



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.



Sao Tome and Principe

Population: 0.19 millions (#191 out of countries)

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Geography

Area: 964 square km. Consisting of two main mountainous islands in the Gulf of Guinea, São Tomé and Príncipe is one of Africa's smallest countries. Extinct volcanoes formed both islands of São Tomé and Príncipe. Tropical, hot climate prevails throughout the year with a rainy season from October to May. Environmental issues include deforestation, soil erosion, and overuse of the limited number of agricultural lands. São Tomé and Príncipe is divided into six administrative districts and one autonomous region (Príncipe).

Peoples

Seven different ethnic groups inhabit São Tomé and Príncipe: Mestico (mixed Portuguese and African), Angolares (descendants of Angolan slaves), Forros (descendants of freed slaves), Servicais (contract laborers from Portuguese-speaking African nations), Tongas (children of Servicais born in São Tomé and Príncipe), Europeans (mainly Portuguese), and Asians (mainly Chinese). Slaves have historically originated from West and Central Africa.

Population: 204,454 (July 2018)

Annual Growth Rate: 1.66% (2018)

Fertility Rate: 4.11 children born per woman (2018)

Life Expectancy: 64.3 male, 67.1 female (2018)

Languages: Portuguese and Portuguese-based creoles (95%), other (5%). Portuguese is the official language. Sãotomense and Príncipe are recognized Portuguese creoles. French and English are commonly spoken minority languages.

Literacy: 74.9% (2015)

History

The Portuguese discovered and colonized the previously uninhabited islands of São Tomé and Príncipe in the late fifteenth century. African slaves were brought to the islands to staff sugar plantations followed by cocoa and coffee plantations in the 1800s. Due to its position in the Gulf of Guinea, the islands became a transit point for the slave trade. Slavery and the recruitment of contract labor workers from mainland Africa continued into the mid-twentieth century. Independence movements began in the 1950s. Independence from Portugal occurred in 1975, but democratic reforms and free elections did not occur until the late 1980s and early 1990s. At independence, twenty Portuguese families owned 93% of the total land area.^[1] Political instability has threatened the integrity of the government and frequently changed leadership in the past three decades. There were frequent changes in presidents in the 2010s. Greater correspondence has occurred with Angola and other Portuguese-speaking African nations due to common language and colonial past.

Culture

São Tomé and Príncipe experiences a fusion of cultural practices and attitudes borrowed from mainland Africa and Portugal. Each ethnic group possesses unique cultural customs and beliefs. The islands are known for their music. Unlike many African nations, polygamy is neither socially accepted nor widely practiced. Alcohol consumption rates are moderate and rank average for the region. Cuisine draws upon African and Portuguese influences.

Economy

GDP per capita: \$3,200 (2017) [5.35% of U.S.]

Human Development Index: 0.609 (2018)

Corruption Index: 46 (2018)

São Tomé and Príncipe depends heavily on cocoa revenues to drive the economy. The small population and limited land area challenge greater economic development and attracting foreign investment. There is a shortage of skilled labor. The discovery of oil in the Gulf of Guinea in recent years provides opportunity for increased revenues and greater diversification of the economy, but prospects in extracting this resource have been delayed due to negotiations with Nigeria over oil rights. A tourist industry may develop due to the islands' tropical climate and scenery. Sixty-six percent (66%) of the population in 2009 lived below the poverty line. Seventy-three percent (73%) of the GDP is produced from services, 15% from industry, and 12% from agriculture. Most of the population depends on fishing and subsistence agriculture for work. Primary crops include cocoa, coconuts, palm kernels, copra, fish, and fruit, whereas primary industries include construction, textiles, soap, and fishing. Portugal, Guyana, Germany, and Angola are major trade partners.

Transparency International ratings of perceived corruption in São Tomé and Príncipe have considerably improved in the past decade. Today, perceived corruption levels are comparable to Senegal and Hungary – levels much higher than most Sub-Saharan African nations.

