witnesses – 6,482 – 115

Seventh Day Adventists – 3,282 – 58

Latter-day Saints – 1,597 – 4

Religion

Buddhism arrived in the third century BC. Buddhists live throughout the country, especially in central and southern areas, and influence government. Islam arrived with Malay and Arab traders a thousand years ago. Eastern areas are mostly Muslim, and northern areas are predominantly Hindu. Most Hindus are Tamil. Christians typically live in the west. Around 82% of Christians are Roman Catholic.[\[1\]](#)

Religious Freedom

Persecution Index: 46th (2019)

The constitution allows for religious freedom, but religious freedom of minorities experiences little protection. Persecution from Buddhists toward minority groups has been severe, particularly toward Muslims and Christians. Buddhists feel threatened by the conversion of many Buddhists to Christianity and harass most Christian churches. False reports circulate that Christians force or coerce Buddhists with other means to convert. Many Christian missionaries and pastors were murdered or reported missing due to violence from Buddhist extremists in the late 2000s. Most of these cases were never pursued by police and government, and those committing these crimes have gone unpunished. The predominately Hindu Tamils persecute Muslims and expelled all Muslims in areas of their control in 1990.[\[2\]](#) Most recently, the government declared a 10-day state of emergency in March 2018 and restricted access to social media in Kandy District where anti-Muslim attacks resulted in widespread violence directed at Muslims. The Supreme Court in 2017 ruled that the constitution does not protect the right to propagate one's religion. Registration is required for religious groups to operate in Sri Lanka. Places for religious worship must be approved by the government. Religious education is required in schools in which students study Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, or Christianity.[\[3\]](#)

Largest Cities

Urban: 18.5% (2018)

Colombo, **Kaduwela**, **Maharagama**, **Kesbewa**, Dehiwala-Mount Lavinia, **Moratuwa**, Negombo, **Sri Jayawardenepura**, **Kalmunai**, Kandy.

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

Four of the ten most populous cities have a Church congregation. Ten percent (10%) of the national population lives in the ten largest cities.

Church History

The first Latter-day Saint missionaries arrived in 1853. Due to opposition to the Church from locals, the missionaries stayed only for a short time and returned to India. Two missionaries stopped in Sri Lanka in 1975 to evaluate whether the country was ready for missionary work. The first members to live in Sri Lanka were from the United States. A Texas businessman who was a member of the Church shared the gospel with a family he had met in Sri Lanka in 1976. In the following year, several members of the family were baptized. The father of the family served as the first branch president in 1978. Several senior missionary couples began serving in the late 1970s, working with humanitarian efforts and teaching those who wanted to learn more about the Church, but active proselytism did not take place.[\[4\]](#)

The Church became officially registered in 1979. The first native missionaries began serving in the 1980s. Missionaries from the Singapore Mission began serving in Sri Lanka in the late 1990s. In November 2007, Sri Lanka came under the jurisdiction of the India Bangalore Mission. In late 2007, eight young American missionaries served in the country on tourist visas. Foreign missionaries were withdrawn in late 2008 due to increasing violence directed towards Christian missionaries and visa problems. Only three native missionaries remained on the island. At least one senior missionary couple continues to serve in the country. A senior missionary couples' conferences for the thirteen couples in the India Bangalore Mission was held in Sri Lanka in early 2009. Missionaries were optimistic that the visa issue would be resolved. However, visa problems for foreign, young full-time missionaries remained unresolved as of 2019. Nevertheless, Sri Lankan members serving full-time missions reopened Sri Lanka to formal proselytism efforts in November 2014.

Membership Growth

Church Membership: 1,597 (2018)

Slow membership growth occurred during the last quarter of the twentieth century. Membership totaled 126 in 1983, 200 in 1995, and 313 in 2000. However, increases in the number of young, foreign missionaries assigned to Sri Lanka resulted in accelerated membership growth in the early 2000s. Membership increased from 663 in 2002 to 851 in 2004, 1,108 in 2006, and 1,277 in 2008. Annual membership growth rates generally exceeded 10% for most years in the 2000s. However, following the withdrawal of full-time missionaries, membership growth rates plummeted to 0-2% for most years between 2009 and 2015. Annual membership growth rates were sustained at 5-6% between year-end 2015 and year-end 2018. Church membership totaled 1,367 in 2015 and 1,597 in 2018.

In 2018, one 14,137 was a Latter-day Saint.

