

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.



Central African Republic

Population: 5.28 millions (#118 out of countries)

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Geography

Area: 622,984 square km. Landlocked in Central Africa, the Central African Republic borders Chad, Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Republic of the Congo, and Cameroon. Large rivers define many of the geopolitical borders of the Central African Republic. The Ubangi River forms the southern border, and the Sangha River runs through the western part of the country. Much of the landscape is flat, with plateaus and hills in some areas. The climate is tropical to sub-tropical. Most of the country is covered by forest. Desertification is a concern in northern areas. The population of the Central African Republic is small in comparison to its size, and little human development has occurred. Dust storms and floods are common natural hazards. Desertification, deforestation, poaching, and lack of clean water are environmental issues. The Central African Republic is divided into fourteen administrative prefectures and two economic prefectures.

Peoples

Baya: 33%

Banda: 27%

Mandjia: 13%

Sara: 10%

Mboum: 7%

M’Baka: 4%

Yakoma: 4%

Other: 2%

Almost all ethnic groups are Sudanese. The Baya reside in the west. The Banda and Mandjia populate the central areas. The Sara live in northern areas. Many ethnic groups in the Central African Republic also have large populations in northern Democratic Republic of Congo or southern Chad.

Population: 5,990,855 (July 2020)

Annual Growth Rate: 2.09% (2020)

Fertility Rate: 4.41 children born per woman (2020)

Life Expectancy: 52.7 male, 55.7 female (2020)

Languages: French is the official language, and Sangho is the national language. Sangho is a creole language based upon the Ngbandi language from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Althuogh there are less than half a million native Sangho speakers, nearly five million speak Sangho as second language Sixty-five native languages are spoken. Banda and Gbaya dialects have the most native speakers with approximately half a million to one million each. No languages have over one million native speakers.

Literacy: 37.4% (2018)

History

African tribes that lived in present-day Central African Republic were some of the most isolated ethnic groups in all of Africa. Little contact with the outside world was made before 1800. Muslim traders first arrived to the Central African Republic. The French claimed the area in the late nineteenth century and named it Ubangi-Shari after two rivers in the area. Ubangi-Shari changed its name to the Central African Republic in 1958 and gained independence from France in 1960. The government was mainly controlled by various military officials for the first thirty years of independence, during which time little progress was made toward development. An election was held in 1993 and ushered in a democratically elected president (President Patasse) who controlled the country for a decade. Unrest and instability continued throughout his presidency. A military coup overthrew Patasse in 2003, and elections were held in 2005. The military general (General Bozize) who overthrew Patasse won the presidency in the election. The Central African Republic is easily influenced by bordering nations due to the country's landlocked position, weak central government, and small population compared to neighboring African nations. Violence and unrest from Sudan, Chad and the Democratic Republic of Congo has affected the Central African Republic from time to time. In the early 2010s, a significant escalation in internal armed conflict occurred and culminated in the ouster of President Bozize by armed rebels who captured the capital city, Bangui. Independent candidate Faustin-Archange Touadera has served as president since 2016 and has worked on peace plans to help disarm and reintegrate rebel groups with the rest of the country into a cohesive nation.

Culture

The lack of economic development and government instability has adversely affected the culture. Education is not emphasized, and many do not complete formal education. The estimated literacy rate has decreased by approximately 10% thus far during the twenty-first century. The physical integrity of women is often threatened, especially in marriages. Polygamy is legal, and its practice affected 28% of women in 1995.[1] The Central African Republic had one of the lowest life expectancy rates in the world in 2020 due to poor access to health care, armed conflict, and malnutrition. Alcohol and tobacco use appear less prevalent than in most nations.

Economy

GDP per capita: $700 (2017) [1.2% of U.S.]

Human Development Index: 0.381 (2018)

Corruption Index: 25 (2019)

The Central African Republic tied with Burundi as the country with the lowest GDP per capita in the world in 2017. Due to political instability and its landlocked position, the Central African Republic has experienced little economic development since independence. The majority of Central Africans support themselves on subsistence agriculture. Timber and diamonds provide the primary exports, whereas food, manufactured goods, and electronics make up the bulk of imports. France, China, Burundi, and the United States are the primary trade partners. Corruption is widespread. Bribery is a common problem, especially in rural areas along roads. Human rights violations are widespread in regards to the conscription of children as soldiers in armed rebel groups, sex trafficking, and forced labor.

