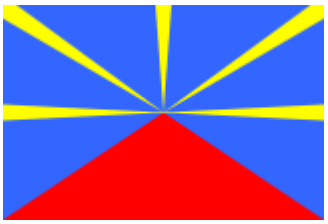


Reaching the Nations International Church Growth Almanac

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.



Reunion

Population: 0.88 millions (#163 out of countries)

By David Stewart and Matt Martinich

Geography

Area: 2,504 square km. Located in the West Indian Ocean, Reunion is an overseas department of France comprising a single island between Madagascar and Mauritius. Terrain consists of rugged mountains with some fertile coastal plains. Tropical climate occurs year round, marked by a cool, dry season and a hot, rainy season. Flooding and volcanoes are natural hazards. Pollution and land conservation are environmental issues. Reunion is divided into four administrative arrondissements.

Peoples

East Indian: 25%

White: 25%

Mixed race and other: 50%

Official statistics are not gathered on ethnicity in Reunion, but East Indians and whites are estimated to each account for one-quarter of the population. Those of mixed ancestry appear to account for half the population or more. Chinese account for approximately 3%.

Population: 963,000 (2016)

Annual Growth Rate: 0.80% (2016)

Fertility Rate: 2.45 children born per woman (2006)

Life Expectancy: 76.5 male, 82.9 female (2011)

Languages: Reunion Creole French (55%), French (21%), Chinese languages (2.5%), Malagasy (2.2%), other or unspecified (19.3%). French is the official language and widely understood. Reunion Creole French is based on standard French with many loan words from Malagasy and Tamil.[1]

Literacy: 93.2% (2019)

History

Arab and Swahili sailors were among the first to sight Reunion, followed by the Portuguese who found the island uninhabited in the early seventeenth century. France claimed Reunion shortly thereafter and utilized the island as a refueling and resting point for ships traveling from Europe to the East Indies. Colonization began in the late seventeenth century and immigration increased, especially from South and Southeast Asia. The United Kingdom briefly occupied the island during the Napoleonic Wars until it returned to French sovereignty in 1815. Reunion became a department of France in 1946. In the mid-2000s, mosquitoes spread a disease similar to dengue fever known as chikungunya that infected over a third of the island's inhabitants.

Culture

Over the centuries, French government policy has stressed the integration of differing ethnic groups into a single society, which has resulted in a shared, eclectic cultural identity. Chinese and Gujarati Muslims are minority groups that have maintained many of their religious practices and ethnic languages. Most do not feel a strong tie to metropolitan France, notwithstanding French occupation for centuries and the island becoming a department of France in 1946. Catholicism is one of the major influences on society, as most are Catholic. Disparities in wealth are extreme and many are unemployed, resulting in over 60% of the population receiving welfare benefits.[2]

Economy

GDP per capita: $25,900 (2017) [43.3% of U.S.)

Human Development Index: 0.822 (2017)

Corruption Index: 72 (2018) – figure is for France

Sugarcane cultivation and tourism sustain the economy. Wealth is unevenly distributed, resulting in conflict between differing socioeconomic classes. Sugar is the primary export. As much as 40% of the population lives below the poverty line. Unemployment is as high as 24% as of 2018. Corruption ranks lower than in most nations in the region.

Faiths

Christian: 87.6%

Hindu: 7%

Muslim: 3%

Other/nonreligious: 2.4%

Christians

Denominations – Members – Congregations

Catholic – 680,000

Evangelical – 49,112

Jehovah's Witnesses – 3,380 – 41

Seventh Day Adventists – 1,449 – 19

Latter-day Saints – 957 – 4

Religion

Most the population is Catholic. There are smaller numbers of Protestants, Hindus, and Muslims. Hindus and Muslims primarily consist of East Indians.