Congregational Growth

Branches: 4 Groups: 1 (August 2019)

The Sri Lanka Branch was created in Colombo in March 1978. A second branch was created in Colombo in 1998 for Sinhala speaking members. The first branch created outside Colombo was the Negombo Branch in 2000.^[5] A district was created in Colombo in October 2000. By the end of 2000, there were three branches in the Colombo Sri Lanka District. A fourth branch was created in Kandy in 2002. A group for members in Chilaw began meeting in the 2000s. The Sinhala speaking branch in Colombo was discontinued in 2008. The Church reestablished a second branch in Colombo, the Colombo 2nd Branch, in 2017 to service southern Colombo and Dehiwala-Mount Lavinia.

Activity and Retention

Low member activity and convert retention rates have occurred for most of the past two decades. This has likely been partially due to Sri Lanka's remote location in the Singapore Mission before the mission realignment in late 2007, as well as dependence on full-time missionaries to teach and fellowship converts in the past. Additional congregations have likely not been organized due to poor member activity. For example, the Kandy Branch has vacillated from as few as 15 active members to over 100 active members. Leadership changes in branch presidencies have appeared to accompany some of these wide fluctuations. One local member in Colombo in 2016 noted that active membership in the branch ranged from 100 to 150, and that 30-39 new converts were baptized into the branch during the previous twelve months. This member indicated that approximately 70% of members on branch records were active, whereas only 50% of new converts remained active one year after baptism.

Active members likely number around four hundred, or 25% of total membership.

Language Materials

Languages with Latter-day Saint Scripture: English, Sinhala, Tamil.

The Book of Mormon is translated into Sinhala and Tamil. Plans to translate the Doctrine and Covenants and The Pearl of Great Price into Sinhala and Tamil were announced in October 2017.^[6] Many basic gospel study and missionary materials are available in Sinhala and Tamil, including General Conference addresses. The Liahona used to have two issues a year for Sinhala and four issues a year for Tamil. However, Liahona translations in Tamil and Sinhala appeared to have been discontinued by 2019.

Meetinghouses

The first Church-built meetinghouse was dedicated in December 2001 in Colombo.^[7] The Negombo Branch meets in a

church-built meetinghouse. The Kandy Branch meets in a renovated building.

Health and Safety

Health issues do not pose serious threats to missionaries and are typical for tropical Asian nations with developing economies. Safety is a concern due to threats and acts of violence against Christian missionaries. Violence between ethnic groups poses some danger to native and foreign missionaries.

Humanitarian and Development Work

The Church has conducted at least 130 humanitarian and development projects in Sri Lanka since 1985. These projects have primarily consisted of community projects and emergency response.^[8] Humanitarian missionaries began teaching English as a second language in 1982.^[9] A large increase in aid and development projects began following the 2004 tsunami. Immediately following the tsunami the Church sent first aid, Atmit nutritional supplements, and clothing.^[10] 650 Fishing boats were built with assistance of the Church. Micro-credit loans were issued to hundreds of women.^[11]

Opportunities, Challenges, and Prospects

Religious Freedom

The Church enjoys greater religious freedom than many other Asian nations albeit government and societal persecution of Christians is widespread, particularly among non-Catholics. Pressures from Buddhists limit religious freedom and may have influenced government to not issue visas to foreign missionaries. There is little government initiative to protect the rights of Christians and prosecute radicals who commit violent acts against religious minorities.

Cultural Issues

Those desiring to join the Church must give up customs of tea consumption. However, rates of alcohol and tobacco consumption are low. Converts potentially come from Buddhist, Hindu, Christian, or Muslim backgrounds, which challenges the ability of missionaries and local leaders to meet individual needs and teach the gospel to their understanding. British colonialism has assisted in the Westernization of many, which may cause friction between the more educated and less educated Sri Lankans. Some Christian groups view the Church unfavorably and persuade others to avoid missionaries and members.^[12]

National Outreach

Only five percent of the national population lives where a congregation is organized, and only two of the eight provinces have a branch: Western and Central. Full-time missionaries have served intermittently for less than two decades and in the 2010s have consisted of Sri Lankan natives. Given the small size of the Church and its missionary program, most inhabitants in Colombo, Negombo, and Kandy are unaware of the Church's presence.

