



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.



Eritrea

Population: 6.38 millions (#107 out of countries)

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Geography

Area: 117,600 square km. Consisting of a strip of coastline in Eastern Africa, Eritrea borders Djibouti, Ethiopia, Sudan, and the Red Sea. The Ethiopian highlands stretch into west central Eritrea, whereas hills, plateaus, and plains occupy other regions. Hot, dry desert climate occurs along the coast, whereas cooler, more temperate conditions occur in the highlands. Semi-arid conditions are experienced in interior, nonmountainous areas. Natural hazards include droughts and locust swarms. Deforestation, desertification, soil erosion, and overgrazing are environmental concerns. Eritrea is divided into six administrative regions.

Peoples

Tigrinya: 55%

Tigre: 30%

Saho: 4%

Kunama: 2%

Rashaida: 2%

Bilen: 2%

Other (Afar, Beni Amir, Nera): 5%

Most ethnic groups are nomadic, and most of the population resides in the Asmara area. Tigrinya and Saho populate areas in central Eritrea, Tigre reside in the west, and Afar live in eastern coastal areas between Asmara and Djibouti. Other ethnic groups reside in the west.

Population: 5,918,919 (July 2017)

Annual Growth Rate: 0.85% (2017)

Fertility Rate: 3.99 children born per woman (2017)

Life Expectancy: 62.7 male, 67.8 female (2017)

Languages: Tigrigna (53%), Tigre (22%), Afar (8%), Saho (4%), Kunama (4%), Bedawiyet (3%), Bilen (2%), Nara (1%), other or unknown (3%). Tigrinya, Arabic, and English are official languages. Tigrinya and Arabic are most commonly used languages for commerce and inter-ethnic communication. English is widely spoken in urban areas.^[1] Only Tigrigna (3.1 million) and Tigre (1.29 million) have over one million native speakers.

Literacy: 53.8% (2015)

History

Local or international powers in the Red Sea region controlled Eritrea throughout much of history until Italy colonized the area in the late nineteenth century. The United Kingdom administered Eritrea following Italy's surrender in World War II. The United Nations passed a resolution for Ethiopia to annex Eritrea but stipulated that Eritreans would be entitled to some autonomy and enjoy democratic freedoms. From the 1960s until independence in the 1990s, Eritrea fought to gain independence from Ethiopia. Following independence in 1993, the government has become an authoritarian one-party state that severely limits civil liberties. A border war with Ethiopia occurred from 1998 to 2000, and border disputes continued for nearly another two decades. In 2018, significant progress occurred in regards to the resolution of the conflict and the establishment of a peaceful, cooperative relationship between the two countries.

Culture

Islam and Orthodox Christianity heavily influence daily life, cultural customs, and social attitudes. Religious feasts and holidays are widely celebrated. Cuisine shares many similarities with Ethiopia and countries in the Horn of Africa, such as widespread consumption of injera bread. Italian cuisine is prevalent in urban areas. Ethnic conflict has traditionally occurred between the Christian highland and the Muslim lowland ethnic groups.^[2] Alcohol and cigarette consumption rates are low. The federal government does not allow the practice of polygamy with the exception of Muslims in administrative regions that follow Shari'a law.

Economy

GDP per capita: \$1,400 (2017) [2.35% of U.S.]

Human Development Index: 0.420

Corruption Index: 20 (2017)

Decades of conflict with Ethiopia, poor education, and the reliance of 80% of the workforce on agriculture create significant obstacles for the Eritrean economy to overcome to experience greater economic growth and development. Half of the population lives below the poverty line. Low food production has not satisfied the population's food consumption needs. The government has struggled to increase the standard of living and attract greater foreign investment. Natural resources include gold, potash, zinc, copper, salt, and fish. Primary crops include sorghum, lentils, vegetables, cotton, tobacco, and corn. Livestock and fish are also important to agricultural activity. Primary trade partners include China, South Korea, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Italy.

