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.

Liberia

Population: 4.09 millions (#128 out of countries)

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Geography

Area: 111,369 square km. Located in West Africa, Liberia borders Cote d'Ivoire, Sierra Leone, Guinea, and the North Atlantic Ocean. Coastal areas consist of mangroves and swamps whereas the interior is comprised of plateaus and hills concentrated along the Guinean border. Many areas are forested; Liberia comprises 40% of West Africa's rainforest.[1] Tropical, hot weather occurs year round with heavy rainfall occurring during the summer months. Dry Harmattan winds bring dust inland from the Sahara Desert during the winter months, which is the primary natural hazard. Environmental issues include deforestation, soil erosion, water pollution, and biodiversity loss. Liberia is divided into fifteen administrative counties.

Peoples

Kpelle: 20.3%

Bassa: 13.4%

Grebo: 10%

Gio: 8%

Mano: 7.9%

Kru: 6%

Lorma: 5.1%

Kissi: 4.8%

Gola: 4.4%

other: 20.1%

Most Liberians (95%) belong to approximately sixteen different ethnic groups; each having their own tribal languages. The Kpelle are the largest and are native to central and western areas whereas the Bassa are concentrated in central areas and the Grebo are located in the south. Other ethnic groups are generally found in southern and interior areas. The remaining five percent of Liberia's population are non-indigenous and consist of the descendents of freed slaves from the United States and the Caribbean.[2]

Population: 3,887,886 (July 2012)

Annual Growth Rate: 2.609% (2012)

Fertility Rate: 5.02 children born per woman (2012)

Life Expectancy: 55.82 male, 59.04 female (2012)

Languages: Kpelle (14%), Bassa (12%), Grebo dialects (8%), Kru (6%), Dan (5%), Loma (5%), Mano (5%), Gola (3%), Kissi (3%), Krahn (3%), Vai (3%), English (2%),

other or unknown (31%). English is the official language; as many as 20% of the population speaks English as a first or second language. Most English speakers are concentrated around Monrovia. Many ethnic languages are unwritten.

Literacy: 57.5% (2003)

History

West African tribes have populated present-day Liberia for millennia. Nicknamed the Grain Coast by Portuguese explorers in the fifteenth century due to plentiful Malegueta pepper seeds, Liberia was never colonized by a European power. The British established trading posts in the seventeenth century but these were promptly destroyed by the Dutch. Denoting "the land of the free," Liberia became Africa's first independent nation which began as a colony for freed slaves. The colony was founded in 1820 by freed American slaves who increased in numbers until independence occurred in 1847. Tensions arose between the freed slave colonists and the indigenous inhabitants during the nineteenth century; indigenous Africans were not granted citizenship until 1904. Controlled by a small elite of freed slaves and the descendents of freed slaves, the True Whig Party dictated all political matters from 1847 to 1980 and restricted the rights of the indigenous population. During the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, the British and French occupied vast areas of Liberia's interior. In 1980, a coup overthrew the government under indigenous Liberian Samuel K. Doe from the Krahn ethnic group. Ethnic conflict escalated during Doe's rule as he promoted members of his own ethnic group. The First Liberian Civil War began in 1989 when Liberian rebels led under Charles Taylor invaded Liberia from Cote d'Ivoire. The war lasted until 1996 and resulted in over 200,000 deaths and the displacement of one million Liberians into surrounding countries. Taylor emerged as president of Liberia following special elections after the war and supported a revolutionary movement in neighboring Sierra Leone. A second civil war occurred in 2003 which resulted in Taylor's resignation and the arrival of United Nations troops to provide national security. In 2005, the most free and fair elections in the country's history occurred and resulted in Liberia electing Africa's first female president. Since 2005, political and ethnic conflict have stabilized and a UN peacekeeping force remains visible throughout the country.[3]

Culture

Americo-Liberians introduced many skills and traditions learned from their lives as slaves into contemporary Liberian culture, such as quilting. Indigenous Liberian ethnic groups exhibit many cultural similarities with West African groups residing in surrounding nations as wood carvings, traditional music, and subsistence farming are commonplace. Notwithstanding its small geographic size and comparatively few inhabitants, Liberia is home to over a dozen ethnic groups which speak differing languages. Tribalism continues to be a the primary influence on society outside of Monrovia. Syncretism between Christianity, Islam, and indigenous beliefs frequently occurs with the majority of the population participating in ancestor worship or gender-based secret societies. Approximately 30% of men practice polygamy, but polygamous marriages are often unstable due to conflict between wives. The cultural view of marriage differs dramatically with Western standards and is viewed as a process rather than an event, which may include bridewealth payments that can last for years.[4] Alcohol consumption rates are low compared to the world average.

