



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.

Sierra Leone

Population: 5.74 millions (#112 out of countries)

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Geography

Area: 71,740 square km. One of the smallest West African countries, Sierra Leone borders the Atlantic Ocean, Guinea, and Liberia. With the exception of mountains in the east, plains and plateaus cover most of the terrain. Sierra Leone has a wet climate, receiving up to nearly 500 centimeters of rain annually, and a dry season. Most of the country is heavily forested with mangroves on the coast and tropical forest in the interior. Deforestation and overfishing are the greatest environmental concerns. Sierra Leone is administratively divided into three provinces and one area. Each of the three provinces is further divided into districts.

Population: 5,363,669 (July 2011)

Annual Growth Rate: 2.249% (2011)

Fertility Rate: 4.94 children born per woman (2011)

Life Expectancy: male 53.69, female 58.65 (2011)

Peoples

Temne: 35%

Mende: 31%

Limba: 8%

Kono: 5%

Creole: 2%

Mandingo: 2%

Loko: 2%

other: 15%

There are approximately 20 African ethnic groups. The Temne and Mende are the largest ethnic groups, together comprise two-thirds of Sierra Leoneans, and reside in the north and the south, respectively. Creole [Krio] are descendents of freed slaves.

Languages: Mende (26%), Themne (22%), Krio (10%), other (42%). English is the official language. Although only 10% of Sierra Leoneans speak Krio as a first language, 95% speak Krio as a second language. Krio originated from freed Jamaican slaves that settled around the Freetown area and spread throughout the country as a language for communication between different ethnic groups. All together there are 16 ethnic groups in the country, each having their own language. Mende is most widely spoken in southern and eastern Sierra Leone and Temne is most widely spoken in northern Sierra Leone. Languages with over one million speakers include Mende (1.48 million) and Themne (1.23 million).

Literacy: 35.1% (2000)

History

West African tribes populated the region prior to European exploration. Sierra Leone received its name from Portuguese explores in the 1400s, meaning "Lion Mountains" and was one of the first areas of West Africa contacted by Europeans. Slaves were regularly trafficked from Sierra Leone by the British to coastal areas of North America during the eighteenth century. The British freed 500 slaves from North America in the late eighteenth century and established one of their first African colonies in Freetown in 1792. During the following century, the British ruled their West African colonies from Freetown, such as The Gambia and Gold Coast. Ethnic conflict prevailed during the nineteenth century between the indigenous population, Krios, and Europeans and ethnic tension deescalated for much of the twentieth century. Independence occurred peacefully from the United Kingdom in 1961.^[1] Following independence, the government suffered from instability and was accused of corruption and favoring certain ethnic groups more than others. Instability continued until the Sierra Leone Civil War erupted in 1991. The war came to an end in 2002. During this time tens of thousands died and millions vacated the country to surrounding nations. Since the end of the civil war, Sierra Leone has grown increasingly more stable due to the military highly involved in enforcing security after the withdrawal of United Nations peacekeepers, although corruption and low standard of living remain major challenges.

Culture

Tribalism, Islam, and Christianity are the primary cultural influences on society. Sierra Leoneans stress politeness and good manners. Sierra Leone was once known in West Africa for its high-quality education but recent war and ethnic conflict have resulted in widespread poverty and low standards of living. Common foods include cassava, okra, and fish. Alcohol consumption rates are comparable to the worldwide average. Marriage usually requires the groom to pay a bride price and is sometimes arranged by families. Polygamy is commonplace, especially in rural areas.

Economy

GDP per capita: \$900 (2010) [1.9% of US]

Human Development Index: 0.365

Corruption Index: 2.4

One of the poorest countries in the world, Sierra Leone ranks among the nations with the lowest Human Development Index (HDI) ratings. Rampant corruption and inequality in the distribution of wealth characterize the economy. Significant natural resources valuable for economic development have yet to be exploited such as valuable minerals and favorable agricultural conditions. Diamond exports account for half of total exports. Agriculture employs half of the work force whereas industry and services employ 31% and 21% of the work force, respectively. Sierra Leone lacks an educated population and infrastructure to support greater economic growth. The economy will more likely develop as peace is kept and commercial farming and mining operations employ the local population. Unemployment remains a major problem in Sierra Leone due to the recent end of the civil war. Diamond mining, manufacturing, petroleum, refining, and ship repair are major industries. Common crops include rice, coffee, palm kernels, palm oil, and peanuts. Primary trade partners include Belgium, the United States, South Africa, and the Netherlands.

