



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.



Timor-Leste (East Timor)

Population: 1.2 millions (#160 out of countries)

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Geography

Area: 14,874 square km. Located in southeastern Indonesia, Timor-Leste (East Timor) occupies the eastern half of Timor Island, the Oecussi region in western Timor, and two nearby small islands. Timor Island is the largest of the Lesser Sunda Islands. Hot, tropical weather occurs year round with rainy and dry seasons. Most the terrain is mountainous. Floods, landslides, earthquakes, cyclones, and tsunamis are natural hazards. Environmental issues include deforestation, soil erosion, water scarcity, and pollution. Timor-Leste is divided into thirteen administrative districts.

Peoples

Timorese: 100%

Timorese consist of Indonesian, Papuan, and Chinese ethnicities.

Population: 1,321,929 (July 2018)

Annual Growth Rate: 2.32% (2018)

Fertility Rate: 4.67 children born per woman (2018)

Life Expectancy: 67.1 male, 70.4 female (2018)

Languages: Tetun Prasa (30.6%), Mambai (16.6%), Makasai (10.5%), Tetun Terik (6.1%), Baikenu (5.9%), Kemak (5.8%), Bunak (5.5%), Tokodede (4.0%), Fataluku (3.5%), Waima'a (1.8%), Galoli (1.4%), Naueti (1.4%), Idate (1.2%), Midiki (1.2%), other (4.5%). Tetun and Portuguese are the primary languages, whereas Indonesian and English are working languages. Ninety-one percent (91%) of the population speaks Tetun as a first or second language, and 43% of Timorese can speak

Indonesian,[\[1\]](#) but less than 25% of the population speaks English or Portuguese.

Literacy: 68% (2017)

History

Timor-Leste, also known as East Timor, receives its name from the main island, Timor, which means east in Malay and Indonesian. Early Austronesian peoples first settled the island of Timor several millennia ago. Chinese and Indians first traded with the native peoples and were followed by the Portuguese, who began colonizing the island during the sixteenth century. During the nineteenth century, the Portuguese lost control of the western half of the island to the Dutch. In World War II, the Japanese occupied Timor between 1942 and 1945, after which power was restored to Portugal. In 1975, Indonesia invaded nine days after East Timor declared independence from Portugal. By the following year, East Timor became the Indonesian province of Timor Timur. For the next two decades, the indigenous population demonstrated a passive stance against Indonesian occupation that resulted in heavy losses, as up to a quarter of a million Timorese perished. In 1999, the population of Timor-Leste voted overwhelmingly for independence from Indonesia. This referendum was met with stiff opposition from anti-independence militias, which killed as many as 1,400 and displaced hundreds of thousands. Most of the Timor-Leste's infrastructure was destroyed at this time, including irrigation, utilities, and schools. Independence occurred in 2002, and four years later, the nation almost fell into disorder. Australia has assisted in helping maintain law and order over the past few years. In 2008, a rebel group attempted to attack government leaders. Overall conditions stabilized in the 2010s. UN Security Council peacekeeping missions in the country ended in 2012 and parliamentary elections occurred in 2017.

Culture

Portuguese colonization and the Catholic Church appear to have left the greatest contemporary cultural footprints. Timor served as an important supplier of sandalwood for many centuries. Native legends continue to shape culture and oral tradition. Most the population has received little formal education.

Economy

GDP per capita: \$6,000 (2017) [10% of U.S.]

Human Development Index: 0.625 (2017)

Corruption Index: 35 (2018)

In 1999, as much as 70% of the economic infrastructure was destroyed by militias and Indonesian troops. Timor-Leste has faced many challenges rebuilding government and economic institutions but has seen many positive developments, including the extraction of oil reserves. Government has regarded its oil deposits as key to future economic growth and wealth, although revenues from such development in other developing nations have typically been captured primarily by government elite and have offered only limited benefits to the general public. Oil revenues account for over 90% of government income. The development of petroleum resources has done little to provide employment opportunities for most Timorese as these jobs require higher education, and there is no production facility to refine petroleum within the country. Many experience poor living conditions as over 40% live below the poverty line. Services employ 45% of the workforce, whereas agriculture employs 41% of the workforce. Industry generates 57% of the GDP, whereas services comprise 34% of the GDP. Primary crops include coffee, corn, rice, and cassava.

