

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.



Kyrgyzstan

Population: 5.6 millions (#114 out of countries)

By David Stewart and Matt Martinich

Geography

Area: 199,951 square km. Landlocked in Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan borders China, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan. Several enclaves from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan dot the extreme southwest. Terrain consists of the high peaks and valleys of the Tien Shan Mountains. Lake Issyk-Kul in the northeast is the second largest mountain lake in the world. Large rivers exit to Uzbekistan to the west. High elevations experience cold, snowy climate and low elevation areas are subject to temperate or subtropical climates. Environmental issues include pollution and increasing soil salinity. Kyrgyzstan is administratively divided into seven provinces and two cities.

Peoples

Kyrgyz: 73.2%

Uzbek: 14.6%

Russian: 5.8%

Dungan: 1.1%

Other: 5.3%

Like many Central Asian former Soviet Republics, Kyrgyzstan is a patchwork of differing ethnic groups. Turkic groups include Kyrgyz, Uzbek, and Uyghur. Russians and Ukrainians come from Eastern Europe. Dungan are Chinese peoples who adhere to Islam.

Population: 5,789,122 (July 2017)

Annual Growth Rate: 1.05% (2017)

Fertility Rate: 2.61 children born per woman (2017)

Life Expectancy: 66.8 male, 75.4 female (2017)

Languages: Kyrgyz (69.5%), Uzbek (14.0%), Russian (8.7%), Dungun (0.9%), other or unspecified (6.9%). Kyrgyz and Russian are the official languages. Approximately half the population speaks Russian as a first or second language. Only Kyrgyz has over one million speakers (3.5 million).

Literacy: 99.5% (2015)

History

The Kyrgyz are a Turkic people who have lived in Central Asia for over two thousand years, with evidence of statehood dating back to the third century BC. The Kyrgyz were originally nomadic raiders living in the Altai and Yenesei regions of Siberia near the northwestern borders of China. With the defeat of the Uyghur Khanate in 840 AD, Kyrgyz hegemony expanded south to the Tien Shan mountain range. The Kyrgyz were most influential around 1000 AD. In the twelfth century, Mongol raids progressively reduced Kyrgyz territory to the region between the Altai and Sayan Mountains. In the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, the Kyrgyz tribes migrated south to their current location in Kyrgyzstan, displacing or assimilating indigenous tribes before being conquered by Genghis Khan in 1207 AD. Early Chinese and Muslim records dating from between the seventh and twelfth centuries AD describe the Kyrgyz of that time as having red hair, blue eyes, and light skin. Modern Kyrgyz have primarily Mongoloid features, reflecting the genetic legacy of the Mongol conquest as well as centuries of intermixing with other Central Asian peoples.

For the following centuries Kyrgyzstan was ruled by many surrounding nations. Kyrgyzstan was ruled by the Khanate of Kokand for most of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Russia took control of most present-day Kyrgyzstan by 1876. Approximately one-sixth of the population perished in a rebellion in 1916. Kyrgyzstan became a Soviet Republic by 1936 and achieved independence in 1991. Kyrgyzstan is regarded as one of the more free and Western-leaning of the Central Asian former Soviet republics. However, political instability and corruption have been major issues that have not been fully resolved since independence, contributing to popular uprisings and regime change in 2005 and again in 2010. The Tulip Revolution in spring 2005 removed President Askar Akaev, who had served as president since independence, and provided hope for a more democratic government. However since 2005, corruption has continued to worsen, and political instability and ethnic hostilities have been exacerbated. The April 2010 riots throughout the country overthrew the government of President Kurmanbek Bakiev and installed a provisional government. Land reform and energy prices are additional issues that have further destabilized the country. The first peaceful transition of power between presidents occurred in 2017.

Since Kyrgyz independence, there has been a gradual exodus of Russians from Kyrgyzstan. 18.8% of the population was Russian in 1993. However, by 2017 only an estimated 5.8% of the population was Russian.

Culture

The Kyrgyz take pride in their nation’s historical legacy as nomadic herders. Decades of former Soviet rule have heavily influenced architecture and attitudes toward religion. There are some distinctions between northern and southern areas involving living conditions, culture, etiquette, and food. Southern areas are seen as more traditional and conservative. Agriculture is dominant in the south, whereas herding is most prominent in the north. The Kyrgyz language was not written until the twentieth century; consequently, oral tradition influences modern culture. Family roles are traditional. Alcohol and tobacco consumption rates are moderately low compared to world averages.

