

### Introduction

**A**live with possibility – three words that describe a nation of exhilarating energy, unlimited optimism and a ‘can-do’ attitude. The lively, beautiful and proud nation of South Africa has beaten the odds of an oppressive past and embraced a future of diversity, possibility and hope. As the superpower of and the most developed country on the African continent the rainbow nation is an influential and economically stable bulwark in Africa.



### History

The history of South Africa can be traced back at least 2,500 years when Bantu people migrated to South Africa from the Niger River delta and lived alongside the Bushmen.

The Portuguese were the first to arrive at the Cape of Good Hope, a rocky headland on South Africa’s most southern coastline, but it was the Dutch, led by Jan Van Riebeeck, a member of the Dutch East India Company, who decided to colonise the area in 1652. He set up a supply depot, which expanded into settlements. The expansion of the settlements required more land forcing the Xhosa people (of Bantu origin) further north. Conflicting land and livestock interests led to a series of wars, called the Cape Frontier Wars, between the Xhosa people and the settlers.

Slaves were brought on ships from Indonesia, Madagascar and India to help with the labour shortages, giving rise to a predominantly Muslim group of people called the Cape Malays. Inter-marriage between the slaves and European settlers created a population known as the Cape Coloureds.

South Africa’s strategic position on the spice route drew the British who gained control of the Cape of Good Hope in 1797 after the fourth Anglo-Dutch War. By 1805 the Cape was a colony of Britain. When diamonds and gold were discovered in South Africa’s interior in 1867 and 1886, immigration to the north was encouraged, causing

conflict between Europeans and the indigenous people, and the British and the Boers (Dutch and Afrikaans farmers). The Boers resisted British encroachment on what they considered to be their land. This led to the First (1880 – 1881) and Second Boer War (1899 – 1902) with the British eventually declaring victory.

In May 1910 the Union of South Africa, a dominion of Britain, was created. In the elections of 1948 the National Party (NP), who saw white people as superior to the indigenous people, was elected to power. The ensuing years saw the implementation of severe segregation laws that later became known as apartheid. White people enjoyed a high standard of living while discrimination on the basis of skin colour disadvantaged everyone else.

In protest to the government’s harsh oppression, resistance movements emerged within South Africa, with the African National Congress (ANC) playing a prominent role in the resistance. The international community condemned apartheid and applied sanctions on the country.

In 1990 the ruling NP lifted the ban on the ANC and other left-wing organisations. Nelson Mandela, a prominent anti-apartheid activist who had been imprisoned for 27 years, was released. Four years later South Africa’s first multi-racial elections were held. The ANC won with an overwhelming majority.

Today South Africa is a democratic country with a strong economy and is undergoing major improvements both socially and racially. While the transition from apartheid to democracy has been relatively smooth the nation is still grappling with its post-apartheid identity and the effects of poverty and HIV.

### Current challenges

- ▶ A severe epidemic is sweeping across South Africa with over 5.5 million people infected with HIV (that’s about one in seven people), 27.9 per cent of mothers are HIV positive, around 1.1 million children (under the age of 17) are orphaned by the virus and 1,000 people die daily from Aids. The country has the fifth highest prevalence of HIV in the world and, whilst treatment for the disease and antiretroviral drugs have only recently been made available, many misconceptions and misinformation about the virus and ‘Aids denialism’ exist. Life expectancy is 48 years of age (compared to

78 years in the UK). HIV and Aids have an enormous – and growing – social and economic impact on the nation.

- ▶ Poverty is one of the major challenges faced by the newly-formed South Africa. Seven per cent of the 46 million population live on less than 54p a day. South Africa has one of the highest unemployment (and economic disparity) rates in the world with between 36 and 42 per cent of the population unemployed.
- ▶ South Africa has the second highest crime rate and the highest incidence of reported rape in the world.

## BMS involvement in South Africa

Dan Pratt is working in Johannesburg with the South African Baptist Convention and is developing and teaching a youth ministry course. BMS also supports five national workers who lecture in the national seminary in Soweto.

## Background Information

### The land

Situated on the southern tip of Africa below the Tropic of Capricorn, South Africa (472,000 sq miles) has a coastline stretching over 2,500 km and across two oceans – the Atlantic and Indian. The north of the country is bordered by Namibia, Botswana, Zimbabwe and Mozambique.

The narrow coastal zone is low-lying and gives rise to a mountainous escarpment that separates the coast from the high inland plateau. South Africa is one of the most geographically varied countries on the African continent, with the landscape ranging from rolling, fertile plains and open savannah, to deserts and mountain peaks.

There are over 46 million people living in South Africa. However, this figure is not culturally or linguistically homogenous as the country has 11 official languages, reflecting a variety of tribal and cultural groupings. English is the most commonly used language in public life but it is only the fifth most spoken language.

### Religion

About two-thirds of the population (68 per cent) is Christian, mainly Protestant. The next major religious grouping is the traditional and animistic faith (28 per cent) followed by a smaller Muslim (two per cent) and Hindu (1.5 per cent) community. In recent years there has been a strong movement to give all religions equal say.

The African Independent Churches are the largest group of Christian churches with a total membership of more than ten million. A number of charismatic churches have been established in the past few years and they worship alongside Methodist, Anglican, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Congregational and Baptist churches.

The South Africa Baptist Convention has 150 churches with 22,000 members; it is one of the four Baptist Unions/Conventions in South Africa. Together they have 684 churches over 77,000 members.

## Prayer points

- ▶ During the apartheid years when injustice and inequality were deeply ingrained in society, the Church remained silent. Pray for the Church to be vocal and active in addressing the huge social challenges that the nation is facing by becoming involved in initiatives to alleviate suffering and bring the good news of Christ to people who have known pain and poverty for far too long.
- ▶ The social ramifications of the Aids pandemic are taking its toll on every part of South African society. Pray for the government to develop effective strategies to curtail the spread of the infection, provide for those infected and their dependents, and educate the public.
- ▶ Division, hatred, misunderstanding and prejudice have marked South Africa's history. Give thanks that apartheid has ended and pray that as the nation wrestles with its identity, forgiveness and reconciliation will be prevalent, and the country will know the presence and peace of God.

## FURTHER INFORMATION

Keep up-to-date with BMS World Mission's work across the globe by visiting [www.bmsworldmission.org](http://www.bmsworldmission.org)

- ▶ sign up for our weekly e-mail updates and mission personnel prayer letters
- ▶ find out more about the resources we have to offer
- ▶ discover how you can get involved in BMS World Mission

**BMS World Mission**  
PO Box 49 Didcot OX11 8XA  
T: 01235 517700  
E-mail: [mail@bmsworldmission.org](mailto:mail@bmsworldmission.org)

Registered as a charity in England & Wales (number 233782) and in Scotland (number SC037767)