Faiths

Christian: 97%

Muslim: less than 2%

Other: 1%

Christians

Denominations – Members – Congregations

Catholic – 173,786

Evangelical – 7,011

Assembly of God – 6,951

Seventh Day Adventists – 6,694 – 98

New Apostolic – 5,929

Universal Kingdom of God – 4,089

Jehovah's Witnesses – 924 – 14

Latter-day Saints – less than 20

Religion

Catholics account for 85% of the population. Protestants constitute 12% of the population and have grown rapidly due to missionary activity. Muslims have arrived more recently and consist primarily of Nigerian and Cameroonian immigrants. There is some syncretism between indigenous African beliefs, Christianity, and Islam.[\[2\]](#)

Religious Freedom

The constitution protects religious freedom, which is upheld by government laws and policies. There have been no reported instances of abuse of religious freedom. To operate in the country, a religious group must send a letter to the Ministry of Justice and Parliamentary Affairs requesting authorization. Once authorization is granted, the religious group must register its name and charter at the national registrar's office. A small fee and minutes or a report of a meeting attended by at least 500 representatives of the group also needs to be submitted for a religious group to register with the government.[\[3\]](#) The government has not rejected any past requests from religious groups desiring authorization, and unregistered groups report meeting without opposition.[\[4\]](#)

Largest Cities

Urban: 73.6% (2019)

São Tomé, Trindade, Santana, Neves, Guadalupe, São João dos Angolares, Santo António, Pantufo.

None of the eight most populous cities have a congregation of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Sixty-seven

percent (67%) of the national population resides in the eight most populous cities. The city of São Tomé accounts for more than one third of the population.

Church History

In 1998, the Africa Southeast Area administered São Tomé and Príncipe. The Mozambique Maputo Mission administered São Tomé and Príncipe after the mission was organized in 2005. The Church reassigned São Tomé and Príncipe to the newly organized Angola Luanda Mission in 2013. In March 2015, the Angola Luanda Mission President met with isolated members in São Tomé and held a sacrament meeting. In 2017, the first known Latter-day Saint from São Tomé and Príncipe to serve a mission began his service in the Cape Verde Praia Mission. This first Latter-day Saint full-time missionary from São Tomé and Príncipe had moved to Cabo Verde with his family and had joined the Church shortly thereafter. In 2019, the Church announced that the country will be reassigned to the new Africa Central Area in August 2020. It is unclear what mission São Tomé and Príncipe may be assigned to after these changes as Angola will be assigned to the Africa South Area.[\[5\]](#)

Membership Growth

Church Membership: less than 10 (2019)

In 2019, there appeared to be fewer than ten Latter-day Saints in São Tomé and Príncipe.

Congregational Growth

Branches: 0 Member Groups: 0 (2019)

São Tomé and Príncipe pertains to the Angola Luanda Mission Branch.

Activity and Retention

No convert baptisms have appeared to occur on the islands.

Language Materials

Languages with Latter-day Saint Scripture: Portuguese.

All Latter-day Saint scriptures and most church materials are available in Portuguese.

Humanitarian and Development Work

The Church had not conducted any past development or humanitarian work in São Tomé and Príncipe as of early 2020.[\[6\]](#)

Opportunities, Challenges, and Prospects

Religious Freedom

The Church faces no legal obstacles preventing the establishment of the Church and formal missionary work. Full religious freedom, no reported instances of societal abuses of religious freedom, a Christian population, and strong growth among missionary-oriented Protestants creates a favorable environment for Latter-day Saint growth.

Cultural Issues

The Catholic Church has historically familiarized the population with Christianity. However, levels of religious participation appear low. Poverty and low living standards are economic challenges in which Latter-day Saints may address through humanitarian and development work.

National Outreach

All but 9,000 reside on Sao Tome. With such a small geographic area and centralized population, future missionary activity would require few outreach centers and resources to proselyte the majority of the population. Distance from established mission centers, few local members, and a small population have likely contributed to the lack of a formal Church presence. The Angola Luanda Mission numbers among missions with the fewest numbers of full-time missionaries assigned largely due to high living expenses in Luanda where nearly all Church activity occurs. Furthermore, Angolans have been highly receptive to the Latter-day Saint gospel message and would likely draw away from any resources available to assign to São Tomé and Príncipe. The large population of Angola, numbering more than 30 million in 2018, also demands greater resources than what is currently allocated to effectively reach the population. Transfer of São Tomé and Príncipe to another African mission in 2020 will continue to present similar challenges given much larger populations on the African mainland and distance, such as in Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and the Republic of the Congo. Also, the Angola Luanda Mission is the only Portuguese-speaking mission in the area, suggesting greater language problems when the mission is reassigned to a French-speaking mission. Seeking converts among Portuguese-speaking African nations with São Tomé and Príncipe natives may help establish an initial Church presence. However, many of these individuals do not return to their home country due to poor living standards.