Economy

GDP per capita: $3,700 (2017) [6.22% of U.S.]

Human Development Index: 0.672

Corruption Index: 29 (2017)

One of the poorest former Soviet Republics, Kyrgyzstan has an agriculturally based economy that primarily produces cotton, tobacco, wool, and meat. Agriculture produces 14.3% of the GDP and employs 48.0% of the workforce. Services produce 53.2% of the GDP and employ 39.5% of the workforce. Growth in the economy is largely dependent on gold prices and gold mine productivity. However little has been done to extract the abundant precious metals and develop hydropower potential. One-third of the population lives below the poverty line, and 7.4% of Kyrgyz were unemployed in 2017. Primary trade partners include Switzerland, China, Russia, and neighboring Central Asian nations.

Corruption is a major factor that has limited economic growth and deterred foreign investment. Accusations of corruption have strongly influenced political instability in the 2000s and were at the forefront of riots in April 2010. There have been only minor improvements with addressing corruption in recent years although efforts to reduce corruption remain ongoing.

Faiths

Muslim: 90%

Christian: 7%

Other: 3%

Christians

Denominations – Members – Congregations

Russian Orthodox – 174,000

Evangelical – 40,152

Jehovah's Witnesses – 5,235 – 71

Seventh Day Adventists – 704 – 27

Catholic – 500 – 3

Latter-day Saints – less than 30 – 1

Religion

Religious affiliation usually coincides with ethnicity. Islam is the dominant religion and the primary religion of Turkic peoples. Approximately half of Christians are Russian Orthodox and consist of Russians or Ukrainians, whereas the other half of Christians are Protestant and comprise a variety of ethnicities. Participation in religious practices is low to modest for most of the population, with southern areas experiencing the highest levels of religious activity. Many nontraditional Christian groups have arrived in the past two decades and are registered with the government.

Islam is the primary religious influence. Although some Islamic influences date back as early as the eighth century, more widespread conversions occurred only in the seventeenth century. Kyrgyz Islam is not as deeply ingrained or as fundamentalist as in many other Muslim nations, although that has begun to change in recent years.

During the 1990s, Kyrgyzstan experienced the most rapid and dynamic Christian growth of any Central Asian or Turkic nation. In the mid-2000s, a resurgent Islamist backlash and cultural pressures led to progressive declines in receptivity to Christian proselytism and to significant attrition among Christians. Well-funded Islamic groups from the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and other Muslim nations bankrolled the construction of mosques across the country, hired unemployed young Kyrgyz men to serve as Islamic preachers, missionaries, and mosque builders, and introduced strict interpretations of Islam, such as the Wahabbi sect. Kyrgyz Islam, which was previously fairly superficial outside of the Ferghana Valley, is hardening into a more fundamentalist faith as a result.

A 2009 analysis by the U.S. Embassy in Kyrgyzstan reported that registered religious communities included forty-nine Jehovah's Witness, forty-nine Pentecostal, forty-three Charismatic, thirty-five Presbyterian, forty-eight Baptist, thirty Seventh-Day Adventist, twenty-one Lutheran, and three Catholic congregations. There are over 50,000 Protestants, more than 5,000 active Jehovah's Witnesses, and approximately 700 Seventh-Day Adventists in many congregations. The Protestant Church of Jesus Christ claims over 11,000 members and is the country's largest denomination. Since 1996, over 1,200 foreign citizens have been registered as missionaries in Kyrgyzstan, but not a single proselytizing missionary from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has served in the country.

Religious Freedom

The constitution ostensibly protects religious freedom and forbids religious discrimination, although recent changes have eroded these protections. The government does not sponsor specific religious groups. Some laws and practices restrict religious freedom. A religion law came into effect in 2009 limiting religious activities, including switching religious affiliation and barring children and youth from involvement in religious organizations unless consent is provided by a parent. To register with the government, religious groups need at least 200 Kyrgyz adult citizen members. Prior to the passage of the new legislation, only

ten adult citizen members were required for registration. Foreign missionaries may operate with restrictions and must register with the government annually. There have been recent proposals to ban proselytism and increase the registration requirements for religious groups.[1]

Largest Cities

Urban: 36.4%

Bishkek, Osh, Jalal-Abad, Karakol, Tokmok, Özgön, Balykchy, Kara-Balta, Kyzyl-Kiya, Naryn.