Faiths

Christian: 89.5%

Muslim: 8.5%

Indigenous beliefs: 1%

Unaffiliated: 1%

Christians

Denominations – Members – Congregations

Evangelicals – 1,453,346

Roman Catholic – 1,260,000

Seventh Day Adventists – 6,039 – 96

Jehovah's Witnesses – 2,901 – 58

Latter-day Saints – 239 – 1

Religion

Most Central Africans are Christian. Protestants constitute 51% of the population whereas Catholics account for nearly one-quarter of Central Africans. Less than 10% of Central Africans are Muslims. Muslims generally experience consistent societal discrimination often attributed to socioeconomic differences, and there has been evidence that the number of Muslims in certain areas, such as Bangui, has significantly decreased in recent years due to violence. Syncretism between indigenous beliefs and Christianity and Islam are common.[2]

Religious Freedom

The constitution grants religious freedom, which is usually upheld by the government. Foreign religious groups must register with the government, which allows for some financial benefits. To register, groups must have over 1,000 members and leadership that government deems as qualified to lead congregations through education at a religious school. However, these regulations were not always followed for registration. Unregistered groups have been allowed to assemble but are monitored by government. There has been significant religious violence in areas controlled by Christian and Muslim militias, particularly in northern and western portions of the country, although these incidents have also recently occurred in Bangui.[3]

Largest Cities

Urban: 39%

Bangui, **Bimbo**, **Berbérati**, **Carnot**, **Bambari**, **Bouar**, **Bossangoa**, **Bria**, **Bangassou**, **Nola.**

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

One of the ten largest cities has a congregation. Twenty-eight percent (28%) of the national population lives in the ten largest cities.

Church History

The first known member in the Central African Republic was Carol Forrest of the United States Peace Corps. She arrived in June of 1991 and lived in Bangui. During her stay, she began sharing the gospel with associates, resulting in a group of investigators interested in learning about the Church. She began by inviting a couple friends and acquaintances to take part in her own personal Sunday gospel study. In the fall of that year, Forrest was set apart as a district missionary for the country. The mission president in the Zaire Kinshasa Mission visited the investigators and Forrest in June the following year to assess how they were progressing. In August 1992, the responsibility for the Central African Republic was transferred from the Zaire Kinshasa Mission to the Cameroon Yaoundé Mission. The president of the Cameroon Yaoundé Mission visited the country in September 1992. During his visit, twenty investigators were baptized, and two branches were organized in Bangui the day following the baptisms.[4] A French couple began serving as missionaries in January 1993. The senior couple served in the country until they were removed due to worsening civil unrest. The seminary program started in 1995.

The responsibility for the Central African Republic shifted from the Ivory Coast Abidjan Mission to the newly created Ghana Cape Coast Mission in 2005, and was again transferred to the Democratic Republic of Congo Kinshasa Mission shortly thereafter. Since the first senior missionaries left the Central African Republic in the early 1990s, there have been no missionaries assigned to the country. President and Sister Livingstone from the Democratic Republic of Congo Mission visited the Central African Republic in early 2009 to conduct an annual branch audit. In mid-2012, the mission president visited the Church's sole branch in Bangui, met with the country's president, and evaluated prospects for assigning full-time missionaries.[5] Later that year, apostle Elder Jeffrey R. Holland dedicated the Central African Republic for missionary work, and mission leaders assessed conditions for assigning proselytizing elders. The Democratic Republic of the Congo Kinshasa Mission conducted exploratory visits and almost assigned full-time missionaries immediately prior to the capture of Bangui by rebel groups in the early 2010s. The Central African Republic was transferred to the Republic of Congo Brazzaville Mission when the mission was organized in 2014.[6] The Church announced that the Central African Republic will be included in the new Africa Central Area when the area opens in mid-2020.[7] It is also anticipated that the Republic of the Congo will be assigned to the new Cameroon Yaoundé Mission when the mission is organized in July 2020.

Membership Growth

Church Membership: 239 (2018)

There were approximately one hundred members by 1996, increasing to 126 in 2000. In 2005, membership nearly doubled to 218 and reached 393 in 2008. However, membership declined to 187 in 2013 and fluctuated between 216 and 239 in the mid- to late 2010s. The significant decrease in Church membership between 2011 and 2012 appeared attributed to efforts to update branch records.

In 2018, one in 24,038 was a Latter-day Saint on Church records.

Congregational Growth

Branches: 1 (2019)

In 1992, two branches were organized instead of one due to the locations where most members and investigators lived.[8] The two branches in Bangui were subsequently consolidated into one branch by the mid-1990s. In early 2020, the Republic of Congo Brazzaville Mission directly supervised the Bangui Branch.

Activity and Retention

During the 2007–2008 school year, there was a total of thirty-two people enrolled in either seminary or institute courses. Convert baptisms periodically occur. New converts are found and taught by branch missionaries. The number of active members in the country appears to be around one hundred, or 42% of total membership.

