

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.



Benin

Population: 10.16 millions (#88 out of countries)

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Geography

Area: 112,622 square km. Located in West Africa and occupying a strip of land between Nigeria and Togo, Benin runs from the Atlantic Ocean in the south to Burkina Faso and Niger in the north. Tropical climate occurs in southern and central areas, with northern areas pertaining to the semi-arid Sahel region. Terrain principally consists of plains, with some hills and small mountains in a few locations. Sandbanks are common along coastal areas, and there are no natural islands, harbors, or river mouths. Hazardous weather generated by harmattan winds is a natural hazard in northern areas. Environmental issues include deforestation, desertification, freshwater scarcity, and wildlife poaching. Benin is divided into twelve administrative departments.

Peoples

Fon: 38.4%

Adja: 15.1%

Yoruba: 12.0%

Bariba: 9.6%

Peulh (Fulani): 8.6%

Ottamari: 6.1%

Yoa-Lokpa: 4.3%

Dendi: 2.9%

Other: 0.9%

Foreigner: 1.9%

Ethnic groups native to southern Benin pertain to the Guinean ethnic family, whereas ethnic groups native to northern areas generally pertain to the Central Bantoid ethnic family. The Fon, Adja, and Yoruba live in the southern departments of Benin, which are the most densely populated in the country. The Bariba reside in northern areas. Population density decreases as one moves north toward the Sahel.

Population: 13,301,694 (2021)

Annual Growth Rate: 3.36% (2021)

Fertility Rate: 5.47 children born per woman (2021)

Life Expectancy: 60.02 male, 63.71 female (2021)

Languages: Fon (15%), Gbe dialects (13%), Hausa (8%), Aja (7%), Baatonum (7%), Fulani (5%), Gun (5%), Ede dialects (3%), Ditammari (2%), Yoruba (2%), Gen (1%), other or unspecified (32%). French is the official language. Languages with more than one million speakers include Fon (2.0 million) and Gbe dialects (1.7 million).

Literacy: 42.4% (2018)

History

The Kingdom of Dahomey occupied southern portions of present-day Benin from the seventeenth century to the end of the nineteenth century. Trading posts were established by the Portuguese, French, and Dutch for the slave trade during this period. The French and the kings of Abomey signed treaties establishing French protectorates in major cities and ports during the late nineteenth century. France established Benin as a French colony by 1900. Additional territory was annexed in the north during the early twentieth century, and in 1958, the colony was granted republic status within the French community as the Republic of Dahomey. Independence occurred in 1960, and the country was renamed Benin in 1975. Several military coups occurred in the 1960s and early 1970s that culminated in government changes, the establishment of a dictatorship, and the implementation of communist and socialist policies. These reforms ultimately failed and resulted in a change to a democratic government in 1991 under pressure from other democratic nations. In 1991, Benin became the first African nation to have a peaceful transfer of power to a democratically elected president. Democratic elections have occurred in recent years, although accusations of electoral fraud persist.[1]

Culture

Tribalism and religion are the primary influences on Beninese culture. Indigenous religions are commonly practiced, such as Vodoun (Voodoo). French colonial influence introduced French as a language for government and interethnic communication; indigenous languages are widely spoken. Music and literature are cultural achievements. Corn, fish, fruit, rice, vegetables, and chicken are the most common foods. Alcohol and cigarette consumption rates are low. The government has outlawed polygamous marriages since 2004 but continues to recognize polygamous marriages performed before the ban.[2]

Economy

GDP per capita: $3,287 (2019) [5.25% of U.S.]

Human Development Index: 0.545 (2019)

Corruption Index: 41 (2019)

As Benin is among the poorest countries in the world, nearly 40% of the population lives below the poverty line. The economy is agriculturally driven, with cotton being the chief crop exported. During the past several years the government has made efforts to privatize the economy and government-controlled infrastructure to attract foreign investment. Benin continues to struggle to meet basic utility needs to expand the economy and improve living conditions. The literacy rate is very low and challenges efforts to develop a greater body of skilled workers. Services generate 51% of the GDP, whereas agriculture and industry generate 26% and 23% of the GDP, respectively. Clothing, food processing, construction, and cement are major industries. Common agricultural products include cotton, corn, cassava, yams, vegetables, palm oil, nuts, and livestock. China, Nigeria, Bangladesh, the United Arab Emirates, and India are the primary trade partners.

