



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.



Rwanda

Population: 12.34 millions (#74 out of countries)

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Geography

Area: 26,338square km. One of the smallest countries in continental Africa, Rwanda is a landlocked country in Central Africa that borders Tanzania, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Uganda. Terrain ranges from hilly to mountainous. The lower elevation areas of the country are near Lake Kivu, which forms much of the border with the Democratic Republic of Congo to the west. The climate is temperate, with two rainy seasons and cooler weather in the mountains. The country is well-watered from the various lakes and rivers throughout its interior and along its borders. Rwanda is Africa's most densely populated country and is administratively divided into four provinces and one city.

Peoples

Hutus: 84%

Tutis: 15%

Twa: 1%

The largest ethnic group in Rwanda is the Hutus who make up 84% of the population. Hutus also live outside of Rwanda, forming the largest ethnic group in neighboring Burundi. Some Hutus live in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo as refugees from Rwanda and Burundi. Tutsis make up 15% of the Rwandan population. Tutsis may also be found outside of Rwanda in neighboring Burundi. Twa are a Pygmy ethnic group and comprise 1% of the population.

Population: 12,943,132 (2021)

Annual Growth Rate: 1.8% (2021)

Fertility Rate: 3.42 children born/woman (2021)

Life Expectancy: 63.55 male, 67.47 female (2021)

Languages: Kinyarwanda (official) 93.7%, Rundi (4.6%), other (1.7%). The three ethnic groups in Rwanda speak Kinyarwanda, also called Rwanda, which is an official language. French and English are the other official languages in Rwanda, although French speakers are limited to educated Rwandans. Few speak English as a second language. Swahili is used as a trade language in commercial centers.

Literacy: 73.2% (2018)

History

A Tutsi monarchy rose to power in the fifteenth century and maintained a close relationship with the Hutus under a system of rule and society like serfdom, as the Hutus pledged their allegiance to their Tutsi overlords in return for the use of pastures, arable land, and loans of livestock. The first known European to enter Rwanda was a German in the 1890s, and by the turn of the century Rwanda became a German protectorate. In 1915, Belgian forces from present-day Democratic Republic of the Congo invaded and annexed Rwanda. Rwanda and Burundi were united as the territory of Ruanda-Urundi after World War I under a mandate from the League of Nations delegated to Belgium. Belgians played a major role influencing the overthrow of the Tutsi monarchy in 1959 by the Hutus. Over 100,000 Tutsis fled the country following the fall of the Tutsi monarchy, and Rwanda achieved independence from Belgium in 1962. Corruption and ineffective government resulted in stagnant economic growth and social progress and exacerbated ethnic tensions during the following decades as violent acts committed against Tutsis were often unpunished. In 1990, exiled Tutsis launched an invasion of Rwanda from Uganda under the name of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF). War persisted until a cease fire was reached in 1992. Both the Rwandan and Burundian presidents were killed in 1994 as an airplane carrying both presidents was shot down by the RPT. Between April 6th and the beginning of July 1994, approximately 800,000 were killed in a massive genocide targeting Tutsis and moderate Hutus. Meanwhile, the RFT waged a civil war against the Rwandan military until overrunning the country by the summer. As a result of the Rwandan genocide and concurrent civil war, one million were killed, one million were displaced within Rwanda, and two million fled to other countries. In 1996, Rwandan troops from the former government and Ugandan forces invaded and retook the country. Consequently, over a million Rwandans returned to their homeland. Since the genocide, ethnic tensions have remained, although violence between the groups has abated. There are an estimated 50,000 or fewer Rwandans living outside their homeland displaced from the conflict and consist of the defeated RPF military forces and its allies. In recent years, the government has sought to address legal issues and rebuild the judicial system.^[1] Rwanda today is known as one of the least corrupt nations in Sub-Saharan Africa, and there have been significant efforts by the government to attract foreign investment.