Economy

GDP per capita: $400 (2011) [0.83% of US]

Human Development Index: 0.329

Corruption Index: 3.2 (2011)

With 80% of the population estimated to live below the poverty line in 2000, Liberia is one of the world's poorest countries as both civil wars destroyed existing economic infrastructure, prevented economic development, and dissuaded foreign investment. Much of the fighting in Liberia during the civil wars was centered in and around Monrovia where most of the country's infrastructure and industry was located. International bans were in place for Liberian diamonds during the civil wars, which were a major source of income for the country. These bans have been lifted since the civil wars have ended. Liberia has large amounts of resources and a suitable climate for agriculture. Iron ore, lumber, diamonds, gold, and hydropower are natural resources. Services employ 22% of the work force and generate 18% of the GDP. Agriculture employs 70% of the work force and generates 77% of the GDP whereas industry employs 8% of the work force and generates 5% of the GDP. Rubber, coffee, cocoa, rice, cassava, palm oil, sugarcane, bananas, sheep , and goats are common crops and agricultural products. Major industries include rubber processing, palm oil processing, wood products, and diamond extraction.

Corruption is perceived as widespread and a major obstacle for greater economic growth and political stability.

Faiths

Christian: 85.6%

Muslim: 12.2%

traditional religions: 0.6%

other: 0.2%

none: 1.4%

Christians

Denominations Members Congregations

Catholic 166,000

Seventh Day Adventists 26,739 57

Jehovah's Witnesses 5,993 112

Latter-day Saints 5,863 18

Religion

Christians constitute the majority of the population and reside in all areas of the country. Liberians who actively participate in a Christian denomination may be as low as 20% however.[5] Major denominations include Lutherans, Baptists, Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Catholics, Seventh Day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Methodists, Latter-day Saints, and Pentecostals. Many Christians often incorporated some indigenous beliefs and practices. Muslims are generally found among the Mandingo, Vai, and Fula ethnic groups. Secret indigenous gender-based societies such as the Poro and the Sande operate in all areas and are often involved in the transition of youth into adulthood. Female genital mutilation is practiced by some Sande followers. [6]

Religious Freedom

Persecution Index:

The constitution protects religious freedom which is upheld by the government. Religious groups must register their articles of incorporation and provide a statement of purpose. There have been no reports of religious groups encountering difficulties with the registration process. Indigenous religious groups are not required to register. Education on Christianity is offered in public schools, but not required. There have been a few reports of ritualistic killings throughout the country for the use of body parts in traditional rituals. Such cases have been regarded as homicides by the government, but the government has faced challenges

prosecuting offenders due to a lack of credible witnesses and community cooperation. There have been a few recent instances of ethno-religious conflict between Christian and Muslims, such as in Lofa County in February 2010. There have been no reports of societal abuse of religious freedom. Easter and Christmas are recognized national holidays. Muslims have expressed desire for greater recognition and rights to observe religious holidays as they these are not nationally recognized.[7]

Largest Cities

Urban: 48%

Monrovia, **Gbarnga, Buchanan, Ganta,** Kakata, **Zwedru,** Harbel, **Harper, Pleebo , Foya.**

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

Three of the ten largest cities have an LDS congregation. 38% of the national population resides in the ten most populous cities.