Corruption is perceived as widespread due to few government regulations and poor enforcement of laws. Increasing wealth from oil profits in the hands of an elite few and mismanagement have perpetuated corruption. However, the perception of corruption has improved within the past decade to levels comparable to Egypt, Indonesia, and Peru.

Faiths

Christian: 99.6%

Muslim: less than 0.4%

Christians

Denominations – Members – Congregations

Catholic – 1,290,203

Seventh Day Adventists – 613 – 3

Jehovah's Witnesses – 366 – 5

Latter-day Saints - ~20 – 1

Religion

Approximately 98% of the population is Catholic. Protestants comprise 1.96% of the population per 2015 census numbers. Traditional customs and beliefs continue to be followed by many, although they are not viewed as religious. Few Timorese converted to Islam during Indonesian occupation, and most ethnic Malay Muslims left the country after independence. Muslims constitute less than one percent of the population.[\[2\]](#)

Religious Freedom

The constitution protects freedom of religion, which tends to be upheld by government policies and law. There is no official state religion, but the Catholic Church tends to have a strong influence on politics. Missionaries may operate in the country. Government registration is not required for religious groups to operate unless they wish to do more than hold religious services. There have been no reported challenges with religious groups obtaining government recognition. Individuals who convert to religions other than Roman Catholicism report societal pressure and persecution.[\[3\]](#)

Largest Cities

Urban: 30.6% (2018)

Dili, **Baucau, Maliana, Lospalos, Pante Macassar, Suai, Ermera, Same, Viqueque, Ainaro.**

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

Dili is the only city in Timor-Leste with a Church presence (one member group). Twenty-eight percent (28%) of the national population lives in the ten largest cities.

Church History

Timor-Leste has pertained to the Indonesia Jakarta Mission since the independence of Timor-Leste. In 2013, the Church reported no members in Timor-Leste. In 2015, senior missionaries underwent a multi-day visit to Timor-Leste to explore prospects for Church-sponsored humanitarian work. On July 1st, 2015, Timor-Leste became its own mission area within the Indonesia Jakarta Mission in preparation for the assignment of full-time missionaries. In August 2015, Church apostle Elder Jeffrey R. Holland visited Timor-Leste and dedicated the country for missionary work.^[4] A senior missionary couple was assigned to the country at approximately the same time and began to hold church services in their apartment with few, if any, visitors or others in attendance. The first baptism of a child of record occurred in late 2016. In mid-2017, the Church completed its first meetinghouse in the country and had more than one hundred who attended the open house. The new meetinghouse was primarily utilized for free English classes taught by the humanitarian missionary couple. The first convert baptisms occurred in February 2019 when five members of the same family joined the Church after months of church attendance and careful teaching by senior missionaries and Indonesian-speaking full-time missionaries via the internet. Two more convert baptisms occurred in July 2019. At the time, senior missionaries reported plans for the Asia Area president to meet the Timorese prime minister. The Church remained unregistered with the government as of July 2019.

Membership Growth

Church Membership: ~20 (2019)

One Timorese member resided in West Malaysia in 2009. Small numbers of foreign members lived in Dili in the late 2010s from countries such as the Philippines. There were nine native Timorese members in the country as of July 2019 – all of whom have requested to be taught about the Church from senior missionaries instead of accepting invitations from senior missionaries to learn about the Church.

Congregational Growth

Wards: 0 Branches: 0 Groups: 1 (2019)

The Church organized the Dili Group in 2015. The group pertains to the Indonesia Jakarta Mission Branch.

Activity and Retention

Seventeen attended church services on the first Sunday the Dili Group met within its new meetinghouse in 2017. Church attendance appeared to range between 10-25 on most Sundays in 2019. All Timorese members were active as of mid-2019. The member activity rate for total membership appears between 80-100%.