Corruption is perceived as widespread. However, corruption has appeared to significantly improve in the past decade based on Transparency International data. Benin is vulnerable to money laundering due to poor enforcement of financial regulations. Illicit drugs destined for Western Europe are frequently trafficked through Benin.

Faiths

Christian: 48.5%

Muslim: 27.7%

Vodoun (Voodoo): 11.6%

None: 5.8%

Other: 6.4%

Christians

Denominations – Members – Congregations

Catholic – 3,391,932

Celestial Church of Christ – 891,213

Methodist – 452,258

Jehovah’s Witnesses – 14,360 – 235

Seventh Day Adventists – 5,859 – 90

Latter-day Saints – 4,018 – 19

Religion

Christianity is the largest religion in Benin, accounting for nearly half of the population. Many of the Fon and Yoruba follow Christianity. Over half of Christians adhere to the Catholic Church; the rest identify with various Protestant and African Christian churches such as the Celestial Church of Christ. Islam is the second largest religion in Benin, claiming 27.7% of the total population. Vodoun is practiced by 11.6%. Christianity is most prevalent in the south, whereas Islam is most prevalent in the north and often ethnically based.

Religious Freedom

The constitution protects religious freedom, which is upheld by the government. The practice of religious belief is determined by the constitutional court, which protects the right of free speech regarding religious affairs. Religious groups must register with the Ministry of the Interior and receive tax-exempt status. There have been no reports of the government denying registration for any religious groups in recent years. Religious instruction is not permitted in public schools, but several religious groups operate private schools. Societal abuses of religious freedom appear infrequent.[3]

Largest Cities

Urban: 49% (2021)

Cotonou, Porto-Novo, **Parakou, Godomey,** Abomey-Calavi, **Djougou,** Bohicon**, Ekpé, Abomey, Nikki.**

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

Four of the ten largest cities has a Latter-day Saint congregation. Twenty percent (20%) of the national population resides in the ten most populous cities.

Latter-day Saint History

When civil war erupted in the Democratic Republic of Congo in 1998, a Latter-day Saint senior missionary couple was transferred from the Democratic Republic of the Congo Kinshasa Mission to Benin and Togo in hopes of legalizing the Church in both countries. Elder and Sister Langevin baptized the first convert to the Church in Benin later that year. The Church obtained legal status in Benin in 2003. At the time, one group operated in Cotonou.[4] Benin was initially assigned to the Ivory Coast Abidjan Mission and was reassigned to the Ghana Cape Coast Mission in 2005,[5] the Ghana Accra Mission in 2007,[6] and the Cote d'Ivoire Abidjan Mission in 2008. Elder David A. Bednar dedicated Benin for missionary work in 2007. Seminary and institute were both functioning by 2008. In 2011, the Benin Cotonou Mission was organized to administer Benin and Togo.[7] In late 2010, non-African missionaries serving in Cote d'Ivoire were evacuated to Benin and Togo. In 2012, the first district was created in Cotonou. In 2016, the Cotonou Benin Stake was organized—the first stake in Benin.

Membership Growth

Church Membership: 4,018 (2019)

At the end of 2004, the Church reported eleven members in the entire country. Membership in Benin increased from ninety-five at the end of 2005 to 253 by the end of 2008. Latter-day Saint membership officially reported by the Church for 2009 and 2010 may be incorrect as the Church reported 201 and 229 members, respectively, and only one congregation, whereas full-time missionaries reported approximately 300 active members and three branches by year-end 2010. Membership totals for Benin's two other Latter-day Saint branches likely accounted for an additional 400 members in 2010. In addition to Beninese members, the Church in Benin also includes Togolese and Nigerian members who reside in Cotonou. Annual membership growth rates in

the 2010s were persistently maintained at a rate greater than 15% with a high of 59.9% in 2012 and a low of 16% in 2019. Church membership totaled 1,081 in 2012, 2,638 in 2016, and 4,018 in 2019. In 2019, one in 3,012 was a Latter-day Saint on Church records.