Corruption is perceived as widespread and especially prevalent in the government. Democratic reforms have not been carried out, and human rights violations have been widespread. There is little government transparency, and few crimes violating human rights are punished. Reporters without Borders ranked Eritrea as the last among 175 countries in the 2009 Press Freedom Index, signifying that freedom of the press is virtually nonexistent. In 2018, Eritrea was ranked 179th out of the 180 countries rated for this index.^[3] Human trafficking is a major concern, as many Eritrean migrant workers are exploited for forced labor and sexual exploitation in the Middle East. Illegal immigration frequently occurs into Sudan, Ethiopia, and Kenya. Eritreans constitute approximately 90% of victims trafficked by the Bedouins in the Sinai Desert for the purposes of sexual exploitation, torture, extortion, and organ harvesting.

Faiths

Muslim: 48-50%

Christian: 48-50%

Indigenous beliefs: 2%

Christians

Denominations – Members – Congregations

Orthodox – ~3,000,000

Catholic – 272,270

Seventh Day Adventists – 526 – 15

Jehovah's Witnesses – less than 500

Latter-day Saints – less than 100

Religion

Sunni Muslims and Orthodox Christians each account for approximately half the population. Approximately five percent of the population adheres to non-Orthodox Christian denominations such as Roman Catholic, Protestants, Pentecostals, and Jehovah's Witnesses.^[4] Christians primarily reside in interior highland areas, whereas Muslims populate coastal areas

Religious Freedom

The government ratified a constitution that guarantees religious freedom in 1997, but the constitution remains unimplemented. Human rights and religious freedom conditions remain poor due to government refusal to recognize additional religious groups, harassment of practitioners of unregistered faiths, and the incarceration of many religious prisoners under harsh and inhumane conditions.

The number of Christians from unregistered groups held as religious prisoners is unknown due to a lack of government transparency. Religious groups must register with the government, but no additional religious groups have been recognized since 2002. Only the Eritrean Orthodox Church, the Evangelical Church of Eritrea (Lutheran), the Roman Catholic Church, and Islam are registered. Several other religious groups, such as Presbyterians, Seventh Day Adventists, and Baha'is, have met all the qualifications for registration, but the government refuses official recognition, as their applications require the president's signature. The government must approve the distribution or printing of religious literature or documents, the assembly of religious groups, and the construction of religious buildings. Most of the population exhibits religious tolerance, with the exception of widespread persecution of Pentecostals and Jehovah's Witnesses.^[5]

Jehovah's Witnesses have experienced the most severe treatment, largely due to their noncompliance with mandatory military service, which is regarded as disloyalty to the country. In 1994, Witnesses were stripped of basic citizenship rights. In June 2009, twenty-three Witnesses were arrested while holding a worship service in a private home. Several of those were mothers with young children who were still incarcerated as of April 2010.^[6] By January 2012, the number of imprisoned Witnesses in Ethiopia stood at forty-eight.^[7] In July 2018, Witnesses reported fifty-three imprisoned members. Some of these individuals had been incarcerated for nearly 25 years, whereas others had been imprisoned for less than one year. Reasons for arrest include attending religious meetings, engaging in religious activities, conscientious objection to military service, and funeral service.^[8]

Largest Cities

Urban: 40%

Asmara, Keren, Assab, Afabet, Massawa, Agordat, Dekemhare, Mendefera, Adi Qayeh, Ghinda.

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

None of the ten largest cities have LDS congregations. Eleven percent (11%) of the national population resides in the ten largest cities.

LDS History

There has been no reported LDS presence in Eritrea. In 1998, Eritrea was assigned to the Africa Southeast Area.

Membership Growth

LDS Membership: less than 10 (2018)

Several Eritreans have joined the Church abroad, primarily in Europe and the United States. Eritrean converts have visited their home country to visit relatives and to examine prospects for humanitarian work.