LDS History

The first LDS Sunday School classes were held in 1985 in New Kru Town. Senior missionary couples arrived in Liberia in 1987 and the first convert baptisms occurred.[8] LDS Apostle Elder Marvin J. Ashton dedicated Liberia for missionary work in September 1987. In March 1988, the Liberia Monrovia Mission was organized[9] but was discontinued in 1991 due to civil war. Full-time missionaries were reassigned to Sierra Leone in 1989. Liberia was assigned to the Ghana Accra Mission in 1991 and to the Africa West Area in 1998.[10] Seminary and institute commenced in 1995. Many Latter-day Saints fled to other countries during the second civil war in the early 2000s. In 2003, there were 150 Liberian Latter-day Saint refugees in the Buduburam Refugee Camp outside of Accra, Ghana. In 2007, Liberia was reassigned to the Sierra Leone Freetown Mission.[11]

Membership Growth

LDS Membership: 5,863 (2011)

In March 1988, there were 133 Latter-day Saints.[12] During the civil war in the early 1990s, there were 400 members unaccounted for, 400 who fled the country, and 400 who remained in Liberia.[13] Membership totaled 1,400 in 1993 and 2,000 in 1997. By year-end 2000 there were 2,956 members. Moderate membership growth occurred in the 2000s as membership increased to 3,871 in 2002, 4,218 in 2004, 4,522 in 2006, and 5,039 in 2008. Annual membership growth rates ranged from a high of 15% and 14% in 2001 and 2002, respectively, to a low of 2.6% in 2008. Annual membership growth rates generally ranged between three and five percent during this period. In 2009, one in 721 was LDS.

Congregational Growth

Wards: 0 Branches: 18 (2011)

In March 1988, there were two LDS congregations: The Congo Town and New Kru Town Branches.[14] In 1989, the first district was organized in Monrovia. By 1990 the number of branches increased to eight but most congregations were closed shortly thereafter due to the civil war[15] and members met in small numbers in their homes. There were seven branches in 1993 and nine branches in 1997. A second district was organized in 1995, named the Monrovia Liberia Bushrod Island District. The first stake, the Monrovia Liberia Stake, was organized in 2000 from both Monrovia districts and had eight wards and one branch. The stake was discontinued in 2007 and divided into two districts. The number of congregations remained unchanged between 2000 and 2007. In 2008, two new branches were organized in Harbel and Kakata. Two additional branches were organized in 2009 and 2010 in the Monrovia Liberia District (Paynesville 2nd and Matadi), increasing the number of branches in the district to six. In 2011, the Church created five new branches in a single weekend in the two Monrovia districts.

Activity and Retention

Member activity rates are slightly lower than most West African nations. 70 priesthood holders attended a district priesthood commemoration activity in Monrovia in 1993.[16] In early 2012, 800 attended the Monrovia Liberia District Conference and 1,000 attended the Monrovia Liberia Bushrod Island District Conference The average number of members per congregation increased from 328 in 2000 to 438 in 2009. 471 were enrolled in seminary and institute during the 2009-2010 school year. In early 2012, most branches in Monrovia appeared to have between 50 and 125 active members whereas branches in Harbel and Kakata appeared to have 50-100 active members. Nationwide active membership is estimated at 1,800, or 30-35% of total church membership.

Language Materials

Languages with LDS Scripture: English

There are no LDS scriptures translated into indigenous languages. The Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith and Gospel Principles are available in Kpelle.

Meetinghouses

In early 2011, there were approximately ten LDS meetinghouses. Many congregations appear to meet in renovated buildings or rented spaces.

Health and Safety

Access to adequate health care is poor in many areas. Tropical diseases are common and pose a health threat.

Humanitarian and Development Work

Members from Monrovia cleaned the St. Paul Bridge area in 2003.[17] In 2005, the Church donated 250 wheelchairs to disabled war victims in Monrovia.[18] In 2006, a water pump project organized by LDS Charities improved accessibility to water for eight communities in and around Monrovia.[19] In recent years, helping hands projects have also occurred.[20] Food and school kits have been donated by the Church in Maryland County for the needy. Other church-sponsored humanitarian or development projects have included emergency aid, textbook donations for public schools, and neonatal resuscitation trainings.[21]

Opportunities, Challenges and Prospects

Religious Freedom

Latter-day Saints benefit from full religious freedom to assemble, proselyte, and worship. Foreign missionaries regularly serve in Liberia without government restrictions. The LDS Church has removed missionaries in the past due to political turmoil. Lawlessness throughout the country has limited national outreach.