Religious Freedom

The constitution protects religious freedom, which in general is upheld by the government. Separation of church and state

occurred in 1905. Traditional Catholic holidays are recognized by the government. Religious organizations may register with the government as an association of worship or as a cultural association. Associations of worship may only organize religious activities, whereas cultural associations grant religious organizations the right to make profits and receive government subsidies but are not tax-exempt. Foreign missionaries may serve in Reunion, France, or other French oversea departments but are required to obtain a long-duration visa if their home country is not exempted from French visa entry requirements. Religious education does not occur in public schools.[3]

Largest Cities

Urban: 99.7% (2019)

Saint-Denis, **Saint-Paul,** Saint-Pierre, **Le Tampon, Saint-André, Saint-Louis,** Le Port, **Saint-Joseph, Saint-Benoît,** Sainte-Marie.

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

Four of the ten largest cities have a Church congregation. Seventy-eight percent (78%) of the island population resides in the ten most populous cities.

Church History

Latter-day Saint missionary activity began in 1979 under the International Mission, and the first branch was organized by the end of the year. The first members to live on Reunion joined the Church up to a decade earlier in metropolitan France.[4] In 1988, the Church organized the Mascarene Islands Mission with headquarters in Reunion.[5] Prior to the organization of the new mission, the South Africa Johannesburg Mission administered Reunion and Mauritius. In late 1988, Elder Marvin J. Ashton dedicated Reunion for missionary work.[6] In 1991, mission headquarters were transferred to Durban, South Africa and the mission was renamed the South Africa Durban Mission. Reunion was assigned to the Madagascar Antananarivo Mission and the Africa Southeast Area in 1998. In 2019, the Church announced that Reunion would remain in the Africa Southeast Area (to be renamed the Africa South Area in 2020).

Membership Growth

Church Membership: 957 (2018)

There were fewer than one hundred members in 1987. Membership totaled 500 in 1993 and 700 in 1997. By year-end 2000, there were 728 members. Stagnant or very slow membership growth occurred in the 2000s and 2010s as annual membership growth rates generally ranged from 0-3%. Church membership totaled 743 in 2005, 851 in 2010, 917 in 2015, and 957 in 2018.

In 2018, one in 1,006 was a Latter-day Saint.

Congregational Growth

Branches: 4 Groups: 2? (October 2019)

There was one branch by 1980. The St. Denis Reunion District was organized in 1982. Between 1985 and 1992, three additional branches were organized in St. Pierre, Le Port, and St. Marie.[7] By 2000, there were five branches (Le Port 1st, Le Port 2nd, St Andre, St Denis, and St Pierre). The number of branches fluctuated between four and five during the 2000s as there were four branches in 2001, five branches in 2004, and four branches in 2008. In early 2011, four branches were functioning in Le Port, St Denis, St Marie, and St Pierre. Later that year, a fifth branch was organized in St Paul. In early 2013, a group was organized in St André.

In 2019, there were four branches: Le Port, St Denis, St Marie, and St Pierre. Two groups may also have functionined at the time in St André and St Paul.

Activity and Retention

In 2004, there were approximately one hundred endowed members.[8] Thirty-seven were enrolled in seminary and institute during the 2009–2010 school year. Most branches appear to have between twenty-five and seventy-five active members. Total active membership is estimated at 200, or 21% of total church membership.

Public Affairs and Finding

Local church leaders have focused on improving awareness of the Church and its image by holding open houses, sending press releases to newspapers, and purchasing newspaper space.[9]

Language Materials

Languages with Latter-day Saint Scripture: French, Tamil, Malagasy, Chinese (traditional and simplified characters).

All Church scriptures and most church materials are available in French, Malagasy, and Chinese (traditional and simplified characters). The Book of Mormon and a limited number of church materials are available in Tamil. There are plans to translate the Doctrine and Covenants and the Pearl of Great Price into Tamil.[10] The Liahona magazine has monthly issues in French and Chinese and four issues a year in Malagasy.

Meetinghouses

There were four meetinghouses in early 2011 and in 2019. Congregations meet in church-built meetinghouses or renovated buildings or rented spaces.

Health and Safety

The spread of tropical diseases by mosquitoes is a concern that in the past has infected sizeable portions of the population.