Member Activity and Convert Retention

Current levels of member activity among the handful of Latter-day Saints has appeared insufficient to warrant the organization of member groups or branches. The few local members in the country may be foreigners and not permanent residents. Low church participation in other denominations may carry over to the Church if converts do not establish a routine of weekly church attendance.

Ethnic Issues and Integration

The complexity of the islands' demography creates significant challenges for mission planners to address. Common language among most of the population appear a major factor that will be favorable for growth, but differing customs and traditions for the differing ethnic groups may lead to future instability in Latter-day Saint congregations.

Language Issues

Unlike the African mainland, São Tomé and Príncipe have little linguistic diversity due to the lack of an indigenous population and strong Portuguese colonial legacy for several centuries. Informal Portuguese-based creoles offer some challenges for future missionary efforts, but the widespread use of Portuguese by almost the entire population simplifies language issues.

Missionary Service

At least one native member São Tomé and Príncipe has served a full-time mission, albeit this member moved away from São Tomé and Príncipe and joined the Church thereafter. No full-time missionaries have ever been assigned to the country.

Leadership

The number of Latter-day Saints in the country is very small and few, if any, have had any leadership experience. A lack of leadership may be a reason why the Church has not established a presence despite favorable growth conditions and widespread religious freedom.

Temple

São Tomé and Príncipe is assigned to the Kinshasa Democratic Republic of the Congo Temple.

Comparative Growth

São Tomé and Príncipe is one of several predominantly Christian African nations that have never had an official Church presence. Other Christian majority nations without an official Church presence include Equatorial Guinea, Seychelles, and South Sudan.

The Church has made little progress over the past decade beginning missionary work on island African nations likely due to the small populations, remote locations, and limited mission resources. Not until around 1990 did the Church begin to establish a presence in Portuguese-speaking Africa. São Tomé and Príncipe shares many historical similarities with Cabo Verde—the Portuguese-speaking African nation with the most Latter-day Saints—which may indicate that São Tomé and Príncipe may as well be a fruitful nation for future mission outreach. Many Pacific nations have smaller populations but have experienced strong Latter-day Saint membership growth and activity.

Evangelicals appear to be the most successful Christian group in gaining new converts since independence. Seventh-day Adventists have reported significant growth in the past decade. The number of regularly proselytizing Jehovah's Witnesses has increased by 300 and several new congregations have been added since 2010. Christian churches tend to struggle with low levels of church participation.

Future Prospects

In a period of Church history with unprecedented opportunities to expand mission outreach in Africa, São Tomé and Príncipe remains a lesser priority due to the lack of local members, remote location, and small Portuguese-speaking population. Nevertheless, the islands present a valuable opportunity for growth given the Church's historical successes in other island nations such as Cabo Verde and in the South Pacific. Mission and area Church leaders will likely need to conduct additional exploratory trips to assess conditions and search for isolated members. The assignment of even one senior missionary couple

may provide an impetus toward establishing a permanent presence and the opening of the islands to missionary work.

[1] "São Tomé and Príncipe," Countries and Their Cultures, retrieved 7 August 2010.
<http://www.everyculture.com/Sa-Th/S-o-Tom-e-Pr-ncipe.html>

[2] "2018 Report on International Religious Freedom: Sao Tome and Principe," U.S. Department of State. Accessed 7 January 2020. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-report-on-international-religious-freedom/sao-tome-and-principe/>

[3] "2018 Report on International Religious Freedom: Sao Tome and Principe," U.S. Department of State. Accessed 7 January 2020. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-report-on-international-religious-freedom/sao-tome-and-principe/>

[4] "São Tomé and Príncipe," International Religious Freedom Report 2009, 26 October 2009.
<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2009/127251.htm>

[5] "Nairobi, Kenya, to be Church Africa Central Area Office." Newsroom. 20 August 2019.
<https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/nairobi--kenya--to-be-church-africa-central-area-office>

[6] "Where We Work." Latter-day Saint Charities. 7 January 2020. <https://www.latterdaysaintcharities.org/where-we-work>