Culture

Rwanda traditionally possessed a culture dominated by the intricate intertwining of Tutsi and Hutu ethnicities. Today, agriculture and Christianity are the predominant influences on society and culture. Alcohol consumption rates are higher than most African nations and slightly higher than the world average. Dance and music are important cultural practices. Common foods include fruit, sweet potatoes, beans, and cassava.

Economy

GDP per capita: \$2,227 (2019) [3.6% of U.S.]

Human Development Index: 0.543 (2019)

Corruption Index: 54 (2020)

Due to its landlocked position and the 1994 genocide, Rwanda's economy has struggled to develop and integrate with the international community. Rwanda lost many of its interested investors due to the genocide, yet economic prosperity has returned to levels before the genocide occurred. The small geographical size of Rwanda challenges efforts to diversify the economy. Thus, the government has sought to develop Rwanda as a regional communications center in East Africa. Industrial and service sectors of the economy are undeveloped, and three-quarters of Rwandans work in agriculture. Primary crops grown

in Rwanda include coffee, tea, bananas, beans, and potatoes. Poverty remains a major problem that was exacerbated by the genocide. The primary trade partners include the United Arab Emirates, Kenya, China, and Uganda. Corruption is perceived at levels lower than most of Sub-Saharan Africa.

Faiths

Christian: 93.2%

Muslim: 2%

None: 2.5%

Unspecified: 2.1%

Christians

Denomination – Members – Congregations

Roman Catholic – 5,694,978

Seventh-day Adventists – 972,966 – 2,553

Jehovah's Witnesses – **31,397 – 570**

Latter-day Saints – 755 – 4

Religion

Most Rwandans identify themselves as Christian. The 2012 census reported that the population is 44% Roman Catholic, 38% Protestant, 12% Seventh-day Adventist, 2% Muslim, and 0.7% Jehovah's Witnesses.[\[2\]](#)

Religious Freedom

Due to the large Christian majority in Rwanda, religious freedom is present in Rwanda and the government is open to many Christian denominations preaching and functioning in the country. However, there are many laws that govern religious groups which have resulted in significant restrictions. For example, the law requires preachers with supervisory responsibilities to possess a degree in religious studies. Special authorization is required to hold meetings in public spaces. Moreover, the government closed 8,760 places of worship in 2018 because it believed such places of worship violated health and safety standards and/or noise pollution ordinances. As of December 2019, most of these places of worship remained closed. The government requires religious groups to register with the government to obtain legal status. Foreign missionaries must obtain a visa and foreign identity card. To obtain a visa, foreign missionaries must complete an application, have the religious group's legal representative sign the application letter, submit an authorization letter from the organization, and pay a fee of \$110.[\[3\]](#) Foreign missionary visas last one year and are multiple-entry visas. Religious studies are a required subject of study in public schools. A few Christian leaders participated during the 1994 genocide and most did little to stop it. However, the genocide was not motivated due to religious affiliation [\[4\]](#) Jehovah's Witnesses have had some government scrutiny, which is likely due to the denomination's views of government.

Major Cities

Urban: 17.4%

Kigali, **Gisenyi**, **Ruhengeri**, **Butare**, **Gitarama**, **Byumba**, **Cyangugu**, **Nyanza**, **Bugarama**, **Kayonza**

Cities listed in **bold** have no Latter-day Saint congregations.

One of the ten largest cities has a Latter-day Saint congregation. Twelve percent (12%) of the national population resides in the ten most populous cities.

Latter-day Saint History

Mission presidents from both the Uganda Kampala Mission and the Democratic Republic of Congo Kinshasa Mission visited Rwanda in late 2006 with their assistants to determine whether the country was ready to open for missionary work and what language (English or French) missionary work should be conducted in if the country were opened. Rwanda was shortly thereafter assigned to the Uganda Kampala Mission, and a group was meeting in Kigali in late 2007. The first independent branch was organized in Kigali by the mission president of the Uganda Kampala Mission in 2008. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland dedicated Rwanda for missionary work in August 2009 on a hill overlooking Kigali.^[5] Missionaries periodically visited the Kigali Branch after the dedication to perform baptisms, and the first senior missionary couple was likely assigned to Rwanda in 2010. The first young proselytizing missionaries were assigned in September 2012. The Church obtained legal recognition from the Rwandan government in October 2013. In 2020, Rwanda was reassigned to the newly organized Africa Central Area.