Language Materials

Languages with Latter-day Saint Scripture: French, English.

All Church scriptures are available in French. Fulani is the only native language that has any Church materials translated. Fulani translations are limited to Gospel Principles and The Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith.

Meetinghouses

The chapel housing the Bangui Branch had space sufficient to hold about sixty to seventy for sacrament meeting in 2009. The building lacked classroom space, leading the branch to hold classes like primary outside under a tree. The branch was reported to lack much of the equipment most congregations have access to, such as televisions to show audiovisual presentations and electronic keyboards for playing hymns during sacrament meeting.

Health and Safety

HIV/AIDS infects 3.6% of the population. Poor sanitation, no access to clean water in most the country, and poor health care availability and infrastructure have likely delayed the reintroduction of Latter-day Saint missionaries.

Humanitarian and Development Work

The Church has conducted eight projects in the Central African Republic since 1985, including six refugee response efforts, one community project, and one emergency response initiative.[9]

Opportunities, Challenges, and Prospects

Religious Freedom

It is unclear whether The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is officially registered with the government. The Church has almost one-quarter of the required number of members to qualify for registration. Because Latter-day Saint leaders do not receive formal education from a religious school, the government may also hesitate to grant registration. These issues may have delayed a more active Church presence and outreach in the Central African Republic. However, distance from the nearest mission headquarters, political instability, and lawlessness in vast areas outside of the capital city have all appeared to discourage the assignment of full-time missionaries. Religious freedom conditions are also limited in practice in areas controlled by armed rebel groups. Religious violence in many areas pose safety concerns for formal missionary efforts headed by foreigners.

Cultural Issues

Like many African nations, war, corruption, and poverty appear to be the biggest limiting factors for the growth of the Church in the Central African Republic. The Church had a bright beginning in the country when the first two branches were organized but encountered problems once civil unrest worsened, forcing the senior missionary couple to leave the country. Instability has persisted in recent years due to conflicts in neighboring nations spilling over into the Central African Republic and the inability of the central government to maintain law and order within its sovereign territory. Poverty ranks among the most severe in the world, partly due to the country's landlocked position. Illiteracy is widespread and has worsened in the past two decades. Low literacy rates pose challenges for individuals to study, learn, and develop their own testimonies of the gospel as they must depend on literate members for instruction. Literacy classes and audio-translations of the Book of Mormon may be helpful to address this need. Nevertheless, low literacy rates present major challenges for local leadership development. The practice of polygamy creates challenges for church growth and mission outreach. Those participating in a polygamous relationship must end marriages in divorce and be interviewed by a member of the mission or area presidency to be baptized.

National Outreach

The Church's presence in the Central African Republic is very limited. Only the capital city of Bangui where 20% of the population resides has an official Church congregation. Very few Central Africans, whether inside or outside of Bangui, have heard of the Church due to the Church's very limited presence and no formal missionary activity. The lack of progress with the Church's growth in the Central African Republic appears attributed to the Church's challenge to mobilize local members and leaders in missionary efforts given there have been long-term concerns with safety that discourage the assignment of foreign, full-time missionaries.

Few visits had been made by regional church leaders due to instability and war. The remote location of the Central African Republic and its limited transportation and health infrastructure makes it difficult to assign foreign, full-time missionaries. Bangui is about 650 miles away from the headquarters of the Republic of Congo Brazzaville Mission and 500 miles away from the nearest congregations in Yaoundé, Cameroon and Kisangani, Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Missions that have administered the Central African Republic have experienced a tremendous response to missionary efforts. Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the Republic of the Congo each have seen rapid growth and require large amounts of mission resources to maintain and expand outreach. The Central African Republic has been less of a priority due to the strong growth in these other nations. Continued rapid membership and congregational growth in surrounding

nations and limited mission resources may continue to place the reintroduction of missionaries to the Central African Republic on hold. Nevertheless, the opening of the Cameroon Yaoundé Mission and the Africa Central Area in 2020 presents opportunities for more mission resources and oversight to begin formal missionary efforts in the Central African Republic.

Member Activity and Convert Retention

Many years of war and unrest have complicated efforts to locate and keep active the nearly 250 Latter-day Saints known to live in the country. Nevertheless, isolated reports from mission leaders suggest that convert retention and member activity rates are good in Bangui. Local members have been effective with helping young single adults prepare and successfully serve full-time missions, which improves the long-term retention of converts.