Language Materials

Languages with Latter-day Saint Scripture: Portuguese, Indonesian.

All Church scriptures are available in Portuguese and Indonesian. Most Church materials have been translated into Portuguese and Indonesian. There are no Church materials translated into Tetun or other indigenous languages in Timor-Leste.

Humanitarian and Development Work

The Church has aggressively and efficiently conducted a variety of significant humanitarian and development projects in Timor-Leste since the arrival of the first senior humanitarian couple in 2015, such as clean water projects and Benson Food initiatives. There have been at least thirty-six projects completed since 1985,^[5] with the vast majority occurring since 2015.

Many of these projects have been focused on improving agriculture and subsistence farming in rural communities. The Church donated clothing, food, and hygiene kits to refugees in West Timor who fled from East Timor in 2000. A director of humanitarian services for the Church visiting refugee camps in West Timor prompted the aid, for which the Church was thanked by the Indonesian government.^[6] Indonesian members packed and sent over 30,000 hygiene kits to Timor in 2000.^[7] New Zealander members also donated bedding, hygiene kits, and clothing.^[8] A single aid package worth over \$156,000 was delivered for Christmas 2000 to Dili.^[9] In 2002, the Church provided the transportation for delivering wooden fishing boats from Australia to East Timor, which were crafted by the Aussie Boats for East Timor charity.^[10]

Opportunities, Challenges, and Prospects

Religious Freedom

East Timor exhibits a strong respect for religious freedom despite recent independence, outbreaks of violence, the homogeneous Catholic population, and some social intolerance directed toward Protestant churches, especially in rural areas. The Church has likely established a positive relationship with the government through humanitarian aid. Tolerance of non-Catholics in government positions also points toward potential for future Church members to integrate into society, particularly in Dili. No legal obstacles appear to prevent an official Church presence, including proselytism and the organization of official congregations. It is unclear why the Church has not obtained official registration with the government despite several years of senior missionaries who have served in Dili and as many as nine convert baptisms during approximately the first half of 2019.

Cultural Issues

The strong influence of the Catholic Church on society will likely pose some challenge for mission outreach as it has for other mission-oriented Christian denominations, although receptivity is likely to be greater than in Indonesia where Muslims predominate. Low standards of living and poverty present opportunities for humanitarian service. The slow establishment of the Church in Timor-Leste may be rooted in the Church's efforts to establish a positive reputation with government and society before formal proselytism begins due to the homogeneous Catholic population. However, this approach has been an anomaly for the Church in Catholic-majority countries.

National Outreach

Limited mission resources, distance from mission headquarters in Jakarta, few native members, the lack of church material in the dominant language, Timor-Leste's small population, limited infrastructure, recent independence, and history of instability have likely reduced the priority of commencing missionary work. Conditions for proselytism appear most promising in Dili due to its large population, somewhat central location, and greater tolerance toward non-Catholic groups. Outreach in rural areas will likely not occur for many years following formal missionary activity in Dili. Separated from the rest of Timor-Leste, the small Oecussi region may not receive mission outreach for many years or decades to come.

Member Activity and Convert Retention

High convert retention rates are commendable and provide strength for the long-term establishment of the Church. This success has been achieved through careful, long-term preparation of prospective converts which usually consists of several consecutive months of church attendance. It is unclear whether recent converts will remain active for the long-term. The lack of Church materials in Tetun and strong societal pressures to affiliate with the Catholic Church present difficulties for long-term retention of converts. Moreover, successes with convert retention have strongly relied on foreign, full-time senior missionaries. Local Timorese members who find, teach, baptize, and fellowship new converts will be crucial toward long-term success regarding the retention of converts.

Ethnic Issues and Integration

The departure of many non-Timorese following independence has decreased ethnic diversity. No significant concerns with ethnic integration issues in Timor-Leste have thus far been reported albeit language barriers between foreigners and local members poses challenges.

