



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.



Malaysia

Population: 30.07 millions (#44 out of countries)

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Geography

Area: 329,847 square km. Malaysia comprises a portion of the Malay Peninsula between Thailand and Singapore and a portion of the island of Kalimantan (Borneo). Several heavily traveled straits encompass Malaysia, such as the Malacca Strait between West Malaysia and Indonesia, giving the country strong geopolitical importance. Terrain consists primarily of heavily forested plains and hills, with large areas of rainforest in East Malaysia. Flooding, landslides, and forest fires are natural hazards. Environmental issues include air and water pollution and deforestation. Malaysia is administratively divided into thirteen states and one federal territory.

Peoples

Bumiputera: 62.0% (includes Malays and indigenous peoples)

Chinese: 20.6%

Indian: 5.7%

Other: 0.8%

Unspecified: 0.6%

Non-citizens: 10.3%

Approximately 80% of Malaysia's population, including most ethnic Malays, resides in West (Peninsular) Malaysia, which is much more urban than East Malaysia. The most prevalent tribes in East Malaysia are the Iban and Kadazan. The Iban live in Sarawak Province but have also migrated to Sabah Province as well as West Malaysia and the West Kalimantan Province in Indonesia. The Kadazan are from Sabah Province. Other major tribal groups include the Rungus, Dusun and Kadazandusun, many of which are Kadazan subgroups. Chinese primarily arrived in the nineteenth century. Most Indians in Malaysia arrived during the British colonial period.

Population: 31,809,660 (July 2018)

Annual Growth Rate: 1.34% (2018)

Fertility Rate: 2.48 children born per woman (2018)

Life Expectancy: 72.6 male, 78.4 female (2018)

Languages: Malay dialects (51%), Chinese languages (20%), Tamil (4%), Iban (2%), other/unspecified (23%). Bahasa Malay is the official language. Languages with over one million speakers include Malay dialects (16.2 million), Chinese languages (6.4 million), and Tamil (1.3 million).

Literacy: 94.6% (2015)

History

Indians brought Hinduism and Buddhism to Malaysia 100 BC, and Hindu kingdoms were established until the spread of Islam in the fifteenth century AD. The Portuguese reached Malacca in 1511, and the British colonized Malaysia during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Japan controlled the region during World War II, and after the war, power was restored to the British. Malaysia gained independence in 1957 and experienced instability within the country and with neighboring nations, including communist movements and conflicts with neighbors to define borders. Singapore seceded from Malaysia in 1965. In recent years, Malaysia has experienced rapid economic growth and significant improvements in living conditions.

Culture

Malaysian culture has evolved from Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Western cultural influences. The Malays exhibit a strong ethno-religious tie with Islam and have struggled to determine to what extent Islam should be integrated into government. Many of the largest cities support diverse populations with significant numbers of Malays, Chinese, migrant workers, and tribal peoples from East Malaysia. One of the most prominent tribes from East Malaysia, the Iban, were traditionally known as headhunters living in longhouses, which they still live in today. Up to hundreds of families can live in a single longhouse in Sarawak. When family members marry, they often build onto the end of the longhouse of their original family. Gawai is a major festival in Sarawak, East Malaysia that occurs on June 1. Common foods include vegetables, rice, fish, meat, and fruit. Alcohol and cigarette consumption rates are lower than world averages.

Economy

GDP per capita: \$29,100 (2017) [48.7% of U.S.]

Human Development Index: 0.802 (2017)

Corruption Index: 47 (2018)

Much of Malaysia's economic potential rests in its geographic location between China and Indonesia, as well as its key position along major Southeast Asian shipping routes. Malaysia transitioned from an economy dominated by the export of raw materials thirty years ago to an economy that has diversified and modernized. Economic prosperity came to the country during the 1970s and 1980s and continues today. Manufactured goods as well as the extraction of petroleum deposits around the country help drive an export-driven economy. More manufacturing occurs in West Malaysia, whereas more extraction of natural resources occurs in East Malaysia. Current economic policies focus on helping Malaysia advance into a high-income developed nation. Malaysia's location attracts many foreigners for employment. Services comprise approximately half of the GDP and labor force, whereas industry accounts for roughly one-third of the GDP and labor force. Singapore, China, the United States, and Japan are the primary trade partners.