Cultural Issues

Tribalism, illiteracy, war, and poverty have adversely affected LDS Church growth in Liberia as LDS populations have been displaced, many have few economic resources and live in deep poverty, ethnic conflict has contributed to political instability, and literacy rates are low. The high degree of cultural influence exhibited by tribalism outside of Monrovia has contributed to a lack of an LDS presence outside the capital as some indigenous beliefs and practices stand in opposition to LDS teachings. Poor church attendance among the general Christian population has carried over to the LDS Church as most converts no longer actively participate in church services and likely no longer identify as Latter-day Saints. Poverty is a major concern and the Church hesitates performing missionary activity when basic needs are not meet. Low literacy rates create challenges for developing self-sufficient local leadership and for members to develop testimonies based upon personal scripture study, but offer an opportunity for the Church to participate in literacy programs which provide service which can also be used to find new investigators.

National Outreach

29% of the national population resides in a city with an LDS congregation and 38% of the population resides in the two administrative counties that receive mission outreach (Margibi and Montserrado). LDS mission outreach was limited to Monrovia until 2008 when congregations were established in two nearby cities, Harbel and Kakata. Missionary activity was severely limited in Harbel and Kakata until early 2011 when full-time missionaries were permanently assigned. Political instability, war, tribalism, low standards of living, language issues, transportation issues, and administrative challenges in Monrovia have delayed the expansion of national outreach outside of Monrovia. Language issues and low literacy rates outside Monrovia have also dissuaded mission and area leaders from assigning missionaries to other cities until recently. There remain significant opportunities to increase the extent of mission outreach in the Monrovia area as nearly all current LDS members reside in this area and many communities have no nearby LDS congregations.

Liberia's small geographic size and comparatively small population have no affected the allocation of LDS mission resources

notwithstanding many more populous and geographically larger nations with widespread religious freedom continue to be completely unreached by the Church. Administering the smallest population of any LDS African mission, the recently organized Sierra Leone Freetown Mission has increased the frequency of mission leadership visits and augmented the number of full-time missionaries assigned to Liberia. Sustained and increasing numbers of local members serving full-time missions will be required for a separate LDS mission to be organized to administer Liberia as mission resources are limited in Africa and many other nations are lesser reached and have more receptive populations to the LDS Church than Liberia. In the coming decade, national outreach is most likely to expand into currently unreached cities nearby Monrovia and along the Atlantic coast, such as Buchanan, Tubmanburg, and urban communities to the southeast and northwest of Monrovia such as Wamba Town and Jahtono. The largest cities distant from Monrovia such as Gbarnga may not open to missionaries for many more years to due transportation difficulties, tribalism, language issues, and full-time missionaries facilitating local leadership development in presently-reached areas.

Member Activity and Convert Retention

Historically, low member activity rates in Liberia are primarily due to war displacing LDS populations and disrupting missionary activity, casual societal attitudes regarding weekly church attendance, and poor prebaptismal preparation. The organization of the Sierra Leone Freetown Mission appears to have greatly improved convert retention rates through greater interaction with mission leaders and improved consistency in mission policies regarding convert baptisms as reflected in the organization of nine new branches since 2008. Leadership development challenges have reduced member activity rates due to some branch presidents and other leaders receiving inadequate training and lack needed administrative skills. There was no change in the number of members enrolled in seminary and institute, suggesting ongoing challenges with member activity and convert retention among youth and young adults. Church education system (CES) programs offer excellent opportunities to solidify member testimonies, increase literacy rates, emphasize missionary preparation, and extend fellowshipping to less-active and inactive members.

Ethnic Issues and Integration

Ethnic conflict in Liberia appears rooted in linguistic, cultural, and religious barriers which have been exacerbated by particular ethnic groups entitling themselves to greater influence and prestige than others. LDS missionaries report no major ethnic integration challenges in Monrovia. Increasing active LDS membership among multiple ethnic groups may increase the potential for ethnic conflict manifesting itself at church, which may include some members refusing to go to a congregation led by a member from a rival ethnic group. The organization of ethnicity-specific congregations that are conducted in indigenous languages may reduce ethnic integration challenges at church.