Corruption is perceived as widespread and present in all areas of society. Instances of corruption in government officials is

commonplace. Low literacy rates have likely contributed to high levels of corruption.

Faiths

Muslim: 77%

Christian: 21%

indigenous beliefs/other: 2%

Christians

Denominations Members Congregations

Catholic 175,000

Seventh Day Adventist 17,151 52

Latter-Day Saints 8,054 18

Jehovah's Witnesses 1,786 33

Religion

Most of the population adheres to Islam. The percentage of Muslims in the country has increased since independence. Many Christians are Catholic. Syncretism between Islam, Christianity, and indigenous beliefs and practices is common.[\[2\]](#)

Religious Freedom

Persecution Index:

The constitution allows religious freedom which is protected by government. There are no requirements for religious groups to register in order to operate in Sierra Leone. Government recognizes both Muslim and Christian holidays.[\[3\]](#)

Largest Cities

Urban: 38%

Freetown, Bo, Kenema, **Koidu**, Makeni, **Waterloo**, **Port Loko**, Goderich, **Daru**, **Lunsar**.

Four of the 10 largest cities have a congregation. 27% of the national population lives in the 10 largest cities.

LDS History

The first Sierra Leonean Latter-day Saints were baptized in the Netherlands and Ghana and later returned to Sierra Leone in the 1980s. A study group was formed in January of 1988. Sierra Leone was included in the Liberia Monrovia Mission when it was organized in March 1988. In May 1988, the first senior couple missionaries arrived and the first 14 converts were baptized the following month. The first branch was organized in Goderich in August 1988. The first Sierra Leonean Mission began serving as full-time missionaries in 1989.[\[4\]](#) The first young missionaries to serve in Sierra Leone arrived around 1990. The first official LDS meetings in Bo occurred in July 1990 with just five members.[\[5\]](#) Due to a civil war in Liberia, the Liberia Monrovia Mission was relocated to Sierra Leone in 1990 and discontinued in 1991. Full-time missionaries were first assigned to Kenema in 2004.[\[6\]](#) Administrative responsibility for Liberia and Sierra Leone pertained to the Ghana Accra Mission until the organization of the Sierra Leone Freetown Mission in 2007.

Membership Growth

LDS Membership: 8,907 (2010)

Church membership grew rapidly in the late 1980s and early 1990s as there were less than 100 Latter-day Saints in 1988 and approximately 1,900 in 1993. Membership stood at 2,700 in 1997 and 3,920 in 2000. During the 2000s, steady membership growth occurred as church membership totaled 4,782 in 2002, 5,712 in 2004, 6,938 in 2006, 8,054 in 2008, and 8,907 in 2010. Annual membership growth rates during this period ranged from a high of 12% in 2002 to a low of 3.4% in 2008 but generally ranged from 7-10%. In 2004, there were 2,177 members in the Bo Sierra Leone District, constituting 38% of the national LDS membership. In 2010, one in 602 was LDS.

Congregational Growth

Wards: 0 Branches: 27 Groups: 1+

Rapid congregational growth occurred between 1988 and 1993 as the number of branches increased from one to 14. The first district was organized in Freetown in 1990 followed by two additional districts in 1991 in Wellington and Bo. The number of branches increased to 16 by 2000. There were 17 branches in 2003, 15 in 2005, 17 in 2006, 18 in 2007, 22 in 2009, and 23 in 2010. Congregational growth in the late 2000s was concentrated in Freetown and Bo. Districts in Freetown and Wellington were consolidated into a single district in 2005 and the Freetown district was divided to create the Freetown Sierra Leone East District in 2011. In 2009, a district branch was organized in Bo for members meeting in groups within the boundaries of the district. In April 2011, there were nine branches in the Bo Sierra Leone District and 13 branches in the Freetown Sierra Leone District. In late 2011, four additional branches were organized: Two in Kenema (IDA and Simbeck) and two in Freetown (Belliar Park and Koso Town). Groups appear to function in Makeni and possibly Moyamba.