Humanitarian and Development Work

There had been no major LDS humanitarian or development projects in Reunion as of early 2011.

Opportunities, Challenges, and Prospects

Religious Freedom

Latter-day Saints benefit from full religious freedom to proselyte, worship, and assemble. Foreign full-time missionaries serve regularly on Reunion.

Cultural Issues

Materialism, secularism, and nominal and traditional affiliation with the Catholic Church are the primary cultural barriers confronting Latter-day Saint missionary efforts. These challenges may continue to deepen due to dependence on welfare programs and Reunion's status as a department of France. Receptivity among non-Catholics is low with the exception of some Christian African immigrant groups, such as Malagasies. The Church continues to struggle developing effective proselytism approaches targeting nominal Christians, Hindus, and Muslims, contributing to slow membership growth over the past fifteen years. Deep socioeconomic divides challenge the ability of local leaders and full-time missionaries to successfully integrate members from differing socioeconomic classes into the same congregations. Outreach appears most challenging among Hindus and Muslims, as many have withstood Christian proselytism attempts for generations.

National Outreach

Notwithstanding the widest portion of Reunion Island being approximately 75 kilometers across, most do not reside in a city with a Church congregation. In 2019, 35% of the island population resided in cities with a branch, and 85% of the island population resided in an arrondissement with a congregation. Saint-Benoit is the only arrondissement without an official branch albeit a member group has functioned in in St André. Low receptivity to the Church, limited missionary resources dedicated to the region, isolation from mission headquarters on Madagascar, inadequate numbers of active members and local leaders to open additional congregations, and high receptivity and church growth on Madagascar drawing away the majority of mission resources have all limited national outreach on Reunion today. Greater missionary outreach has occurred in Reunion than on neighboring Mauritius, as Reunion served as the original headquarters of the Mascarene Islands Mission. Expansion of national outreach will depend on local leadership coordinating missionary activity by holding cottage meetings and establishing home groups in the most populous unreached cities of St Benoit, St Joseph, Le Tampon, and St-Giles les Hauts. Performing missionary activity in these five cities would increase the percentage of the population reached by the Church to approximately 75%. Repeated failures during the 2010s to expand outreach into additional cities may dissuade future efforts to organize

member groups or branches in previously unreached locations. There is no internet outreach directed toward Reunion, but the Church operates many French-language websites that can assist in mission outreach and proselytism efforts.

Member Activity and Convert Retention

Low member activity rates in Reunion appear to result from quick-baptism tactics in the late 1980s and early 1990s during the years in which membership growth was most rapid; little success has been achieved at reactivation efforts in recent years. The number of active members does not appear to have varied significantly over the past two decades, as the number of congregations and the number of students enrolled in seminary and institute has remained relatively unchanged. Developing youth-oriented mission outreach, stressing seminary and institute attendance for investigators and less-active members, and involving youth in missionary preparation courses may improve member activity rates over the long run.

Ethnic Issues and Integration

The population is a mixture of African, South Asian, and European populations that have blended over time. Nonnative whites, Malagasy immigrants, and Hindu and Muslim Indians pose the greatest challenge assimilating into congregations populated primarily by those of mixed race due to ties to their ancestral languages and religious practices. Significant integration challenges exist for differing socioeconomic groups into the same congregations.

Language Issues

Church materials are available in the native or second language of approximately 99% of the population. Widespread use of French as a first or second language simplifies mission outreach. Reunion Creole French does not warrant translations of Church materials at present, as it is rarely written, and local schools teach students in standard French. Church materials are available in Tamil and Chinese (traditional and simplified characters) but do not appear to be regularly used in proselytism efforts on Reunion.

Missionary Service

Few local members have served full-time missions and foreign missionaries constitute the majority of missionaries assigned to Reunion. In 2010, approximately one dozen full-time missionaries appeared to be assigned to Reunion. Missionary preparation for Latter-day Saint youth will be required to reduce reliance on foreign missionaries to staff local needs and facilitate greater sustainability of local leadership in the long term.