National outreach faces many challenges. Infrequent visits and few mission resources were allocated when assignments were made to the Singapore Mission. Following visas issues and civil war, national outreach has been reduced. Members have provided a steady number of full-time missionaries, but their small numbers remain insufficient to expand outreach outside of cities with branches. Persecution of Christians and Hindus from Buddhist militants has historically contributed to the Church's caution in Sri Lanka in extending outreach into additional areas. Predominantly Muslim and Hindu areas will likely be difficult to reach due to hardships experienced during the civil war. The greatest opportunities for outreach are in the Western Province around Colombo, where over five million people live. Nearby communities have the largest Christian populations in the country. These areas may be receptive to future outreach.

High literacy rates can benefit Church outreach through greater printing and distribution of proselytizing materials than currently. With vision and planning, church literature could be distributed in unreached areas. However, these efforts would most likely be successful if headed by local church leaders.

Member Activity and Convert Retention

Before the mid-2000s, member activity was high and convert retention strong. Rapid membership increase, quick-baptize tactics of foreign missionaries with limited preparation of converts from diverse backgrounds, and distance from mission headquarters in Singapore resulted in worsening activity and convert retention. The little progress that has been achieved in increasing active

membership is evidenced by no net increase in the number of branches in Sri Lanka since 2002.

Ethnic Issues and Integration

The most severe persecution and violence has been based on racial differences and not religious differences. Violence and friction between the Sinhalese and Tamils in the north impede prospects for establishing the Church there. However, ethnic differences do not appear to significantly affect the Church's operations in the two Colombo branches.

Language Issues

Both Sinhala and Tamil have a large amount of materials available despite a small Latter-day Saint population. Speakers of languages with Church material translations account for over 80% of the population. Difficulties for foreign missionaries learning both these languages present the greatest linguistic challenges for the Church, since missionaries are not guaranteed to remain in Sri Lanka for their entire missions. The Church may experience some difficulty with speakers of both languages meeting in the same congregation when active membership is not large enough to justify the creation of separate congregations for each language. High literacy benefits the development leadership and activity. The 46,000 speakers of Sri Lankan Creole Malay are difficult to reach due to the small number of speakers and the adherence of many to Islam.

Leadership

Leadership developed early in the Church's history, with a Sri Lankan instated as a first branch president in 1978 and the creation of the first district when only 300 members lived in the country. As membership growth increased rapidly, leadership growth did not appear to increase commensurately, as no congregations have been created until 2017. Nevertheless, all four branches appeared to be led by local church leaders as of 2019.

Temple

Sri Lanka pertains to the Hong Kong China Temple District. Temple trips occur infrequently due to distance and financial constraints. The Bengaluru India Temple will reduce many of the demands on time, money, and distance for Sri Lankan members, but trips would still require considerable sacrifice.

Comparative Growth

Membership growth in Sri Lanka has been slower than average for nations in Asia. The Church in Cambodia and Mongolia both experienced more sustained, rapid growth, yet congregations were first established fifteen years later than in Sri Lanka. The Church in Pakistan grew from the same number of members in the early 1990s to over 4,000 members in thirteen branches and three districts. Other nations have had very limited growth despite a Church presence for several decades.

Only a few Christian groups experienced sustained, rapid growth, which has slowed recently. Seventh-Day Adventist growth has been low since 2000 with no noticeable increase in membership. However, Jehovah's Witnesses have reported steady growth with a net increase of dozens of congregations in the past decade. The greatest growth has been with Pentecostal and Evangelical churches. These groups utilize member-missionary work and plant churches in new areas.

Future Prospects

Accelerated membership growth since the mid-2010s and the organization of a second branch in Colombo point to some recent improvements in growth trends. This has been significant given that only local Sri Lankan members and senior couples have served in Sri Lanka as full-time missionaries during this time. However, missionary efforts have not been able to replicate more rapid membership growth attained by foreign, fulltime missionaries during the 2000s, albeit a higher percentage of recent converts appears to have been retained. Branches in Negombo and Kandy may divide when warranted by sustained growth in active membership. Additional branches or member groups in lesser-reached areas of the Colombo metropolitan area appear most favorable for future efforts to expand outreach due to high population density, proximity to other branches, and difficulty accessing the meetinghouse from more distant urban areas. Once there are at least five branches, over 120 active Melchizedek Priesthood holders, and 1,900 members a stake may be established, although current trends suggest that this goal is far distant especially given low member activity rates. Improving convert retention through approaches tailored to the needs of individuals of diverse religious and cultural backgrounds and careful preparation of prospective converts to ensure that gospel habits are in place will be crucial to achieving real long-term growth.

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