

History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Kenya



Faith in Jesus Christ, patience and service characterise the history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Kenya.

A small group of Church members, consisting primarily of expatriates, worshipped together in members' homes in Kenya in the 1960s, operating as an official branch from 1967 to 1970. During this period, Kenyans living abroad also learned about the Church, and a few were baptised.

Church President Spencer W. Kimball received a revelation in June 1978 that extended the blessings of the priesthood and the temple to all worthy members, regardless of race. This opened the door to the growth of the Church in Africa. In 1979, Elizaphan Osaka; his wife, Ebisiba; and their two oldest children, Margaret and Jairo, were the first Kenyans to be baptised in their country. A year later, the first missionaries to serve in Kenya, Farrell and Blanche McGhie, arrived in Nairobi and began the long process of registering the Church with the Kenyan government. Without registration, the Church could not proselytise or own property. Nevertheless, membership continued to grow by word of mouth, and the first district was created in 1981 with branches in Nairobi and Kiboko.

Brothers Nickson and Benson Kasue were baptised in a small gathering in Nairobi in February 1985. Their older brother, Julius, was baptised on Feb. 4, 1986. Church leaders authorised Julius to start a Sunday School and administer the sacrament in his father's home in Chyulu Hills.

Church members in the United States and Canada fasted on Jan. 27 and Nov. 24, 1985, and donated the cost of meals skipped, totaling over \$10 million, to victims of a devastating famine in Africa. The Ngorika Water System was built for \$300,000 in partnership with local Kenyans, who performed much of the labor, although no Church members lived in the region at the time. The system supplied drinking water for 1,100 dwellings in 15 villages in central Kenya.

By the end of 1987, 182 native Kenyans had joined the Church, including Joseph W. and Gladys Sitati and their children. Leaders recognised the Church's tenuous legal status in Kenya and were concerned that continued activity jeopardised official recognition. As a result, in July 1989, they stopped all missionary lessons, suspended baptisms and withdrew all foreign missionaries. Joseph Sitati was named presiding elder for the country.

In addition to the Church's formal applications, several members lobbied government leaders in support of registration. Members in Kenya, organised by Sitati, fasted together for the Church to be successfully registered.

Eventually, these efforts led to a meeting with Kenyan President Daniel Arap Moi on Feb. 5, 1991. Joseph Sitati and Jim Dott, an attorney representing the Church, presented another formal petition for registration. President Moi received it positively and, on Feb. 21, 1991, the Church was officially registered.

The Kenya Nairobi Mission was organised on July 1, 1991, covering Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda and later Ethiopia. Members primarily worshipped in Nairobi and Chyulu, speaking English, Kiswahili and Kikamba. In October, Elder James E. Faust of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles visited Nairobi and dedicated Kenya for the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Faust prayed for the elimination of hate, for mutual respect among the people of Kenya and that Church members would have access to a temple.

By 1992, farms in the Chyulu region were under great stress from ongoing drought. Famine was imminent. The Church responded with food deliveries. It also began purchasing plots in the region where families

from the community planted drought-resistant crops. The Church dug wells, provided storage tanks and water lines and provided instruction on farming best practices. In October 1992, local members planted maize in the dry ground, despite the drought. They held a special fast for rain, and less than one week after planting, rain fell in an area that had seen no rainfall for almost two years. “The crops grew, and so did the faith of the people.” The Church also provided food and other supplies for refugees congregated in Kenya near the Somali border.

The first permanent Church-built chapel in East Africa was completed in 1994 in the Langata area of Nairobi. A stake center in the Buruburu area was completed a short time later.

In January 1996, the Kenyan government, acting on unfounded rumors and criticism, expelled all young, non-Kenyan Latter-day Saint missionaries from the country. Senior missionaries were allowed to stay and continue serving along with young Kenyan natives. Leaders accelerated efforts to prepare local youth to serve and teach. By 1998, the government relaxed restrictions and began allowing a few young non-Kenyans to serve in the country.

Church President Gordon B. Hinckley visited Kenya in February 1998. He taught members that righteous living would bring prosperity and a temple to Kenya. “There isn’t the slightest doubt in my mind,” Hinckley said, “that the time will come if you will walk in faith and patience, that a temple will be built in this land to serve this people.”

The Church grew steadily in the following decade. A full translation of the Book of Mormon to Swahili (Kiswahili) was published in 2000. The first stake (similar to a diocese) in East Africa was organized in Nairobi on Sept. 9, 2001, with more than 1,700

members. The Church continued building chapels to accommodate the growth, and in July 2005 the Kenya Nairobi Mission was divided.

Kenyan members regularly traveled long distances to temples in Johannesburg, London and Accra to make sacred covenants with the Lord and be sealed as families for eternity. These trips required great personal sacrifice, and many were assisted by the Church’s Temple Patron Fund.

Today over 22,000 members of the Church worship in 74 congregations across Kenya. Latter-day Saints strive to follow the teachings and example of Jesus Christ to relieve suffering and serve their neighbors. In recent years, members of the Church, working with partner organisations, have supplied thousands of tons of food and tens of millions of dollars to feed refugees and other impoverished people. In Kenya, the Church continues to cooperatively sponsor and fund programs such as vaccination campaigns, clean water projects, hygiene and sanitation efforts and job training. In 2023, work in Kenya included projects supporting entrepreneurship for women, enhancing the quality of maternal and newborn care and improving food security and nutrition. These services are offered without regard to recipients’ faith or church membership.

In December 2024, the Church facilitated a “Giving Machine” in Nairobi, engaging Kenyans of all faiths and backgrounds to relieve the suffering of the less fortunate.

The Nairobi Kenya Temple will be the first temple in the country, continuing the Church’s long history of building these sacred structures that allow members to make covenants with the Lord Jesus Christ.