Corruption is perceived as a major issue with little improvement in the past decade. Human trafficking for forced labor and commercial sexual exploitation are serious concerns. The government maintains strict enforcement of illicit drug trafficking laws. Malaysia is a producer of synthetic drugs, such as methamphetamine and ecstasy.

Faiths

Muslim 61.3%

Buddhist 19.8%

Christian 9.2%

Hindu 6.3%

Confucianism, Taoism, other traditional Chinese religions: 1.3%

Unspecified: 0.9%

None: 0.8%

Other: 0.4%

Christians

Denomination – Members – Congregations

Catholic – 1,330,000

Evangelicals – 1,207,985

Seventh Day Adventists – 58,840 – 427

Latter-day Saints – 10,504 – 31

Jehovah's Witnesses – 5,350 – 118

Religion

Most ethnic Malays are Muslims and live in West Malaysia. The constitution declares all ethnic Malays Muslims at birth. Less than one percent of ethnic Malays are Christian. Chinese adhere primarily to Buddhism or traditional Chinese religions. Most of the tribal peoples in East Malaysia are Christian, particularly in the province of Sarawak. Two-thirds of Christians in Malaysia live in East Malaysia.[\[1\]](#)

Religious Freedom

Persecution Index: 42nd (2019)

As Muslims constitute a slight majority of the population, Malaysia continues to struggle over whether to define itself as an Islamic state; some Muslim-majority provinces have adopted portions of Sharia law. Malaysian law forbids the proselytism of Muslims, which comprise approximately 60% of the population. Society has becoming increasingly intolerant of religious diversity and religious freedom for non-Muslims. If Malays wish to denounce Islam, they must appeal for public apostasy in order to have their Muslim status revoked. Penalties for apostasy vary by state. Proselytism laws vary among provinces, with the most liberal provinces in East Malaysia. Minors must have permission from both parents to convert to another religious group. Current legislation bars non-Muslims from using the Malay word for “Allah” to denote God. Only Sunni Islam is permitted to be practiced in Malaysia, and the government seeks to “rehabilitate” followers of other branches of Islam.[\[2\]](#)

Major Cities

Urban: 76% (2018)

Kuala Lumpur, Johor Bahru, **Klang**, Ipoh, **Ampang Jaya**, **Subang Jaya**, Petaling Jaya, Kuching, **Shah Alam**, Kota Kinabalu, **Seremban**, **Kuantan**, Sandakan, **Kuala Terengganu**, **Kota Bharu**, Tawau, **Kajang**, **Taiping**, **Alor Setar**, George Town, **Sungai Petani**, **Selayang Baru**, **Batu**, Miri, Sibul, **Bukit Mertajam**, Melaka, **Kluang**, **Batu Pahat**, **Kulim**, **Sungai Ara**, Bintulu, **Muar**, **Butterworth**, **Gelugor**.

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

Thirteen of the thirty-five cities over 100,000 inhabitants have a Church presence. Forty-five percent (45%) of the national

population resides in the thirty-five most populous cities.

Church History

The Church experienced little growth for the first thirty years that missionaries served in Malaysia. The first missionaries arrived in 1972 and served in Kuala Lumpur. Malaysia has been a part of the Singapore Mission since its reorganization in 1974. Rapid membership and congregational growth occurred during the 2000s, but this growth came to a dramatic slowdown in the 2010s. In 2018 the Presiding Bishop in the Church visited members in Kuala Lumpur.^[3] In 2019, international church leaders in the Primary and Young Women's organizations visited youth in Malaysia.^[4]

Membership Growth

Church Membership: 10,504 (2018)

There were 66 Latter-day Saints in 1977. Membership totaled 116 in 1981, 290 in 1985, and 300 in 1989. Membership reached 600 in 1993, 800 in 1997, and 1,309 in 2000. During the 2000s, rapid membership growth occurred as membership increased to 1,922 in 2002, 2,456 in 2004, 3,633 in 2006, 5,646 in 2008, and 7,314 in 2010. Annual membership growth rates in the 2000s ranged from a high of 27% in 2007 to a low of 10% in 2004 and generally varied from 15%–25%. Membership has generally increased by 1,000 a year during this time period.