Congregational Growth

Wards: 0 Branches: 0 (2018)

There are no LDS congregations that assemble in Eritrea. The Church operates an administrative branch under the Africa Southeast Area to keep track of isolated members in the country.

Language Materials

Languages with LDS Scripture: Arabic, Amharic, English, Italian.

All LDS scriptures and many church materials are translated into Arabic and Italian. Only the Book of Mormon is available in Amharic. There are plans to translate remaining LDS scriptures into Amharic. Some of the LDS Church materials translated into Amharic include Gospel Fundamentals, Melchizedek Priesthood and Relief Society materials, and various Church proclamations such as The Family: A Proclamation to the World. The Church has translated The Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith and Gospel Fundamentals into Afar.

Health and Safety

The government restricts the travel of all foreigners and in 2010 arrested several Eritreans who have dual citizenship in the United States and Eritrea. Military skirmishes along the Ethiopian border have killed many in previous years. The United States Department of State has previously issued travel warnings for Eritrea.[\[9\]](#)

Humanitarian and Development Work

Latter-day Saints sent a shipment of over 4,000 tons of wheat to Eritrea and Ethiopia to feed drought victims in 2000.[\[10\]](#) There have been six humanitarian and development projects that have focused on community projects, emergency response, and refugee response.[\[11\]](#)

Opportunities, Challenges, and Prospects

Religious Freedom

Current government policies and restrictions severely restrict the practice of unregistered religious faiths. There have been no reports of imprisoned Latter-day Saints in Eritrea. Loyalty to one's government and compliance with mandatory military service are teachings of the LDS Church that may help Latter-day Saints gain a positive reputation and respect from government authorities. Past humanitarian assistance may also improve government relations in the future.

Cultural Issues

High levels of religious participation among Orthodox Christians and Muslims create cultural barriers that may be challenging for missionaries to overcome. The religious tolerance exhibited by most citizens may allow the LDS Church to operate in the event that the government amends policies that severely limit the practice of unrecognized religious groups and begins to regularly

recognize religious groups that meet registration standards.

National Outreach

The entire population is completely unreached by the LDS Church. The lack of any LDS mission outreach in Eritrea results from long-term military conflict with Ethiopia, distance from established mission outreach centers in Ethiopia, lack of church materials in local languages, poverty and poor living conditions, and little religious freedom.

Eritrean converts who join the Church abroad may assist in initial proselytizing efforts by introducing the church to relatives. If political conditions improve, Eritrea may one day be assigned to the Uganda Kampala Mission due to similarities in language and culture with Ethiopia, which is also part of the Uganda Kampala Mission.

Member Activity and Convert Retention

Although no convert baptisms have occurred in Eritrea, a few native members have joined the Church abroad. Most Eritrean Latter-day Saints have not permanently returned to their home country due to poor living and social conditions. Activity among Eritrean converts appears to be moderate, as many known Eritrean converts actively participated in church and doctrinal study prior to baptism.

Ethnic Issues and Integration

Ethnic tensions between highland and lowland ethnic groups may manifest themselves at church if LDS converts consist of both former Muslims and former Orthodox Christians. However, as in other nations with large Muslim populations, it is likely that most baptisms would be among Christians, and there are likely to be few converts from Islam if proselytism of Muslims is permitted at all. Multiple ethnic groups attending the same congregation may necessitate the use of a second language to conduct church meetings, such as English or Arabic, until a sufficiently large numbers of members require the creation of local language-specific congregations.

Language Issues

Several languages spoken by large numbers of Eritreans have many church materials translated, namely Arabic and English. Some individuals may be more proficient in Amharic or Italian and utilize these language materials. Afar church materials provide outreach potential to Afar speakers who appear to constitute less than five percent of the population. No LDS Church materials are translated into Tigrinya or Tigre, which will be needed to achieve greater outreach potential if the Church is established in Eritrea one day. Converts living abroad may be capable of translating materials into these and other indigenous languages. Historically low literacy rates challenge efforts for members to accurately learn about Church doctrine and to develop local, self-sustaining leadership but also create an opportunity for teaching literacy skills as humanitarian service.