Congregational Growth

Wards: 7 Branches: 12 (2020)

In 2003, the first Latter-day Saint branch was organized in Cotonou. At the end of 2008, the Cotonou Branch was divided to create two new branches. In early 2011, there were three branches operating in Benin (Akpakpa, Gbedjromede, and Menontin), which reported directly to the Cote d'Ivoire Abidjan Mission. The Church created its first district in 2012 and organized three additional branches for a total of six branches in the country. In April 2016, the Church organized its first stake in Benin. The Cotonou Benin Stake was organized from the Cotonou Benin District and included eight wards and six branches. In December 2018, the Cococodji Benin District was organized from a division of the Cotonou Benin Stake. Three branches were assigned to the district (Agla, Cocotomey, and Hilacondji) and two wards in the stake were transferred to the district and downgraded to branch status (Cococodji and Hevie). In October 2019, a new branch was organized in the city of Bohicon. Since the organization of the first branch in Benin in 2005 (the Cotonou Branch), all other cities with congregations have been on the Atlantic coast, including Calavi (organized in 2014), Port Novo (2014), and Hilacondji (2017). In June 2021, the Cococodji Benin District became a stake.

Activity and Retention

Ninety-two were enrolled in seminary or institute during the 2009–2010 school year. Convert retention rates in the 2010s were generally around 50% for new converts one year after baptism according to returned missionary estimates. One member noted their congregation in Cotonou had approximately 60-79 active members with an activity rate of 55% as of 2016. Returned missionary reports indicated that most congregations in the country had between twenty-five and 100 active members during the mid to late 2010s. However, local members reported that approximately 80-85% of church membership in the Cotonou Benin Stake regularly attended church services during the early 2021. A similar percentage of recent converts remained active in the Church within the stake at the time. Nationwide active membership is likely approximately 3,000, or 75% of total church membership.

Language Materials

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

All Latter-day Saint scriptures and most church materials are available in French. The Book of Mormon, two church proclamations, and several primary, Relief Society, missionary, and priesthood materials are available in Yoruba. The Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith is available in Ewe, Fon, Fulani, and Hausa. Gospel Principles is available in Ewe, Fulani, and Hausa. The Church recently added Fon to its languages with translations of Church materials in February 2021, but no materials were available on the website as of May 2021.

Meetinghouses

Latter-day Saint congregations appear to primarily meet in renovated buildings or rented spaces.

Health and Safety

The risk for infectious diseases is very high. Common diseases include typhoid fever, hepatitis A, bacterial and protozoal diarrhea, malaria, yellow fever, meningococcal meningitis, and rabies. In 2019, the estimated HIV/AIDS infection rate for the adult population was 1%.

Humanitarian and Development Work

The Church had reported twenty-three humanitarian and development projects completed in Benin between 1985 and 2019 which have included community projects, immunization campaigns, Benson Food initiatives, wheelchair donations, and maternal and newborn care.[8]

Opportunities, Challenges, and Prospects

Religious Freedom

Latter-day Saints benefit from full religious freedom from the government and no reported instances of societal abuses of religious freedom. Foreign missionaries regularly serve, and missionaries and members alike may freely proselyte, assemble, and worship.

Cultural Issues

Low literacy rates and poverty are challenges that limit local member self-sufficiency in leadership and economic self-reliance. However, these conditions also provide opportunities for Latter-day Saint humanitarian and development projects that can meet these needs in the general population and raise public awareness of the Church, provide finding opportunities for full-time missionaries, and offer opportunities for local members to introduce friends and family in need to services provided by the Church. Clean water projects, education assistance, employment workshops, and additional medical care are potential development and humanitarian activities that have yet to be explored by the Church in Benin.

Returned missionaries report that most are receptive to the Latter-day Saint gospel message, and there are few instances when they are rejected by people they teach. However, cohabitation among couples is a major barrier for potential converts to join the Church given few are legally married. Dowries are expensive and present significant barriers for many to join the Church who otherwise desire membership. Those participating in a polygamous marriage must end relations in divorce or permanent separation and be interviewed by a member of the mission presidency to be considered for baptism. Ethno-religious ties among some traditionally Muslim ethnic groups such as the Peulh (Fulani) present barriers for Latter-day Saint mission outreach.