Membership Growth

Church Membership: 755 (2019)

There were seventeen Latter-day Saints in 2008. President Christensen visited the Kigali Branch on its one-year anniversary of becoming a branch in March 2009 and noted that nine were baptized the day of his visit and that eighteen had joined the Church in the past year. A senior missionary couple reported that membership in the branch increased from twelve when it was organized to forty-five a year later. In September 2009, ten Rwandans were baptized in Lake Muhazi, and several returned missionaries, most from other nations living in Rwanda, were reported to be part of the branch.

Church membership slowly increased in the late 2000s and early 2010s. Membership totaled 48 in 2009 and 121 in 2012. Rapid membership growth occurred for much of the remainder of the 2010s as the Church reported 281 members in 2014, 390 members in 2016, and 755 members in 2019. Stagnant membership growth occurred in 2019 (0.8% increase from 2018).

In 2019, one in 16,490 was a Latter-Day Saint on Church records.

Congregational Growth

Branches: 4 (2020)

The Kigali Branch was created in 2018. In 2012, two additional branches were organized in Kigali. The Church organized the three Kigali branches into its own district in 2017. There were plans to organize two new branches in Kigali as of mid-2017, but

these plans did not come to fruition due to changes in government legislation regarding use of buildings for houses of worship. A fourth branch in Kigali was created in 2019.

Activity and Retention

With small, relatively recent membership in Rwanda, activity and retention appear high. Approximately 100 attended Church meetings in Rwanda as of January 2013—83% of Church membership at the time. Thirty-nine (39) investigators attended church in the three Kigali branches as of November 2016. Missionaries anticipated 100 convert baptisms in Rwanda for the year 2016. There were 408 who attended the general meeting to organize the Kigali Rwanda District in March 2017—approximately 91% of Church membership in Kigali at the time. Moreover, there were 120 men who attended the first priesthood session in the newly organized district. There were 111 in attendance at the first meeting of the Kigali 3rd Branch after it was able to meet in its new chapel in mid-2019. The loss of the Church's meetinghouses in 2018 appeared to significantly impact member activity rates. In 2020, Church attendance appeared no greater than 350, or 46% of Church membership.

Language Materials

Languages with Latter-Day Saint Scripture: Kinyarwanda, English, French, and Swahili.

The Church has translated a small number of Church materials into Kinyarwanda. The Church is currently translating the Book of Mormon into Kinyarwanda, and the Kinyarwanda translation of the Book of Mormon is available online to read from 1 Nephi until Alma 42 as of April 2021.^[6] As of the early 2010s, only Gospel Principles and The Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith were available in Kinyarwanda. The Church conducts meetings in English.

Meetinghouses

The first Latter-Day Saint meetings in Rwanda were held in a hotel in Kigali. Rented spaces were secured for the three Kigali branches in the early 2010s. Changes in government legislation resulted in the Church losing its three meetinghouses in Kigali in 2018. This required the Church to temporarily rent a single large hall for Sunday meetings. In early 2021, the Church again operated three meetinghouses in Kigali.

Humanitarian and Development Work

Senior couples serving in the Uganda Kampala Mission reported that authorization for humanitarian work was given in the fall of 2008. Humanitarian work in Rwanda began in early 2009. In the fall of 2009, a humanitarian missionary couple serving in the Uganda Kampala Mission reported that the Church was working on a refugee project in the Gihembe Refugee Camp, located north of Kigali near the town of Byumba. The humanitarian project was done through Deseret International Charities, together with the United Nations High Commission for Refugees. Senior missionaries visited the camp and assisted in the distribution of needed clothing, hygiene, school, and healthcare items such as newborn kits. At the time, there were a reported 18,000 refugees in the camp who arrived across the border from the Democratic Republic of Congo due to ongoing and renewed civil unrest and war. A neonatal resuscitation project organized by the Church was planned for Rwanda in early 2010. By 2020, the Church had conducted 72 humanitarian and development projects in Rwanda that have included clean water projects, community projects, emergency response, maternal and newborn care, refugee response, vision care, and wheelchair donations.^[7]