Membership growth dramatically slowed in the 2010s from double-digit annual membership growth rates to 2-3% for most years. Membership numbered 8,967 in 2012, 10,010 in 2016, and 10,504 in 2018.

In 2018, one in 3,028 was a Latter-day Saint on Church records.

Congregational Growth

Branches: 31 (August 2019)

The first district was created in 1980 in Kuala Lumpur. There were three branches in 1987 located in Ipoh, Kuala Lumpur, and Penang. In the 1990s, the Church organized its first branches in Malacca (1995), Kota Kinabalu (1996), Miri (1997), Sibul (1997), Sandakan (1999), Tawau (1999). The number of branches increased to four in 1993, nine in 1997, and fifteen in 2000. The Church organized its first district in East Malaysia in Kota Kinabalu in 1997. There were two districts by year-end 1999.

Slow congregational growth occurred between 2000 and 2008 as the number of branches increased from fifteen to seventeen. There were twenty-four branches in 2009 and twenty-eight branches in 2010. Cities where the Church organized its first branches in the 2000s included Johore Bahru (2001), Bintulu (2002), Kuching (2003), Butterworth (2009), and Sitiawan (2009). Several additional districts were organized during the decade including Ipoh (2003), Kuching (2003), Miri (2008), and Sibul (2009). There were six districts in Malaysia by year-end 2009.

The Singapore Mission organized language-specific groups in several cities during the early 2010s. One Chinese-speaking group functioned in Miri in 2011. In early 2012, additional language-specific groups were organized in Sitiawan, Johore Bahru, and Kuching. The Chinese-speaking group in Miri later became a branch, a Malay-speaking branch was organized in Johore Bahru, and an English-speaking branch was organized in Kuching. The Malay-speaking group in Sitiawan closed in approximately early 2014. Cities where the Church organized its first branches during the 2010s included Mukah (2010), Sibul Jaya (2010), and Klang (2014). A member group in Kuantan also appeared to begin to operate during this time period. The Church reached thirty-four branches in 2014. Additional districts organized in the 2010s included Bintulu (2011) and Johor Bahru (2011) – both of which were discontinued in 2015. Missionaries reported that the Bintulu Malaysia District was merged with the Miri Malaysia District in preparation for the area to become a stake within the foreseeable future.

Several branches were discontinued in the mid and late 2010s. The number of branches decreased to thirty-three in 2016, thirty-two in 2017, and thirty in 2019. Branches discontinued during this time were the Park City Branch (Bintulu) in 2015, the Stampin Branch (Kuching) in 2016, the Klang Branch in 2017, and the Butterworth Branch and Sitiawan (Mandarin) Branch in 2019. The Singapore Mission Branch services areas outside of traditional branches such as Kelantan State and most of Johor State.

Activity and Retention

In the late 2000s, it was not uncommon for some missionaries in East Malaysia to have over twenty investigators at Church on a Sunday. Many branches in East Malaysia commonly had several baptisms a week at the time. Most branches were reported by missionaries to consist of 50–150 active members in the late 2000s. However, nominal membership growth has far outstripped

the increase in church units, reflecting challenges of member retention and local leadership development. The average number of members per congregation tripled from 108 in 2001 to 318 in 2018 without much of a commensurate increase in the number of active members per branch. The number of converts retained every year in Malaysia during the years of most rapid growth appeared as low as 200–300, considering that few new congregations were created during this time.

Returned missionaries reported the following number of active members per branch during the mid- to late 2010s: Petaling Jaya (80-100), Kuala Lumpur (70-80), Ipoh (50-70), Cheras (50), Kota Kinabalu branches (50 each), Sibu branches (50), Penang (40-80), Miri branches (40-100 each), Bintulu branches (40-70), Mukah (40-60), Kuching branches (30-90), Klang (20-30), Malacca (20), Butterworth (15), and Sandakan (10). At the time, returned missionaries reported that the Singapore Mission generally baptized 200-300 converts a year – the vast majority of whom resided in Malaysia. Approximately 20-30% of converts appeared to continue to regularly attend church one year after baptism in the early and mid-2010s, whereas by the late 2010s this percentage may have increased to as high as 60-70%.