Language Issues

The Church has no language materials available in native languages spoken by most of the population. Initial mission outreach will most likely commence with those who speak Indonesian, Portuguese, and English prior to greater breakthroughs with monolingual speakers of indigenous languages such as Tetun and Mambae.

Leadership

There are only a few male Timorese members. These members may serve in local leadership positions in the near future if they remain active. In the mean time, foreign senior missionaries will likely continue to hold essential leadership positions due to the lack of experienced members.

Temple

East Timor pertains to the Hong Kong China Temple district. No organized temple trips occur. Timor-Leste may be reassigned to the Bangkok Thailand Temple district once the temple is completed.

Comparative Growth

Timor-Leste shares many similarities with nations in the Pacific rather than with Asia due to ethnic and religious commonalities. The Church has tended to experience slow initial membership growth in predominantly Catholic nations with little pluralism, although increasing pluralism has historically been associated with higher growth rates, as in the Philippines and Latin America. Timor-Leste is among one of the few nations in Southeast Asia and the Pacific without an official Church presence.

One of only two nations in Asia that has a predominantly Christian population, Timor-Leste has seen little growth among non-Catholic denominations due to political instability over the past several decades and the strength and size of the Catholic Church. Protestant outreach has been limited to Dili and Atauro, and growth has been slow. Reported membership for the Seventh-Day Adventist Church and Jehovah's Witnesses remains less than 1,000 despite both denominations having a presence in the country for at least one decade.

Future Prospects

The Church has established a strong foundation among less than one dozen Timorese members in Dili – all of whom appeared active as of July 2019. Continued mentoring and fellowship of these members by one another and by senior missionaries will likely result in the development of local leadership that can one day sustain an official branch. The reason why the Church continues to lack official government recognition remains unclear as there do not appear to be any legal obstacles that prevent registration. It is unlikely that the Church will experience significant growth until such registration is obtained and young, full-time proselytizing missionaries are assigned. In the meantime, growth will most likely consist of high-quality converts who self-refer for information about the Church or who have personal connections with senior missionary couples or local members. Distance from mission headquarters in Jakarta, a comparatively tiny population, no translations of Church materials in Tetun, and an extremely small Church membership pose long-term challenges for future proselytism efforts through traditional means.

[1] "Background Note: Timor-Leste," Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, 12 February 2010.
<http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/35878.htm>

[2] "2018 Report on International Religious Freedom: Timor-Leste." U.S. Department of State. 21 June 2019. International Religious Freedom Report 2009, 26 October 2009.
<https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-report-on-international-religious-freedom/timor-leste/>

[3] "2018 Report on International Religious Freedom: Timor-Leste." U.S. Department of State. 21 June 2019. International Religious Freedom Report 2009, 26 October 2009.
<https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-report-on-international-religious-freedom/timor-leste/>

[4] Avant, Gerry. "Elder Holland delivers messages of hope, faith, reassurance to Asia Area." LDS Church News. September 2015.
<https://www.thechurchnews.com/archive/2015-09-03/elder-holland-delivers-messages-of-hope-faith-reassurance-to-asia-area-4310>

[5] "Where We Work." Latter-day Saint Charities. Accessed August 1 2019.
<https://www.latterdaysaintcharities.org/where-we-work>

[6] "Indonesian minister thanks Church for aid," LDS Church News, 6 May 2000.
<http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/37733/Indonesian-minister-thanks-Church-for-aid.html>

[7] Sheffield, Sheridan. "Delivering hope with humanitarian aid," LDS Church News, 21 October 2000.
<http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/38759/Delivering-hope-with-humanitarian-aid.html>

[8] "Relief Society gives humanitarian aid," LDS Church News, 22 July 2000.
<http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/38157/Relief-Society-gives-humanitarian-aid.html>

[9] "Christmas aid to help East Timor regrow," LDS Church News, 30 December 2000.
<http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/39120/Christmas-aid-to-help-East-Timor-regrow.html>

[10] "Church supports boats for Timor," LDS Church News, 26 October 2002.
<http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/42706/Church-supports-boats-for-Timor.html>