Opportunities, Challenges, and Prospects

Religious Freedom

Delays in obtaining legal recognition from the government postponed the introduction of proselytizing full-time missionaries. Moreover, the Church must operate under stricter rules with securing and using meetinghouses which has had a major negative impact on growth in recent years. Nevertheless, societal abuses of religious freedom are low.

Cultural Issues

High receptivity to Christianity presents many opportunities for missionary activity. Poverty and a predominantly rural population pose significant barriers and challenges for missionary activity, especially given the Church's centers of strength emphasis. Rwandans also use alcohol frequently in celebrations and declining the offer of a drink in a Rwandan's home is considered a great insult. Unlike many African nations, few Rwandans practice polygamy, which is not recognized in the country and is illegal.

National Outreach

Only 10% of the national population resides in Kigali, the only city with Latter-Day Saint congregations. Most the inhabitants of Kigali are unaware of a Latter-Day Saint presence, as the Kigali Branch was organized in 2008, and no formal proselytism occurred until 2012. Past ethnic violence, distance from Latter-Day Saint mission outreach centers in other countries, a lack of Rwandan Latter-Day Saint converts in other countries, and few mission resources allocated to the region have contributed to the lack of Latter-Day Saint outreach in Rwanda until recently and continue to prevent greater outreach. Rwanda's large rural population will likely take decades to reach and will probably come as a result of the Church establishing its presence in the population centers throughout the country. National outreach expansion for the Church will most likely occur as member-missionary programs take precedence, greater mission resources are allocated to the country, and additional meetinghouse spaces can be easily secured.

Member Activity and Convert Retention

Member activity rates in Rwanda have historically been some of the highest in the world. However, government restrictions on meetinghouse use have appeared to significantly decrease member activity rates based on the most recent missionary reports available. Separation from mission headquarters and no assigned full-time, young missionaries until the early 2010s likely increased the involvement of local members in the teaching and fellowshipping of new converts, thereby increasing convert retention rates. The COVID-19 pandemic may have also negatively impacted member activity rates due to disrupted missionary work and church services. The size and maturity of other missionary-minded Christian groups in Rwanda may thwart Latter-Day Saint efforts to baptize converts from these groups and lead less-active members to return to their previously affiliated churches given the high amount of religious interest and activity among Rwandans.

Ethnic Issues and Integration

Rwanda's recent genocide significantly contributed to the Church's delayed entry into Rwanda. In early 2013, local members reported no difficulties assimilating Hutus, Tutsis, and other ethnicities into the same congregations despite past ethnic violence. Much of these historical ethnic tensions appeared to have significantly eased by the 2010s, and there were no reported difficulties with such tensions affecting Church operations.

Language Issues

The Church has consistently emphasized that meetings are only held in English, and that only English-speaking Rwandans should be eligible for baptism. Although it is unclear whether this restriction has been eased in recent years, this has resulted in the Church deliberately concentrating its missionary efforts and resources on often more educated and affluent Rwandans rather than the general population. Mission leaders have explained that this emphasis has been done to help improve the self-sustainability of fledgling congregations and to establish a competent body of local leadership to eventually expand

missionary efforts among monolingual Kinyarwanda speakers. However, only approximately 10% of Rwandans speak English as a second language. The translation of a small body of Church materials, General Conference addresses, and Latter-day Saint scriptures in the late 2010s and early 2020s signals efforts by the Church to begin outreach in the Kinyarwanda language. A transition to Church meetings being held in Kinyarwanda will likely occur soon given its national language status. Moreover, the Church in Rwanda benefits from unusually low linguistic diversity in Rwanda thereby simplifying missionary and administrative efforts.