Nationwide active membership is estimated at 1,600, or 15% of total church membership.

Language Materials

Languages with Latter-day Saint Scripture: Malay, Chinese, English.

The Church has translated all Latter-day Saint scriptures and many church materials into Standard Malay and Chinese (traditional and simplified characters). This is a major improvement from the late 2000s when there were only two Church publications translated into Malay: Gospel Fundamentals and the Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith. Local members report that in 2009, the Church authorized the translation of the Book of Mormon into Bahasa Malaysian. The only Church publications available in Iban are The Articles of Faith and the Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith.

Meetinghouses

The first Church built chapel in Malaysia was dedicated in 2006 in Miri, East Malaysia.^[5] A second chapel constructed by the Church began construction in Kota Kinabalu, East Malaysia a month after the dedication of the first meetinghouse in the country in Miri. Other cities also had church-built meetinghouses as of 2019 such as Kuching and Kuala Lumpur. Branches without church-built meetinghouses meet in rented spaces or renovated buildings.

Health and Safety

A full-time missionary serving in Kuching died in 2013 after he was struck by a vehicle while he was riding his bicycle.^[6] The tropical climate of Malaysia presents a moderate risk for infectious diseases.

Humanitarian and Development Work

There have been a total of more than 200 humanitarian and development projects completed by the Church in Malaysia since 1985.^[7] Most of these projects have appeared to occur in East Malaysia. Fifteen villages in Sarawak benefited from a clean water project funded by the Church in 2007.^[8] In 2010, senior missionaries were conducting clean water projects in many regions of East Malaysia. Other humanitarian projects senior couples participate in include wheelchair donations by the Church in conjunction with the Rotary Club.

Opportunities, Challenges, and Prospects

Religious Freedom

Missionaries serving in Malaysia have to leave the country frequently to renew their visas and comply with visa laws. This results in periodic hiatuses from missionary work and expenses in taking missionaries temporarily out of the country, usually to Singapore. This is a particularly time-consuming and difficult journey for missionaries in East Malaysia, who travel by plane to get their visas renewed. Missionaries in Malaysia have avoided the title “Elder” on mail due to potential threats from radical Islamic groups. Legal restrictions prohibit proselytism of ethnic Malays.

Cultural Issues

High receptivity to Christianity among indigenous East Malaysian peoples has favored Church growth over the past two

decades. In addition to legal restrictions, strong ethno-religious ties of Malays to Islam prevent missionary activity among Malays, resulting in half of the Malaysian population being unreached by the Church. Mission and area leaders have directed full-time missionaries to avoid any proselytism activity with Muslims due to the sensitive nature of Christian proselytism among Muslims. Many branches in West Malaysia have diverse demography and provide opportunities for outreach among a wide range of ethnic groups. Some cultural practices interfere with Church teachings in Malaysia, such as the drinking of alcohol at the funeral of a loved one among the Iban tribe.

National Outreach

Twenty-six percent (26%) of the national population resides in cities with a Church congregation. Six of Malaysia's thirteen states do not have mission outreach (Kedah, Kelantan, Negeri Sembilan, Pahang, Perlis, and Terengganu). Twenty-six percent (26%) of the national population (8.4 million inhabitants) reside in unreached states. Every unreached city over 100,000 inhabitants without a Church presence is in West Malaysia. Currently, the Church does not have a presence in any cities of less than 100,000 people in West Malaysia. East Malaysia is subject to the most liberal proselytism laws and presents the greatest opportunity for church growth. Only half of the East Malaysian population lives in cities larger than 10,000 inhabitants.

There has been very little expansion of mission outreach to additional cities since 2010. The majority of progress in increasing mission outreach in Malaysia has occurred in the largest cities of East Malaysia, as the number of congregations in several cities increased from one to as many as five between 2000 and 2010. Continued congregational growth in East Malaysia in both the largest cities and presently unreached cities will be required to significantly increase national outreach in areas that are most receptive and tolerant of Christian proselytism. Establishing groups and dependent branches in unreached cities over 100,000 inhabitants in West Malaysia is greatly needed. Many unreached large cities in West Malaysia have Latter-day Saints who attend church meetings in other cities. The Kuala Lumpur Branch could feasibly be realigned to organize several additional church units for members residing in locations far from the church meetinghouse. Continued delays in organizing additional congregations in West Malaysia may result in missed opportunities when local populations were most receptive. The ongoing debate over the representation of Islam in government may bar expansion of mission outreach in West Malaysia if greater implementation of Shari'a law occurs in the future.