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

No cities in Kyrgyzstan have an official congregation of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints although a member group appears to meet in Bishkek. Twenty-eight percent (28%) of the national population lives in the twenty-two largest cities.

Church History

In 2000, Kyrgyzstan became part of the Europe East Area. In 2002, half a dozen members serving in the United States military stationed at Manas Air Base in Kyrgyzstan held meetings in a tent used for religious services on a U.S. military base. Elder Russell M. Nelson visited in August 2003, met with government leaders, and dedicated the country. The Church attempted to register with the government in the 2004 but still remains unregistered. A senior missionary couple on humanitarian assignment has served in Kyrgyzstan since the mid-2010s. Kyrgyzstan was assigned to the Central Eurasian Mission in 2015.

Membership Growth

LDS Membership: less than 30 (2018)

Members in the U.S. military have lived in Kyrgyzstan for approximately 15 years. The only native members are Kyrgyz baptized in Kazakhstan or Russia who have returned to Kyrgyzstan. As of late 2009, there were fewer than ten known Latter-day Saint Kyrgyz members who lived in Bishkek.

Congregational Growth

Branch: 1 Groups: 1? (2018)

The Church organized a mission branch to exclusively service Kyrgyzstan when the country was transferred from the Central Eurasian Mission to the Russia Yekaterinburg Mission in 2018. A small group for U.S. military and foreign members appears to meet in Bishkek. However, this group does not appear accessible to native Kyrgyz. It is unclear whether the group continues to function at present. No proselytism occurs.

Activity and Retention

No missionary activity has occurred. Kyrgyz members baptized abroad who have returned to Bishkek are unable to hold meetings or proselyte.

Language Materials

Languages with LDS Scripture: Russian

All Latter-day Saint scriptures and many church materials are available in Russian. The Kazakh language is mutually intelligible with Kyrgyz. There is a small number of materials translated into Kazakh such as General Conference addresses, basic proselytism and gospel study materials, and the sacrament prayers.

Meetinghouses

Church meetings have historically been held on the U.S. military base.

Humanitarian and Development Work

The Church has conducted significant humanitarian and development work in Kyrgyzstan in recent years. There have been 89 projects completed since 1985, including sixteen projects in 2017. Recent projects have included Benson Food initiatives, community projects, maternal and newborn care, and wheelchair donations.[2] In November 2008, the Church donated 250 new wheelchairs to the disabled in Osh and Batken.

Opportunities, Challenges, and Prospects

Religious Freedom

Changes to laws governing religious groups in 2009 pose insurmountable obstacles for the Church to overcome in order to meet legal requirements to obtain registration. The Church appeared to struggle to find ten adult, citizen members in the same locality to apply for registration prior to the passage of the law in 2009. The current requirement of 200 adult citizen members in the same locality to obtain registration places hopes for an official Church presence on hold unless changes occur to this legislation. Nevertheless, there are meaningful opportunities for the Church to continue to engage in humanitarian and development work. These efforts may help establish a positive relationship between the Church and the Kyrgyzstani government.

Cultural Issues

Kyrgyzstanis have traditionally maintained weaker ties to Islam than other Turkic peoples in Central Asia. However, the revival of Kyrgyzstani identity has strengthened Islamic ties for many Kyrgyzstanis who were previously only nominal Muslims. The Church has yet to develop teaching resources and approaches tailored to those with a Muslim background. Many continue to live in rural areas, which are often difficult to access.

National Outreach

The entire population is unreached by the Church. The Church did not establish a presence in Kyrgyzstan during the 1990s when conditions were more favorable to obtain legal recognition and proselyte. Difficulties mobilizing a foreign, full-time missionary force across the vast region of the former Soviet Union, combined with wariness to place foreign missionaries in predominantly Muslim nations far from the nearest Latter-day Saint centers at the time, appear primarily responsible for the Church missing this window of opportunity to enter Kyrgyzstan. Furthermore, ethnic tensions, political instability, and corruption have also likely deterred area leadership from serious considerations to open Kyrgyzstan to missionaries during the 1990s.