Missionary Service

The first Rwandan to serve a full-time mission from Rwanda began his service in 2012. Three more members from Kigali began their full-time missions later that year. There were twelve full-time missionaries serving in Rwanda as of October 2016. The Church in Rwanda has generally appeared self-sufficient in regards to the number of members serving full-time missions being comparable to the number of full-time missionaries assigned to the country, but the size of the missionary force remains extremely small given the country's nearly 13 million inhabitants.

Leadership

In 2009, all members of the branch presidency served a full-time mission according to missionaries who visited Rwanda. At the time, non-Rwandan members served in branch leadership, two of whom are from Kenya and India. As of 2021, all four branch presidents in Kigali appeared to be from Rwanda. The Church has quickly developed strong local leadership, albeit such leadership has been limited in its experience in such roles in the Church due to most having joined the Church in the past decade.

Temple

Rwanda is assigned to the Johannesburg South Africa Temple District. Rwanda will likely be assigned to the Nairobi Kenya temple when it is complete. This will drastically decrease the time and financial burdens for Rwandan members to visit the temple.

Comparative Growth

Rwanda is one of the most recently entered nations for the Church in East Africa and Central Africa. The percentage of Latter-day Saints in the population is comparable to neighboring Burundi where the Church was reestablished at approximately the same time (2010) as the Church's establishment in Rwanda. Rwanda has one of the smallest numbers of members with a district organized. Member activity rates in Rwanda at present appear comparable for the region, but member activity rates in Rwanda prior to 2018 ranked among the highest in the world.

Other outreach-focused Christians have experienced tremendous growth in Rwanda. The total number of Latter-day Saints in Rwanda is less than three times the number of Seventh-day Adventist congregations in the country. Rwanda is one of the countries with the highest percentage of self-identified Seventh-day Adventists (12%). During the 2000s, Adventists organized approximately 500 new congregations and baptized between 17,500 and 40,700 new converts annually.^[8] There were nearly one million Adventists in 2020. Jehovah's Witnesses reported 31,397 active members in 570 congregations in 2020. These denominations have seen strong growth in Rwanda because of a long-established presence in the country and strong national outreach primarily through the mobilization of local members.

Future Prospects

The Church in Rwanda has significant potential given a highly receptive population to Latter-day Saint missionary work,

increases in mission resources allocated to the country in recent years, official government recognition, the translation of Latter-day Saint scriptures into Kinyarwanda, and the establishment of dedicated and committed local leaders. However, the Church continues to assign few resources to Rwanda, and the country remains under the jurisdiction of the Uganda Kampala Mission. The organization of a separate mission headquartered in Kigali is greatly needed to provide greater mission president oversight and more resources and attention to fledgling congregations which have seen a significant reduction in member activity rates due to the government's closure of thousands of places of worship. Moreover, the Church will require strategic vision to reach more than 80% of the Rwandan population which lives in rural areas.

[1] "Background Note: Rwanda," Bureau of African Affairs, 12 April 2011. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2861.htm>

[2] "2019 Report on International Religious Freedom: Rwanda." U.S. Department of State. Accessed 12 April 2021. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/rwanda/>

[3] "2019 Report on International Religious Freedom: Rwanda." U.S. Department of State. Accessed 12 April 2021. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/rwanda/>

[4] "Rwanda," International Religious Freedom Report 2010, 17 November 2010. <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2010/148714.htm>

[5] <http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/57850/Dedication-blesses-two-African-nations.html>

[6] IGITABO CYA MORUMONI. www.churchofjesuschrist.org, Accessed 12 April 2021. <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/bofm?lang=kin>

[7] Accessed 12 April 2021. where [web.archive.org/web/20200111150925/https://www.latterdaysaintcharities.org/where-we-work](https://www.latterdaysaintcharities.org/where-we-work)

[8] "Rwanda Union Mission (2003-Present)," www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 16 May 2011. http://www.adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldInstID=1580286