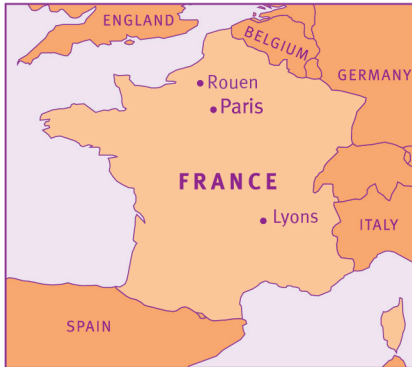


Introduction

The largest country in Western Europe, France is a land of great artistic, intellectual and creative genius. The nation has produced some of the most influential artists, writers and thinkers and also the much-loved comic hero Astérix. Visited by over 70 million visitors each year, France is renowned for its cuisine, culture and beauty. Yet, despite its long history of Roman Catholicism, 72 per cent of French people have never read the Bible.



History

France became part of the Roman territory, Gaul, between 59 and 52 BC. During the fourth and fifth centuries AD, Germanic Franks, the barbarian tribe from which France derives its name, destroyed most of the Roman legacy. When the Franks line died out five centuries later, France became socially and politically split.

The fragmented country was gradually pieced together during the Middle Ages as royal dynasties recovered power. By the 13th century France had entered its 'Golden Age', a time of economic and agricultural prosperity and considerable French influence on Western civilisation. Yet, this was not to last as the ensuing centuries brought with them the Black Death and war – including the ongoing conflict between Catholics and Protestants, the Hundred Years War with England and the Thirty Years War with Spain.

By the 18th century the social and economic conditions in the country had changed, the old order of the divine right of kings was being questioned and in 1789 the Revolution broke out. It was a year of enormous political and social upheaval: the absolute monarchy was replaced with a constitutional monarchy; the Declaration of the Rights of Man was signed; and the First French Republic proclaimed. For the next ten years France was in turmoil, undergoing huge institutional and social reforms.

Over the following two centuries France had five republics, two empires and three monarchies.

The instability caused by World War II brought with it a time of political insecurity. Although the Second World War left France reduced in power and prestige, France still became one of the five most influential powers in the United Nations.

In recent times the French government has undergone significant change, seen most noticeably in parliament's move away from centralisation and their approval of the devolution of wide-ranging powers to France's 22 regions and 96 departments.

France has the fifth largest economy in the world, is one of the most modern countries on earth and is a leader in Europe. It is a nation proud of its rich historical and cultural heritage yet its leaders have increasingly linked the country's future economic success to the development of the European Union, of which it is a founding member. However, even though political leaders have stressed the importance of European integration, the people of France haven't always agreed, as seen in the rejection of the proposed EU constitution in a referendum held in May 2005.

Current challenges

- ▶ One of the biggest challenges faced by the French authorities is preventing intolerance between multicultural groups. Black, Arab and Asian youth are less likely to be employed than White youth, even if they have the same level of education and social background.
- ▶ France has the largest Muslim population (five million) in Western Europe. The threat of religious fanaticism expressed through terrorism remains an issue of concern to the French government.
- ▶ Persecution of religious minorities has long been a problem in France, where religion is often treated with suspicion. The government has introduced laws to limit the activities of religious 'sects'. Under these laws many churches are in danger of being considered 'cults' or 'sects'.

BMS involvement in France

BMS World Mission works with the Fédération des Eglises Evangéliques Baptistes de France (FEEBF). BMS worked in Brittany as far back as the 1800s but, in more recent times, started sending workers to the country in 1988. There are two BMS couples leading local churches: John and Sue Wilson are at Lyons Baptist Church and Reuben and Katie Martin are at Rouen Baptist Church. Philip Halliday, BMS Regional Secretary for Europe, is also based in France following a number of years leading the church in Massy.

Background Information

The land

France is approximately twice the size of Britain with about the same number of people. It is the only country facing both the North Sea and the Mediterranean and shares its borders with seven other countries, including the UK. The French landscape is diverse ranging from coastal plains in the north and west, to mountain ranges, such as the Pyrenees, in the south and south east. The centre of France is made up of vast plains and elevated regions like the Massif Central.

There are over 62 million people living in France (est 2008). Ethnic minorities include people from former French colonies.

Religion

Historically and culturally France is Roman Catholic. Religious freedom came about in 1905 with the separation of Church and State, which meant that no church or religion was recognised by the state. In its outworking this has had repercussions in everyday practice, most noticeably seen in the separation of all areas of public life, such as in sharing of faith or wearing of religious symbols being forbidden in schools.

Although Christianity was introduced as early as the first century and spread rapidly, today it is in decline. The last century saw a drastic fall in the number of Roman Catholic adherents and priests.

Protestant evangelical churches are growing even though they are often divided and numerically small. They are in part filling the void left by the decline of the Roman Catholic Church, but also in response to the needs of communities. The most evangelical community in France is the Roma minority. About a quarter of the Roma people have come to faith in Jesus since the 1960s.

There are approximately 112 Baptist churches in France with a membership of about 6,500 people.

Prayer points

- ▶ France is sometimes referred to as the 'graveyard of missionaries' because of the high number of mission workers leaving the country. Pray for Christians working in the country to be encouraged and strengthened.
- ▶ Of concern is the growing number of cults of which there are approximately 50,000 full-time occult practitioners. Pray for God to break through the spiritual darkness and show his power and love.
- ▶ France is often referred to as a spiritual wasteland, as more than 43 per cent of the population do not believe in the resurrection of Jesus. Pray for revival to turn the hearts of people back to God and break the power of humanism that blinds people to the truth of Christ.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Keep up-to-date with BMS World Mission's work across the globe by visiting 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

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