Prospective mission outreach in Bishkek would reach up to eighteen percent (18%) of the population. Nearly two-thirds of Kyrgyzstanis live in rural communities. It will likely take many decades for rural populations to be reached by the Church following the establishment of congregations in the most populous urban areas. Southern areas of the country will be more challenging to reach than northern areas due to distance from Bishkek

Member Activity and Convert Retention

No convert baptisms appear to have occurred in Kyrgyzstan. Most Kyrgyz members are likely inactive due to a lack of mission support given long-term struggles for the Church to obtain legal recognition.

Ethnic Issues and Integration

Ethnic conflict between some groups, such as Kyrgyz and Uzbeks, may occur at Church if these groups meet in the same congregations in locations where conflicts most frequently occur, such as in Osh and other southern regions of the country. Widespread use of Russian as a second language facilitates interethnic communication. Use of Russian in church meetings may be helpful when Kyrgyz and Uzbeks meet in the same congregations.

Language Issues

There remain no Church materials in Kyrgyz, the native languages of 70% of the population. The translation of even a couple missionary and gospel study materials in Kyrgyz can have long-term consequences for future church growth if conditions improve. Kazakh-language materials may be utilized by Kyrgyz speakers in the meantime as the two languages are mutually intelligible. However, translations of church materials into Kazakh are also limited. For example, there is no Kazakh translation of the Book of Mormon or other Latter-day Saint scriptures. The translation of basic proselytism materials in Kyrgyz and Uzbek,

such as The Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith, will greatly facilitate missionary work among speakers of these languages in the event that Latter-day Saints conduct missionary activity among these ethnic groups. Russian translations of Church materials will likely be first utilized as no materials are translated into other local languages, and use of Russian by the Church can foster communication between various ethnic groups.

Missionary Service

No known Kyrgyzstanis have served a full-time mission. Proselytizing full-time missionaries have never been assigned.

Leadership

U.S. military servicemen and senior missionaries have appeared to undertake all church leadership for member groups in the country. The Church lacks active Kyrgyzstani men to serve in leadership positions.

Temple

Kyrgyzstan is assigned to the Kyiv Ukraine Temple district. No regular temple trips occur, and there are no foreseeable prospects for a closer temple.

Comparative Growth

Kyrgyzstan is the only Central Asian nation without an official Church presence that has been dedicated for missionary work. Kazakhstan is the only country in the region to have had proselytizing, full-time missionaries assigned and multiple official branches organized. Member groups have temporarily functioned for foreign members in Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Only Tajikistan has a few local members, whereas Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan appear to have no known native Latter-day Saints. Azerbaijan, the only other Muslim-majority former Soviet Republic, has no Church presence but had an official branch to service foreign members in Baku until the mid-2010s. A member group may continue to operate in Azerbaijan for foreign members who temporarily live in the country for employment purposes.

Many prominent, proselytism-focused Christians have operated in Kyrgyzstan since the 1990s when religious freedom laws were more conducive to missionary activities. However, these groups currently report slow growth. Jehovah's Witnesses report a significant presence with more than 5,000 active members and over 70 congregations. Seventh-Day Adventists baptize few converts and have experienced membership decline in the past decade likely due to the emigration of Russian members.

Future Prospects

After missing the initial window of opportunity in the 1990s, there are currently no realistic prospects for the Church to enter Kyrgyzstan. The reason for the nonapproval of the Church's 2004 application is unclear but may be related to the possible lack of the ten adult citizen members required at the time. The current requirement of 200 adult citizen members for a religious organization to be registered poses a virtually insurmountable barrier, as no proselytism may occur without registration, and there are very few Kyrgyz living in cities of Russia or Kazakhstan with Church congregations who could conceivably join the church there and return to their homeland.

The Church is respectful toward other faiths, Christian and Islam alike, and has a great deal to offer the people of Kyrgyzstan. Beyond the many spiritual benefits of gospel teachings, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints also teaches the importance of strengthening the family, respecting culture and heritage, and avoiding harmful substances like alcohol and tobacco, which have resulted in substantial morbidity in Kyrgyzstan. Latter-day Saints are loyal and patriotic citizens who support their nations, obey the law of the land, and pursue education and skills to build up their native lands. Pray that the leaders of Kyrgyzstan may be blessed with wisdom to understand the many lasting benefits that their nation and people would experience from having The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints among them.

[1] "Kyrgyzstan," International Religious Freedom Report for 2017. Accessed 22 October 2018. https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2017&dlid=281026#wrapper

[2] "Where We Work," LDS Charities. Accessed 22 October 2018. https://www.ldscharities.org/where-we-work