Leadership

Limiting the number of full-time missionaries assigned to Reunion has contributed to the self-sufficiency of local leadership. Most branches appear to have full branch presidencies comprised of local members. All branches had a local branch president in 2019. A district has operated for nearly four decades notwithstanding low membership growth rates and fewer than 1,000 members on record at present. Increasing the number of members serving full-time missions and decreasing emigration will be required to sustain and expand the local leadership body.

Temple

Reunion is assigned to the Johannesburg South Africa Temple district. Temple trips appear to occur occasionally as a district, but distance and travel costs limit the number of members attending for the first time and the regularity of temple attendance thereafter. Prospects for a future temple closer to Reunion may be forthcoming over the medium or long term in Madagascar where membership and congregational growth may eventually merit the construction of a temple if sustained.

Comparative Growth

Together with the Central African Republic, Namibia, and Mauritius, Reunion experienced some of the slowest membership growth in Africa during the 2000s and 2010s and was one of the only African nations or territories that experienced a decline in the number of congregations during this period. Member activity rates and the percentage of members enrolled in seminary and institute appear to be among the lowest in Africa and is comparable to Western European and Latin American levels. Local leadership is among the most developed among African nations or territories with fewer than 1,000 members. The percentage of Latter-day Saints in the general population is among the highest in southern Africa and the Indian Ocean.

Missionary-minded Christian groups report slow or moderate church growth trends. Seventh-Day Adventists reported fifty or fewer convert baptisms annually and stagnant congregational growth during the 2000s.[11] The number of Adventists in 2018

was unchanged from a decade earlier, albeit a couple new congregations had been organized during this period. Jehovah's Witnesses experience moderate membership growth. Witnesses reported an increase of approximately one thousand active members and the creation of several new congregations during the 2010s. Notwithstanding similar growth trends with Latter-day Saints, other outreach-oriented Christian groups have established congregations in nearly all large cities. Evangelicals appear to have experienced the greatest growth.

Future Prospects

Contrary to the belief of some, Reunion illustrates that a developed local leadership body operating among a predominantly Christian population does not guarantee greater prospects for growth in the The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, as Reunion has experienced some of the slowest membership growth in Africa over the past two decades. Prospects for attaining greater growth in the Church in Reunion will rely on increasing the number of youth converts, emphasizing seminary and institute attendance, augmenting the number of local members serving full-time missions, and developing outreach approaches tailored to the needs of nominal Catholics.

[1] "Reunion Island," Countries and Their Cultures, retrieved 21 March 2011. http://www.everyculture.com/No-Sa/Reunion-Island.html

[2] "Reunion Island," Countries and Their Cultures, retrieved 21 March 2011. http://www.everyculture.com/No-Sa/Reunion-Island.html

[3] "2018 Report on International Religious Freedom: France." U.S. Department of State. 21 June 2019. https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-report-on-international-religious-freedom/france/

[4] "Reunion," Country Profile, 10 June 2010. http://newsroom.lds.org/country/reunion

[5] Workman, Barbara. "Gerard and Annie Giraud-Carrier: Always Beginning," Liahona, Nov. 1995, 14.

[6] "News of the Church," Ensign, Mar. 1989, 74–80.

[7] "Reunion," Country Profile, 10 June 2010. http://newsroom.lds.org/country/reunion

[8] Heaps, Julie Dockstader. "Forging ahead on Reunion Island," LDS Church News, 5 June 2004. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/45649/Forging-ahead-on-Reunion-Island.html

[9] Heaps, Julie Dockstader. "Forging ahead on Reunion Island," LDS Church News, 5 June 2004. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/45649/Forging-ahead-on-Reunion-Island.html

[10] "Approved Scripture Translation Projects." www.churchofjesuschrist.org. 9 October 2017. https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/bc/content/ldsorg/church/news/2017/10/09/15159_000_letter.pdf?lang=eng

[11] "Reunion Conference (1992-Present)," www.adventiststatistics.org, retrieved 18 March 2011. http://www.adventiststatistics.org/view_Summary.asp?FieldID=C10378