Activity and Retention

The LDS Church experienced low member activity and convert retention rates in Sierra Leone from the mid-1990s to the late 2000s due to rushing investigators into baptism with little prebaptismal preparation. In 2010 and early 2011, the Sierra Leone Freetown Mission made noticeable progress improving convert retention and member activity rates. 1,100 attended district conference in Freetown in March 2011 and 1,660 attended in August 2011 when the district was divided. 1,090 attended the Bo Sierra Leone District Conference in late 2011. The average number of members per congregation increased from 135 in 1993 to 245 in 2000 and 387 in 2010. 2,050 were enrolled in seminary and institute during the 2009-2010 school year. In early 2011, most branches had between 100 and 200 active members. Nationwide active membership is estimated at 3,500, or 35-40% of total church membership.

Language Materials

Languages with LDS Scripture: English

All LDS scriptures and materials are available in English. The Articles of Faith are available in Mende.

Meetinghouses

In early 2011, there were approximately a dozen LDS meetinghouses. The Church began construction of its first Church-built meetinghouse in 2004 in Bo. There are additional church-built meetinghouses, but most congregations meet in rented spaces or renovated buildings.

Health and Safety

Tropical diseases are endemic and health infrastructure is poor. HIV/AIDS infects 1.7% of the population. Sexual promiscuity is widespread and contributes to the spread of disease.

Humanitarian and Development Work

Poverty is a major issue in Sierra Leone. The Church has periodically organized "Helping Hands" service projects for local members to clean streets and hospitals. In 2007, the Church planned measles vaccinations for children after programs were successfully conducted in other African nations.[\[7\]](#) In 2008, senior missionaries reported that the Church assisted in building 71 wells around the city of Bo. Additional humanitarian and development projects have included wheelchair donations for the disabled, a clean water project in Waterloo, donating health care equipment, and providing neonatal resuscitation training.[\[8\]](#)

Opportunities, Challenges and Prospects

Religious Freedom

No government regulations limit proselytism or the arrival of foreign missionaries. Sierra Leone offered unrealized opportunities for the Church prior to the organization of the Sierra Leone Freetown Mission. These opportunities continue not to be fully utilized as few full-time missionaries serve in the country and most areas receive no LDS mission outreach.

Cultural Issues

Poverty reduces the ability of many to be self-reliant economically and obtain vocation training and education. Low literacy rates severely challenge efforts for the Church to establish self-sustaining local leadership and for illiterate members to obtain and grow their testimonies on an individual basis. Poor standards of living nonetheless provide opportunities for development and humanitarian projects for the Church which at present have been severely limited. Tribalism and ethnic conflict in some unreached areas have likely contributed to no increase in national outreach by the Church for nearly a decade. Many have been receptive to the Church notwithstanding the prominence of Islam in local culture. As in many Muslim-majority African nations, the prevalence of polygamy presents an obstacle for some who wish to join the Church. If those participating in a polygamous marriage wish to join the Church, men must divorce their additional wives and women must divorce their husbands if they are not the first wife. Many investigators stop investigating the Church when the issue of polygamy and joining the Church is brought up. There have been some faithful investigators who have divorced additional wives in order to become members of the Church. Polygamy remains a cultural obstacle for many Sierra Leoneans to join the Church as it adversely affects family and community relationships.

National Outreach

23% of the national population resides in a city with an LDS congregation and LDS congregations operate in three of the four administrative divisions. The Church conducts excellent mission outreach in most areas of Freetown, Bo, and Kenema and the majority of the population of these cities resides within a kilometer of an LDS meetinghouse. The decision in recent years to organize additional branches in Freetown rather than consolidate active membership into larger congregations to form prospective wards for a future stake present a good planning and outreach approach that encourages growth and accessibility. LDS meetings have only recently begun in Makeni and no independent branch or full-time missionaries are assigned.