National Outreach

Latter-day Saint mission outreach occurred only in Cotonou as of early 2011 and reached no more than 12% of the national population. The percentage of the Beninese population who resided in cities and towns with an official ward or branch had risen to 17% as of early 2021 with the opening of the Church's first branches in Calavi (2014), Porto Novo (2014), Hilacondji (2017), and Bohicon (2019). Nevertheless, The Church's outreach in Benin remains very limited. The Church maintains no presence in central or northern areas of the country. Seven of the twelve administrative departments in Benin have no Latter-day Saint congregations and together account for 55% of the national population. Fifteen of the nineteen official congregations in the country operate within the Cotonou metropolitan area where there are 1.89 million inhabitants. Thus, the average ward or branch in Cotonou has 126,000 people within its geographical boundaries. This finding indicates there is a significant need for greater outreach among Benin's most populous city given most have likely not heard anything about the Church or have not ever had contact with a member of the Church.

With widespread religious freedom and a highly receptive population to Latter-day Saint mission efforts, Benin presents excellent opportunities for expanding national outreach in currently unreached locations. Delays in opening Benin to formal missionary work until 2003 appear largely due to limited missionary resources dedicated to the region and complications receiving government recognition. Delays in expanding national outreach is primarily attributed to limited Latter-day Saint mission resources dedicated to the region, the plateauing of Latter-day Saint missionary manpower worldwide in the 2000s, and the several mission boundary changes since 2000 involving Togo and Benin. Past missions that administered Benin have included three or more nations within their boundaries, and most mission resources were dedicated to the nation in which the mission was based. Benin's geographic separation from missions it has pertained to over the years has likely resulted in inadequate training and emphasis placed on the retention of converts. Furthermore, when Benin was under the jurisdiction of missions in Ghana, missionaries had to learn French and local African languages if transferred to the country. This would complicate matters for mission presidency members traveling to Benin and providing training and assistance if they did not know French or African languages spoken in the Cotonou area.

The amount of mission resources allocated to Benin in the late 2000s was comparable to Togo, notwithstanding the Church in Togo reporting twice as many members, two additional congregations, and a functioning district in early 2011. New proselytizing areas opened regularly in Cotonou in the late 2000s and early 2010s. The organization of the Benin Cotonou Mission in 2011 facilitated the opening of additional congregations in the Cotonou area and the expansion of the Church into additional cities. Nevertheless, the mission continues to service neighboring Togo which has more members of the Church and more congregations than Benin. Thus, the Benin Cotonou Mission continues to have limited resources to expand outreach into additional areas of the country. Furthermore, difficulties with self-sustainable in some of the recently organized congregations have drawn away mission resources to stabilize these units at the expense of delaying outreach expansion into additional locations.

Member Activity and Convert Retention

The early Church in Benin provides an excellent example of how rapid membership growth does not always correlate with low convert retention and member activity rates, as the Church blossomed from a single congregation of eleven total members in 2004 to approximately 300 active members out of 600 meeting in three congregations in late 2010. Successes in achieving moderately high rates of convert retention appear linked to avoiding the overstaffing of Latter-day Saint congregations with full-time missionaries and the opening of additional congregations in late 2008.

Ethnic Issues and Integration

Ethnic violence and conflict have been less apparent than most African nations notwithstanding the high degree of ethnic diversity. At present, Latter-day Saint missionaries have not reported ethnic integration challenges at church. Potential for ethnic integration challenges exists and deserves careful observation by Church leaders and emphasis by local and mission leaders to play down ethnic differences at church through sharing common beliefs and values.

Language Issues

Most Beninese are illiterate—a major barrier to the Church's traditional missionary program and reliance on written materials to teach and grow testimonies. Low literacy rates create serious challenges for developing self-sustaining local leadership but provide the opportunity of extending Latter-day Saint literacy classes designed to meet literacy needs among members and nonmembers. Literacy programs can be an effective finding and retention approach. The Church is currently unprepared to meet the needs required by the high degree of linguistic diversity, as most local languages have no Latter-day Saint materials available, and the few languages with translations of materials have only one or two Latter-day Saint resources. It was not until the early 2020s that the Church had begun to translate materials into Fon, and these materials remained unavailable online as of May 2021. Low literacy rates reduce the urgency of translating additional materials in local languages if most are unable to read proficiently. Missionaries report that church meetings are supposed to be conducted in French, but oftentimes members speak in Fon, Fongbe and English at church. Language-specific congregations may be organized if the number of active members speaking differing languages warrants it and if qualified leadership is available. Languages in the greatest need of Latter-day Saint scriptures and a wide selection of basic proselytism materials include Fon and Gbe.