The Church maintains an English language newsroom website for Malaysia at <https://www.mormonnewsroom.my/>. Launching a website providing local news, information on church teachings, and contact information in Malay for full-time missionaries may facilitate national outreach expansion. The use of social networking websites in member-missionary work in Malaysia provides for promising opportunities for accelerating growth.

Member Activity and Convert Retention

With approximately one-third of converts becoming long-term active members, convert retention and member activity remain key challenges for church growth in Malaysia. Activity problems are great in both East and West Malaysia. Factors hampering convert retention include missionary pressure to quickly baptize converts with limited understanding before meaningful Church activity becomes routine, historical lack of adequate church materials in the Malay language, the lack of Church materials translated into Iban, church services held in languages that members of diverse backgrounds may not understand, and limited local leadership to nurture converts joining the Church in large numbers.

West Malaysia may have a more severe inactivity and retention problem, likely linked to the large diversity in nationalities among members. A member in Kuala Lumpur estimated his branch to have about 100 of the approximately 300 members active in 2010. Growth in active membership appears to be relatively flat, with new converts merely replacing those lost to inactivity. A stronger emphasis seems to have been historically in place to bring new members into the Church rather than teaching and fellowshiping new or less active members. Although there have been recent improvements with convert retention, the bulk of Church membership in Malaysia joined the Church in the 2000s and have since been lost to inactivity.

Previous and current efforts to encourage youth to participate in family history and temple work may help improve the retention of young members by greater participation in church activities and development of stronger faith and devotion to Church teachings.^[9] However, enrollment in seminary and institute appear an effective method to improve testimony development and understanding of gospel principles. Member-missionary activity is good in some branches, but reliance on full-time missionaries to find, teach, and fellowship new converts remains problematic.

Ethnic Issues and Integration

Very few, if any, ethnic Malays have joined the Church. An increasing number of Chinese converts are helping grow membership in Malaysia. A single branch in West Malaysia may have up to fifty different nationalities. These converts from many different nations pose challenges in assimilating membership into congregations speaking the same language for Church meetings. The majority of the converts of the Church in Malaysia come from the poorer immigrant workers from Africa, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, or from the native peoples of East Malaysia. Converts must often overcome differences in culture and language with other immigrant workers in the Church. Immigrant workers in the country often lack sufficient resources to lead congregations due to the transient nature of their employment and living accommodations. Future growth among immigrants and migrant workers in this area of Malaysia may continue to strain leadership to meet the needs of those from unfamiliar cultures. Yet the Church has the great opportunity to reach many different people from countries in which

the Church is not found or is under severe restrictions for sharing the gospel.

Language Issues

Church meetings are conducted in English, Malay, and Chinese. Some branches in East Malaysia use Iban in meetings. As the languages spoken in the Church in Malaysia are often not the native languages of many church members, many converts may feel detached from members around them or may not fully understand the Gospel teachings presented to them. The lack of scriptures and adequate church materials in Iban, other languages spoken in East Malaysia, or foreign languages such as Burmese, limit the depth to which converts may learn doctrine and lessen the resources available for members to be more self-sufficient on maintaining their testimonies in the gospel. It is difficult for investigators to learn about the Church and pray to gain a testimony when the scriptures are unavailable and Church meetings may be conducted in a language that is unfamiliar or not spoken fluently.