The Church initially made significant inroads expanding national outreach following an official church establishment in the country as several congregations were established in Freetown and Bo but war, poverty, leadership training challenges, convert retention issues, ethnic conflict, distance to mission headquarters, and limited missionary resources dedicated to the region contributed to no additional cities opening to missionary work between the early 1990s and the mid-2000s. The organization of the Sierra Leone Freetown Mission in 2007 directed greater mission resources to Sierra Leone in the late 2000s and the mission has recently prepared for the opening of additional cities to missionary work, such as Makeni and Moyamba. Full-time missionaries reported that both Makeni and Moyamba almost opened to full-time missionaries in early 2011, but area leadership recommended that mission efforts be concentrated on establishing stakes in Bo and Freetown prior to opening additional cities to proselytism. Notwithstanding continuing delays in expanding national outreach due to administrative and activity challenges in established church centers, mission leadership has broadened its vision for expanding outreach and in early 2011 announced to full-time missionaries serving in the mission that between one and two dozen new branches would be organized in Sierra Leone and Liberia within the coming year. Prospects for expanding outreach in the medium and long term are favorable as Sierra Leone services the smallest population of any African mission of less than ten million and receptivity has been historically high.

LDS mission outreach will face significant challenges proselytizing the rural population. The majority of the population resides in small cities, towns, and villages inhabited by less than 10,000 people. Transportation difficulties, tribalism, a lack of LDS materials in native languages, and few or no members residing in these locations create barriers to outreach outside the largest cities.

Member Activity and Convert Retention

Many are willing to listen to what the missionaries teach but overall struggle to remain active and develop lasting church attendance. One missionary in August 2009 reported that the branch he was serving in the Freetown Sierra Leone District had 400 members but fewer than 100 attended Church meetings regularly. Low member activity and poor convert retention have contributed to the lack of a stake in Sierra Leone. High membership growth rates are less impressive when poor convert retention and low member activity rates are considered. The small increases in the number of branches which has not kept pace with nominal membership growth since the early 1990s demonstrate the severity of the retention problem. The new mission was created partially to address Sierra Leone's worsening member activity and convert retention problems and in 2010 and 2011 noticeable results were forthcoming as evidenced by an increase in active membership and congregations and stable seminary and institute enrollment numbers. Emphasis on establishing weekly church attendance and personal gospel living habits will be required to improve member activity and convert retention over the long-term.

Ethnic Issues and Integration

Sierra Leone is the African country with the highest percentage of Muslims (77%) with an LDS mission. Unlike many other African nations, there appears to be little violence or conflict between Christians and Muslims in Sierra Leone. Despite the small number of Christians in the country, the Church has made many converts. These converts do not come from just one religious group and consist of fellow Christians, Muslims, and followers of other religions. LDS missionaries have not reported significant ethnic integration issues notwithstanding chronic ethnic conflict in Sierra Leone. Expanding LDS outreach into rural and northern areas may increase the likelihood of ethnic tensions presenting at church.

Language Issues

Only the Articles of Faith have been translated into Mende. No other LDS materials or scriptures have been translated into any indigenous African languages. English is the official language of Sierra Leone, but its use is limited primarily due to low literacy rates. Foreign missionaries learn and speak Krio while serving in the country. As Krio is widely spoken across Sierra Leone, it is the most likely candidate for future translations of church materials and scripture. Additional church material translations into Mende appear likely in the coming years due to church growth in Mende-speaking areas such as Bo and Kenema.

Missionary Service

Sierra Leone is nearly self-sufficient in its missionary manpower, but many local members serve elsewhere in West Africa instead of in their home country such as Nigeria. In early 2011, approximately half of the full-time missionary force was North American. 89 local members were serving full-time missions by year-end 1993, 41 of which were from the six branches operating in Freetown at the time.^[9] North American full-time missionaries and African missionaries regularly serve in Sierra Leone. There have been some reported challenges training and preparing male LDS youth to serve missions and return honorably. Maintaining high rates of seminary and institute participation will facilitate higher rates of missionary service.

Leadership

Missionaries serving in Sierra Leone point to difficulties in developing strong, educated local leadership as well as problems with convert retention and low member activity. Despite these problems, active members of the Church in Sierra Leone provide great service and support to full-time missionaries and the overall functioning of the Church. Full-time missionaries frequently report on the high level of involvement of local branch missionaries in teaching and fellowshipping investigators, recent converts and less active members. Many Sierra Leonean members serve missions with some branches having over half a dozen members serving in the mission field at a time. It does not appear that the widespread corruption in the country has significantly impaired the functioning of the Church. Missionaries have reported several instances of some local leaders dealing haphazardly with church finance responsibilities. These issues were resolved quickly by area, district and mission presidencies. In recent years, the number of returned missionaries has increased, greatly strengthening leadership manpower and training but their numbers remain too limited to justify the organization of stakes at present.