Language Issues

Low literacy rates and linguistic diversity challenge efforts to open additional cities to missionary work outside Monrovia. Local Liberian full-time missionaries may be instrumental in the opening of these areas to missionary work if they have language abilities in languages spoken in these areas. Only Kpelle has a LDS materials translated, which are limited to only two proselytism and member instruction materials. Prospects for additional LDS materials translated into Kpelle and other most commonly-spoken indigenous languages such as Bassa and Grebo dialects appear likely in the coming years. Several languages are not written, which will require audio-translations if LDS materials are translated into these languages one day.

Missionary Service

In early 2011, there were approximately two dozen full-time missionaries assigned to Liberia, two-thirds of which were Africans. Two senior missionary couples were assigned to Monrovia at this time, one of which preformed young single adult outreach and another provided church service. Liberia appear self-sufficient in its missionary force notwithstanding low member activity rates. Continued emphasis on young single adult outreach and seminary and institute attendance is warranted to maintain and increase the number of local members serving missions.

Leadership

Liberia has exhibited some of the most severe and troublesome local leadership challenges in Africa apparent by the discontinuance of the Monrovia Liberia Stake in 2007. The stake appeared to be discontinued due to inadequate numbers of active, tithe-paying Melchizedek Priesthood holders, administration and leadership challenges, and low member activity rates rather than due to transportation challenges and distance. Channeling limited church leadership personnel into stake leadership and administrative positions likely strained available leadership to support local congregations prior to this time. Missionaries serving in Liberia in 2009 reported that some local priesthood leaders were mishandling church finances. There remains a continued need for mission leadership to dedicate more resources and attention for assisting and training leadership without making local members and leaders dependent on foreign missionaries and leaders. With the recent organization of the Sierra Leone Freetown Mission, missionaries and mission leadership have been able to respond more quickly to problems and provide proper guidance and correction when appropriate. Consequently, the number of congregations has begun to increase in recent years and full-time missionaries report that the Monrovia Liberia District is close to becoming a stake as minimal standards for a stake to operate are coming closer to being reached.

Temple

Liberia is assigned to the Accra Ghana Temple district. In 2005, a group of members traveled four days by bus to the Accra Ghana Temple.[22] Temple trips appear to occur infrequently and in small groups. There are no realistic prospects for a prospective temple to be built closer to Liberia in the foreseeable future due to inadequate local leadership, low member activity rates, few total members, and economic difficulties in the region.

Comparative Growth

The LDS Church in Liberia experienced some of the slowest membership and congregational growth in Africa during the 2000s as only three new congregations were organized and annual membership growth rates were generally below five percent. Only Namibia, Reunion, and Mauritius experienced slower church growth during this period. In 2009, Liberia ranked as the country with the ninth most Latter-day Saints without a stake. The percentage of the population reached by the Church is comparable to most West African nations. Member activity and convert retention rates have historically been among the lowest in Africa and comparable to Sierra Leone. The percentage of members enrolled in seminary and institute is among the lowest in Africa at nine percent.

Other outreach-oriented Christians have experienced comparable membership growth to the LDS Church in recent years, but generally extend greater national outreach and have larger church memberships. Many of these groups have operated in the country much longer than the LDS Church. The Seventh Day Adventist Church has operated in Liberia for nearly a century. During the 2000s, Seventh Day Adventists baptized generally between 500 and 1,000 new converts annually, reported over 25,000 members in 2009, and experienced congregational growth from 36 churches in 2000 to 50 in 2009.[23] Jehovah's Witnesses operated over 100 congregations and had over 6,000 active members in 2010. Other missionary-minded Christian groups have been more successful retaining converts than the LDS Church largely due to reliance on local members instead of foreign missionaries for proselytism and teaching.

Future Prospects

The outlook for LDS Church growth in Liberia is favorable due to sustained, moderate rates of receptivity, the organization of the Sierra Leone Freetown Mission in 2007, the recent organization of new congregations in and outside of Monrovia, sustained numbers of local members serving full-time missions, and progress with districts in Monrovia reaching many qualifications to become stakes. Tribalism, poverty, and low literacy rates present challenges expanding national outreach outside of Monrovia.

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