Missionary Service

Few, if any, Eritreans have served full-time missions. No missionary activity has occurred in Eritrea as of 2018. Eritrean converts living abroad may one day assist in conducting missionary activity in their home country if permitted by the government.

Leadership

Eritrean converts have served in church leadership positions outside of their native country. Eritrean-born Michael Isaac joined the church in 1991 in Poland and has since served in branch, district, and mission presidencies.[\[12\]](#)

Temple

Eritrea is assigned to the Johannesburg South Africa Temple district.

Comparative Growth

Eritrea remains one of a few African nations with sizeable Christian minorities without an LDS Church presence; other such nations include Chad and Burkina Faso. Eritrea, Somalia, the Maghreb countries, and Sudan rank among the least tolerant of foreign religious groups and exhibit the poorest religious freedom records in Africa.

Missionary-oriented Christians have gained thousands of converts despite local citizens and missionaries jeopardizing their

safety and experiencing severe government persecution and social stigmatization. Yet in comparison to other East African countries, these denominations gain dramatically fewer converts. Seventh Day Adventists baptized ten or fewer converts per year after 2003, and no increase in congregations has occurred. Jehovah's Witnesses report dozens of Tigrinya-speaking congregations worldwide that are primarily located in Europe, East Africa, North America, and Australia.

Future Prospects

Latter-day Saints appear to have no realistic hope of gaining an official presence in Eritrea in the foreseeable future due to severe government restrictions on religious freedom. Several Eritreans who have joined the Church offer meaningful prospects for future outreach if religious freedom conditions improve one day. The greatest prospects for growth within the medium term appear among Eritreans who live in countries where there are no restrictions on religious freedom. Humanitarian work is greatly needed and may establish a positive relationship with the government.

[1] "Background Note: Eritrea," Bureau of African Affairs, 14 June 2010. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2854.htm>

[2] "Eritrea," Countries and Their Cultures, retrieved 2 October 2010. <http://www.everyculture.com/Cr-Ga/Eritrea.html>

[3] "2018 World Press Freedom Index," Reporters Without Borders. Accessed 26 July 2018. <https://rsf.org/en/ranking>

[4] "Eritrea," International Religious Freedom Report 2016. Accessed 26 July 2018.
<https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2016religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2016&dliid=268646#wrapper>

[5] "Eritrea," International Religious Freedom Report 2009, 26 October 2009. <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2009/127231.htm>

[6] "Minority faiths in Eritrea have few choices," Jehovah's Witnesses Official Media Web Site, 19 April 2010. "Forty Eight Jehovah's Witnesses Imprisoned in Eritrea," Jehovah's Witnesses Official Media Web Site, 31 January 2012, <http://www.jw-media.org/eri/20100419.htm>

[7] <http://www.jw-media.org/eri/20120131rpt.htm>

[8] "Jehovah's Witnesses Currently in Prison – Eritrea – July 2018," jw.org. Accessed 26 July 2018.
<https://www.jw.org/en/news/legal/by-region/eritrea/jehovahs-witnesses-in-prison/>

[9] "Eritrea," Travel Warning U.S. Department of State Bureau of Consular Affairs, 24 September 2010.
http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/tw/tw_2939.html

[10] Weaver, Sarah Jane. "Church sends wheat to Africa for famine relief," LDS Church News, 17 June 2000.
<http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/37980/Church-sends-wheat-to-Africa-for-famine-relief.html>

[11] "Where We Work," LDS Charities. Accessed 26 July 2018. <https://www.ldscharities.org/where-we-work>

[12] Scott, Taylor. "LDS Church in Poland has had long, hard journey," Deseret News, 13 September 2010, p. 3.
<http://www.deseretnews.com/article/700064997/LDS-Church-in-Poland-has-had-long-hard-journey.html?pg=3>