Temple

Sierra Leone is assigned to the Accra Ghana Temple district. One of the first groups of members to go to the temple attended the Ghana Accra Temple in May 2006. A total of 42 members from Freetown and Bo participated and 18 couples were sealed.^[10] Temple trips occur infrequently due to distance to the temple and travel costs. There are no realistic prospects for a prospective temple to be built closer to Sierra Leone in the foreseeable future due to inadequate local leadership, low member activity rates, few total members, and economic difficulties in the region.

Comparative Growth

Membership growth rates and seminary and institute enrollment for the LDS Church in Sierra Leone have been comparable to other African nations in recent years although convert retention, member activity, and congregational growth rates have been considerably lower and comparable to Liberia. The Church in Sierra Leone had the fourth most members without a stake in 2010. The percentage of Latter-day Saints in the general population is among the highest in Africa and comparable to Ghana.

Other outreach-oriented Christian faiths experience similar obstacles in Sierra Leone. Jehovah's Witnesses have a small membership in the country and claimed about 1,800 active members in 33 congregations in 2008, baptizing about 100 new members a year. Seventh Day Adventists numbered 17,151 in 52 churches for the same year. Only one new Adventist congregation was created between 1997 and 2008 during which time SDA membership in Sierra Leone increased by 5,000. Comparing the results of other church's missionary programs with the LDS Church reveals that even some of the most organized and successful Christian churches in Africa experience high convert attrition in Sierra Leone. Problems with the people in Sierra Leone actively participating in Christian churches may be linked to low literacy, extreme poverty, and a culture which is dominated by Islam.

Future Prospects

The outlook for future LDS Church growth is favorable due to the organization of the Sierra Leone Freetown Mission in 2007 which has emphasized higher standards for convert baptisms, provided more consistent leadership training, and recently held a vision for expanding national outreach in the coming months and years. The establishment of stakes appears highly likely in the near future in both Freetown and Bo. In 2011, full-time missionaries reported short-term plans for the organization of a district in Kenema. Missionaries report that several branches may soon be organized in Makeni. Additional cities will likely open for missionary work within the next decade, but outreach will likely not occur in rural areas for many more years. The Sierra Leone Freetown Mission may administer currently unreached nations in West Africa one day, such as Guinea and The Gambia. Poverty, low levels of religious commitment, and mediocre literacy rates will continue to limit growth and present persistent challenges toward establishing long-term, self-sufficient leadership.

[1] "Background Note: Sierra Leone," Bureau of African Affairs, 8 March 2011. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/5475.htm>

[2] "Sierra Leone," International Religious Freedom Report 2009. <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2009/127254.htm>

[3] "Sierra Leone," International Religious Freedom Report 2009. <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2009/127254.htm>

[4] "Sierra Leone," Country Profile, 2 April 2011. <http://newsroom.lds.org/country/sierra-leone>

[5] Thomas, President Kent; Thomas, Sister Carolyn. "Church, tribal leaders pleased with start of first chapel in Sierra Leone," LDS Church News, 6 November 2004.

<http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/46437/Church-tribal-leaders-pleased-with-start-of-first-chapel-in-Sierra-Leone.html>

[6] Thomas, President Kent; Thomas, Sister Carolyn. "Church, tribal leaders pleased with start of first chapel in Sierra Leone," LDS Church News, 6 November 2004.

[7] Weaver, Sarah Jane. "Measles initiative continues to fight disease in Africa," LDS Church News, 30 September 2006. <http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/49498/Measles-initiative-continues-to-fight-disease-in-Africa.html>

[8] "Projects - Sierra Leone," Humanitarian Activities Worldwide, retrieved 30 April 2011. <http://www.providentliving.org/project/0,13501,4607-1-2008-117,00.html>

[9] "Sierra Leone," Country Profile, 2 April 2011. <http://newsroom.lds.org/country/sierra-leone>

[10] Gunnell, President Grant. "Joy at Ghana temple," LDS Church News, 27 May 2006. <http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/49002/Joy-at-Ghana-temple.html>