Ethnic Issues and Integration

No major ethnic integration issues appear to have occurred in the Church in the Central African Republic due to the limited size and distribution of membership. Future challenges may occur in regions with several ethnic groups with histories of conflict.

Language Issues

Fulani is the only native language in the Central African Republic with any translated church materials. Sangho is the language most likely to have future translations because it is the national language and widely spoken amongst the country's more than seventy ethnolinguistic groups. The high linguistic diversity in the country challenges future mission outreach, considering that Fulani has only approximately 150,000 speakers and two ecclesiastical materials translated. French will likely be used until greater local membership growth and activity occurs. Low literacy rates indicate a need for audio translations of Church materials and scriptures to improve accessibility to study materials for the illiterate.

Missionary Service

In 2009, President Livingstone of the Democratic Republic of Congo Kinshasa Mission interviewed a young man who was sending his mission papers to serve as a full-time missionary, the first in many years from the country. A missionary from the Central African Republic was serving in Pennsylvania in 2009. The elder joined the Church three years earlier in the United States. Although no young, full-time missionaries have ever served in the country, there have been as many as one dozen members from the Bangui Branch who have served full-time missions since the early 2010s.

Leadership

In 2009, Roger Langue, an advisor to the president of the Central African Republic who was baptized with his family when he studied in France in the 1980s, provided great strength to the country's sole branch. President Goffi served as branch president in early 2020. Developing additional priesthood leadership has been challenging given isolation from mission headquarters.

Temple

The Central African Republic is assigned to the Kinshasa Democratic Republic of the Congo Temple district. Organized temple trips appear to have never occurred due to limited active membership, long distance, travel expenses, and difficulties acquiring the needed documentation and permissions to travel to South Africa prior to the completion of the temple in Kinshasa in 2019. The placement of a senior missionary couple would greatly increase the likelihood of future temple participation of Central African members.

Comparative Growth

The greatest accomplishment of the Church in the Central African Republic has been its continuous presence for nearly 30 years despite minimal outside support from mission leadership during this time and relatively small Church membership. Isolation from mission headquarters due to geography and political instability have required local members to become self-sufficient in meeting leadership needs. Some African nations, including Somalia and South Sudan, had a Church presence originally established but no longer have an official ward or branch. Growth trends for the Church in the Central African Republic have most closely mirrored other Sub-Saharan African nations prior to the assignment of full-time, proselytizing missionaries, such as Angola and Cameroon during the 1990s and early 2000s.

Christian groups report slow growth but most have maintained a presence in the Central African Republic for much longer than The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Both Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh Day Adventists have usually reported slow membership and congregational growth in the past decade. Geographical isolation, a relatively small population compared to other African nations, and war and political instability have all appeared responsible for the lack of growth in these nontraditional, proselytism-focused Christian groups.

Future Prospects

The opening of the Cameroon Yaoundé Mission and the Africa Central Area in 2020 present good opportunities for more member and leader support and resources to explore options to begin deliberate missionary efforts in Bangui. Ongoing political instability, low living standards, and geographical isolation from the nearest cities with a Latter-day Saint presence remain major barriers to assign foreign, full-time missionaries. It is unlikely the Church will assign young, full-time missionaries until greater peace and political stability is established and maintained. Mobilization of local members and leaders to find, teach, baptize, and retain new converts appears the most appropriate method to help the Church grow in the immediate future. Translations of basic missionary and gospel study materials and the Book of Mormon into Sangho is greatly needed given the widespread use of this creole language throughout the country. The assignment of a senior missionary couple presents good opportunities to explore humanitarian and development projects to help alleviate suffering, especially in regards to literacy classes and medical care, although this may not be possible until conditions in Bangui become safer for foreigners to live in the city for extended periods of time.

[1] "Central African Republic," Social Institutions and Gender Index, retrieved 20 March 2010. http://genderindex.org/country/central-african-republic

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[3] "2018 Report on International Religious Freedom: Central African Republic." U.S. Department of State. Accessed 18 February 2020. https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-report-on-international-religious-freedom/central-african-republic/

[4] Mostert, Mary. "Medical officer ministers to souls," LDS Church News, 5 December 1992. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/21796/Medical-officer-ministers-to-souls.html

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[7] "Nairobi, Kenya, to be Church Africa Central Area Office." Church Newsroom. 20 August 2019. https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/nairobi--kenya--to-be-church-africa-central-area-office

[8] Mostert, Mary. "Medical officer ministers to souls," LDS Church News, 5 December 1992. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/21796/Medical-officer-ministers-to-souls.html

[9] "Where We Work." Latter-day Saint Charities. Accessed 18 February 2020. https://www.latterdaysaintcharities.org/where-we-work