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Christianity in Liberia (71)

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(71) CHRISTIANITY IN LIBERIA

Samuel B. Reeves

Religion	Pop 2010	Pct 2010	Pop 2025	Pct 2025	Gr Pct 1970 2025
Christians	1,604,000	40.5%	2,499,000	43.6%	3.0%
Independents	637,000	16.1%	965,000	16.8%	2.8%
African initiated	565,000	14.3%			
Protestants	539,000	13.6%	863,000	15.1%	3.2%
Methodist	148,000	3.7%			
Lutheran	110,000	2.8%			
Pentecostal	107,000	2.7%			
Holiness	38,700	1.0%			
Anglicans	38,100	1.0%			
Adventist	38,000	1.0%			
Nondenominational	25,500	0.6%			
Roman Catholics	311,000	7.9%	550,000	9.6%	3.9%
Pentecostals/Charismatics	605,000	15.3%	920,000	16.1%	2.8%
Evangelicals	319,000	8.1%	535,000	9.3%	3.5%
adherents of traditional African religions	1,647,000	41.6%	2,158,000	37.7%	1.8%
Muslims	635,000	16.0%	940,000	16.4%	2.7%
Baha'is	11,100	0.3%	20,000	0.3%	4.0%
people professing no religion	60,400	1.5%	111,000	1.9%	4.1%
Total population	3,958,000	100.0%	5,728,000	100.0%	2.5%

Source: Centre for the Study of World Christianity (CSGC), Boston, Gordon-Conwell TS

Brief History

Liberia is Africa's oldest independent nation. Different from any other nation in Africa, Liberia was born in the womb of a church. Her declaration of independence was signed and the first sessions of both houses of legislature was held in the Providence Baptist Church on Broad and Center Streets, on July 26th 1847. Unlike most of Africa, Liberia was never colonized. Liberia is bordered on the west by Sierra Leone, north by Guinea, east by the Ivory Coast, and south by the Atlantic Ocean. It is interesting to note that all her neighbours have predominately non-Christian populations.

According to the National Census, Liberia has an estimated population of 3.5 million people. It is made up of 95% natives, 2.3% of American descent, while the remaining 2.7% are other nationals living and working in the country. The country has sixteen major ethnic groups divided into three language families. The Mande make up 47.2% of the population, the Kru 41.3%, and the West Atlantic 7.9%.

According to the 2008 National Census, 85.5% of Liberia's population practises Christianity.¹ Muslims comprise 12.2% of the population, largely coming from the Mandingo and Vai ethnic groups.² The vast majority of Muslims are Malikite Sunni, with sizeable Shia and Ahmadiyya minorities.³ Traditional indigenous religions are practised by 0.5% of the population, while 1.8% subscribe to no religion.⁴

Since its existence, Liberia has been a land of rich cultures and traditions. The culture and tradition of the Liberian people are the connecting link that enables them to maintain their common identity and life.

The Dawn of Christianity in Liberia

The beginning of Christianity in Liberia is joined at the hip with the arrival of freed people of coloured (ex-slaves) from the Carolinas, Georgia and Virginia in the United States to Liberia. Following their emancipation, the American Colonization Society (ACS) was established to assist in their voluntary repositioning to the West Coast of Africa. The majority of them were Christians who looked forward to making their new home a place influenced by Christianity. Unfortunately, most of them remained on the coast. In the 1820s, the Baptist Church, and the Methodist and Protestant Missionary Societies were organized on board the ship *Elizabeth*, which brought the first settlers to Liberia.

The Growth of Christianity in Liberia

With regard to the spreading of the gospel throughout the nation, the Christians who brought it to Liberia were very slow in reaching the interior and proclaiming Jesus to the local population. For a very long time these pioneer missionaries restricted themselves to the coast, and remained socially, politically, religiously and culturally isolated from the rest of the country and its people.