Leadership

Church leadership is most developed in West Malaysia, but there have been good improvements in some East Malaysian cities such as Miri and Kuching. All branches appeared led by a local branch president – most of whom are Malaysian. However, few Malaysian members have been to the temple or received the Melchizedek Priesthood. One senior missionary couple in East Malaysia in 2009 reported that only one couple from their branch had been through the temple. Most branches have few Melchizedek Priesthood holders. This is likely the result of many converts not progressing after baptism to the point of receiving the Melchizedek Priesthood. Leadership development challenges and low member activity rates have delayed the creation of stakes. Stakes outside of the United States require at least 1,900 members and 125 or more active, full tithe-paying Melchizedek Priesthood holders. Only one Malaysian member has been called to serve in an international Church leadership position. In 2013, Yoke Sang Freddie Chan was called as the first area seventy from Malaysia.[\[10\]](#)

Temple

Malaysia is assigned to the Hong Kong China Temple district. Malaysia will likely be reassigned to the Bangkok Thailand Temple once it is completed. Singapore may be a likely location for a new small temple that is much closer for members living in Malaysia. President Hinckley stated in Singapore in 2000: “I want to hold before you the challenge of promoting the growth of the Church in this area, and the faithfulness of the people to a point where some day we can have a Singapore Temple of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.”[\[11\]](#) With the announcement of many small temples in remote areas of the world with few members during the late 2010s, Singapore appears a likely candidate for such a temple.

Comparative Growth

The growth in raw membership the Church experienced in Malaysia during the 2000s is comparable to nearby Cambodia and more distant Mongolia. Both Mongolia and Cambodia saw rapid growth in terms of membership, each increasing by about 1,000 members for a five-year period between 2000 and 2005. Growth in these two nations has since decreased to membership increasing by about 300–600 members a year. Similar deceleration in membership and congregational growth rates has also occurred in Malaysia during the 2010s. Unlike Mongolia and Cambodia, Malaysia has seen its greatest success in missionary work among converts who were already Christian, whereas in Cambodia and Mongolia nearly all converts were Buddhist. However, the Church in Malaysia has lacked the higher rates of convert retention and native missionary service experienced in Mongolia and Cambodia. The Church in Malaysia experienced the most rapid congregational growth rates in the late 2000s and in 2010 in Southeast Asia. However, membership and congregational growth rates for the Church in Malaysia during the 2010s was comparable to the Church in Indonesia, and less than the Church in other Southeast Asian nations such as Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam. The percentage of nominal Latter-day Saints in the Malaysian population is comparable to the Church in Thailand.

Seventh-Day Adventists, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and other Christian groups with strong member-missionary programs have experienced success in Malaysia, particularly in East Malaysia, indicating continued receptivity to a religious message. Both Adventists and Witnesses each operate over one hundred congregations. These and many other missionary-minded Christians have carried out more coordinated, aggressive church planting strategies than the Church over the past several decades. Furthermore, these groups, such as Jehovah’s Witnesses, have conducted language-specific outreach in many languages. Jehovah’s Witnesses, for example, operated congregations that held meetings in seven different languages in the Kuala Lumpur metropolitan area alone as of late 2019.

Future Prospects

The outlook for the Church in Malaysia is noticeably bleaker for the coming decade compared to the 2000s and 2010s. Marked declines in membership growth rates from the previous decade, low member activity rates, leadership development challenges, and no expansion of the Church into additional cities in recent years, as well as a contraction in outreach with the sole branches in several cities closed in the 2010s, indicate that the Church in Malaysia’s focus has been on strengthening the core of active membership and preparing for some of the larger districts to become stakes, such as in Kuala Lumpur and Miri, rather than outward expansion. This approach may yield some long-term results with the formation of stakes in both East and West

Malaysia in the foreseeable future. The translation of all Latter-day Saint scriptures and many Church materials into Malay within the past decade also presents good opportunities for testimony development and missionary activity. However, with uncertainty regarding the role of Islam in government and increasing societal intolerance toward religious minorities may result in greater limitations placed on nontraditional Christian denominations such as The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which may, in turn, result in insurmountable obstacles toward future expansion of the Church. Consequently, the Church may be vulnerable to miss the current window of opportunity to expand into additional cities both in East and West Malaysia if such restrictions come into effect. However, the Church in Malaysia will most importantly need to become self-sufficient in meeting its own leadership and missionary needs without assistance from foreign full-time missionaries or expatriate Westerners in order to develop a more solid membership base that can endure societal and political changes, and perpetuate growth for generations to come.

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