Missionary Service

As of 2009, ten full-time elders were serving as missionaries in the country in addition to a senior couple who also administers to Togo. In the late 2000s, the first Beninese members began serving full-time missions. Stressing weekly church attendance, personal religious habits like scripture reading and daily prayer, and participation in seminary and institute may increase the number of local members serving missions, reduce reliance on foreign missionaries to staff Benin's missionary needs, and generate a larger body of potential church leaders over the medium term.

Leadership

All wards and branches were led by local members in 2020. However, returned missionaries have previously complained that local leaders struggle with a lack of training and experience in handling Church administration and properly leading their congregations. These leadership difficulties likely influenced the decision to divide the Cotonou Benin Stake to create a new district in 2018 in order to provide more mission oversight to Church administration in the branches of this district. Nevertheless, leadership development efforts have appeared effective as evidenced by the organization of a second stake in 2021.

Temple

Benin is assigned to the Accra Ghana Temple district. Crossing two international boundaries to reach the temple is a challenge for many, although members in Benin benefit from closer proximity to a temple than most in Africa. Temple trips appear to be held irregularly and in small groups or on an individual basis. Benin will most likely be assigned to the Lagos Nigeria Temple when it is completed. Prospects appear favorable for the construction of a temple in Togo within the medium term given that there are two stakes in Togo and steady and sustained growth in the number of active members and congregations.

Comparative Growth

With only eleven reported Latter-day Saints in 2004 and more than 4,000 members in 2019, Benin has experienced the most rapid numerical membership growth among African nations that had no independent branches organized prior to 2003. The percentage of Latter-day Saints in the population of Benin is the lowest in West Africa among nations with at least 1,000 Latter-day Saints. However, member activity and convert retention rates were among the highest in the world as of the early 2020s.

Most outreach-oriented Christians have maintained a presence in Benin for decades but have experienced limited growth compared to other African nations. The Seventh-day Adventist Church experienced steady membership growth during the 2000s, but the number of churches only increased from eleven to fourteen, notwithstanding Adventist membership more than doubling. Adventists generally baptized between 200 and 400 new converts in the 2000s.[9] Adventists reported significant growth in the number of churches in the 2010s to thirty-one, albeit Adventist membership increased by less than 1,000. Jehovah's Witnesses claimed 10,687 members, operated 162 congregations, and baptized over 500 new converts in 2010.[10] By 2020, Witnesses reported 14,360 active members, 495 annual baptisms, and 235 congregations. Nevertheless, both Adventists and Witnesses have experienced limited growth compared to other nations with comparable populations. The Benin-based Celestial Church of Christ bears many similarities in teachings and doctrines with missionary-minded denominations and continues to grow despite the death of its founder in the 1980s and controversy concerning leadership succession. In sum, these denominations have been much more effective than Latter-day Saints in regard to self-sustainability of local leadership and national outreach expansion.

Future Prospects

The Church in Benin has achieved significant growth within a short period of time as attested by the establishment of the Church's first two stakes in the country within less than two decades of the first branch being organized. Convert retention and member activity rates are among the highest in the world, albeit there have been periods of time when there have been challenges with local leadership development and convert retention in the recent past. Recent experience has demonstrated that there are excellent prospects for rapid Church growth in Benin, but there is a need for strict fidelity to the timeless principles

of effective missionary work—namely adequate and careful prebaptismal preparation, local member-led finding and fellowshipping efforts, emphasis on full-time mission preparation for youth, and proper mentoring and training of local leaders who are almost entirely recent converts from the past 5-10 years. The expansion of the Church into additional cities outside of Cotonou since the early 2010s is a welcome development especially given the mission's focus during this time with the establishment of the first district in 2012 and the first stake in 2016. The creation of a separate mission for neighboring Togo appears likely in the foreseeable future, and this development may further help strengthen the fledgling Church in Benin.

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