Liberia does however have an undisputed Christian heritage. Because of this, before Independence, the capital city of Liberia was first called 'Christopolis', meaning the 'City of Christ'. The name was later changed to Monrovia in honour of America's fifth president, James Monroe who, it is said, significantly contributed to the formation of the American Colonization Society which was responsible for the repatriation of emancipated slaves to Africa. In appreciation of his generosity, some 'unspiritually-minded' settler leaders changed the name of the capital city. Unlike other countries in Africa, Liberia celebrates a national holiday called 'Fast and Prayer Day', which is set aside to mobilize national prayers for the spiritual cleansing and healing of the nation (2 Chr. 7:14). This national day was born out of a political crisis between Liberia and the British colonial parents of Sierra Leone in the mid-1800s out of which Liberia, along with its political leadership, was delivered only by the power of prayer. Since then, this National Day of Fast and Prayer has been annually observed. The contents of the national anthem, the national flag, the pledge of allegiance, and the first constitution of Liberia (1847-1985) all point to the fact that Liberia's forefathers had assumed Liberia to be a Christian nation.

The Christian denominations in Liberia include the Lutheran, Baptist, Episcopal, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, United Methodist, African Methodist Episcopal (AME) and AME Zion denominations, and a variety of Pentecostal churches. Some of the Pentecostal movements are affiliated with churches outside

¹ "International Religious Freedom Report 2010: Liberia". *United States Department of State*. November 17, 2010. Retrieved July 22, 2011.

² *Ibid.*

³ The World's Muslims: Unity and Diversity. *Pew Forum on Religious & Public life*. August 9, 2012. Retrieved March 31, 2014.

⁴ International Religious Freedom Report 2010: Liberia. *United States Department of State*. November 17, 2010. Retrieved July 22, 2011.

the country, while others are independent. There are also members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) and Seventh Day Adventists. Christians live throughout the country.

In the Liberian church setting, people use the term *kwi* to imply a style of worship of a Christian church that is marked by reserve and decorum.⁵ This is changing rapidly throughout the country. *Kwi* is a Liberian term used to connote westernization.⁶ Services in churches considered to be non-*kwi* have more outward spiritualist expression, with dancing and even street processions in colourful costumes as key elements. Non-*kwi* churches also have self-proclaimed prophets who interpret dreams and visions, and prioritize a direct experience of the Holy Spirit. Liberia's educated elite have historically regarded the apostolic churches as churches of the uneducated and thus non-*kwi*.⁷

Currently, the church, with functioning and multiplying congregations is reproducing itself in a cross-cultural society. It is in the vanguard of spearheading indigenous missions throughout the country.

One would further expect that all of Liberia's people groups would by now be adequately evangelized and made disciples of Christ, but there are still unreached people groups in parts of the country. There are still challenges in mission endeavours and some of the country's people groups remain vulnerable to the rapidly and silently invading forces of Islam and other religious groups, which are scrambling for a place in Liberia. There is a need for a reliable national research statistic on the church in Liberia to help determine the extent of the harvest field and harvest force in the country. The church must put aside her denominational labels and religious restrictions, and combine its effort, expertise and resources to move this force and implement its mission. This will aid the acceleration of the gospel and mission opportunities throughout the length and breath of the nation.

Some Current Challenges

Today, the church has numerous challenges to deal with emerging from complicated, contradictory and unstable relationship between religion, law and human rights, including the country's turbulent history of civil, ethnic tensions, widespread impunity and corruption. These makes it difficult for the Church's prophetic voice to have positive impact on an ongoing efforts towards peace building and reconstruction . There's a need for God-fearing, honest, credible and accountable leaders in both the church and the larger society that will uphold the rule of law and restore the lost image of the nation. The church must continue to speak up and be a shining example against the vice of rampant corruption that continues to invade every sector of Liberian society due to the high rate of poverty and joblessness. The church must engage in a holistic gospel – meeting the whole needs of the whole person and the high illiteracy rate with a proper educational system. There is a need for sound theological education that will train and equip godly men and women for evangelism and promoting the propagation of biblical Christianity in the nation.

More than at any other time in the history of the church in Liberia, she has the most educated clergy, so she must invest in research in mission in order to have a genuine picture of the state of the church. The church must allow, teach, promote and strengthen partnership and networking among the churches and para-church organizations for mission mobilization.

A large number of foreign missionary groups work amenably and freely throughout the country. The constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the government generally respects this right in practice. Notwithstanding frequent interaction among religious groups, some tensions remain. Some societal abuses or discrimination based on religious belief or practice occur.

⁵ Liberia Country Study, "The Christianity of Indigenous Africans", GlobalSecurity.org

⁶ Culture of Liberia", EveryCulture.com

⁷ Liberia Country Study, "The Christianity of Indigenous Africans", GlobalSecurity.org

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