

Somali Christian Census, 2023

Bureau of Statistics, Somali Bible Society

Dedication

This census is a tribute to the late Bishop Venanzio Francesco Filippini, OFM.

introduction

Formal mission work started in British Somaliland in 1881. However, despite over 140 years since then, there has never been a nationwide census of Somali Christians until now. Counting the number of Somali Christians has been considered too complex due to security and logistical challenges. The absence of official statistics has led to widely varying estimates of the increasing number of Somali Christians. However, “according to Venanzio Francesco Filippini (1890 – 1973), the Roman Catholic Bishop of Mogadishu, there were 40,000 Somali Catholics in southern Somalia by 1940.”⁸¹ The Somali population in Somalia was estimated to be about 1,150,000 in 1940 and 1,200,000 in 1950 by the Italian colonial authority. This means that Somali Catholics in Italian Somaliland made up about 3.5% of the population in 1940.⁸²

According to Operation World, the Somali Church is the 7th fastest growing evangelical church in the world.⁸³ Despite not having any conventional church buildings, the Somali Christian community has shown remarkable resilience in the face of unspeakable atrocities committed by intolerant Muslims. The counting of Somali Christians began on August 22, 2022, and concluded on October 7, 2023. The Bureau of Statistics of the Somali Bible Society conducted this vital census without any loss of life or limb, and we are grateful to the Lord for His protection.

The majority of the professing Somali Christians in southern Somalia are the descendants of the Swedish Lutheran mission converts who became followers of Christ between 1896 and 1935. The second largest group of Somali Christians trace their heritage back to the Roman Catholic mission work, which began officially in Italian Somaliland on 21 January 1904 under the leadership of the Prefecture Apostolic of Benadir.⁸⁴

⁸¹ “Catholic Hierarchy,” Diocese of Mogadiscio, 11 October 2023.

<http://www.catholic-hierarchy.org/diocese/dmgds.html> (accessed 09 December 2023). Cited in Aweis A. Ali, *Understanding the Somali Church*. Nairobi, Kenya: KENPRO Publications, 2021, 89.

<https://www.somalibiblesociety.org/download/understanding-the-somali-church.pdf> (accessed 09 December 2023).

⁸² Aweis A. Ali, *Understanding the Somali Church*. Nairobi, Kenya: KENPRO Publications, 2021, 89.

<https://www.somalibiblesociety.org/download/understanding-the-somali-church.pdf> (accessed 09 December 2023).

⁸³ *Evangelical Growth*, Operation World, 2021. Cited in Aweis A. Ali, *Understanding the Somali Church*. Nairobi, Kenya: KENPRO Publications, 2021, 89.

<https://www.somalibiblesociety.org/download/understanding-the-somali-church.pdf>

⁸⁴ Diocese of Mogadishu: Dioecesis Mogadiscensis, Catholic Hierarchy. 11 October 2023. <https://www.catholic-hierarchy.org/diocese/dmgds.html> (accessed 14 December 2023).

Somalia in the Bible

It is interesting to note that Somalia is likely mentioned in the Bible due to its proximity to Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Yemen. In Saadia Gaon's translation of the Bible in the tenth century, Zeila, a coastal town in Somaliland, is used in place of Havilah.⁸⁵ Similarly, Benjamin Tudela, a well-known Jewish traveler in the twelfth century, believed that the Zeila region was the land of Havilah, which bordered Al-Habash (Abyssinia) on the West.⁸⁶

Havilah (Heb. חַוִּילָה) is mentioned in the Bible five times, both as a personal and place name.⁸⁷ While scholars debate its exact location, northern Somalia is a strong contender given its strategic location and ancient records that identify it as Zeila.

Punt (also spelled as Put or Phut) is often translated as Libya in the Bible. However, some editions of the KJV and NIV mention in their footnotes that Punt is also identified as Somalia. The Puntland region of Somalia is named after Punt, an area that the ancient Egyptians knew as the Land of the gods.⁸⁸

Although it is uncertain where the three wise men (Magi) originated from, it is highly probable that two of their gifts, frankincense and myrrh, were procured from Somalia. Somalia has a rich history of producing frankincense and myrrh, which were also used for worship and embalming by ancient Egyptians to preserve mummies.⁸⁹

The Census

This field-based census systematically recorded the population of Somali Christians residing in Somalia, Somaliland, Djibouti, Ethiopia, and Kenya. The National Assembly of the Somali Bible Society formed a 14-member census committee using their knowledge and experience. This committee then selected 241 Somali census takers, out of which 135 were Christians, and 106 were friendly and peaceful Muslims with Christian family members, relatives, and/or friends. When possible, the census takers met adult Christians face-to-face. However, most Christians were interviewed over the phone using encrypted social media platforms.

The census was conducted based on the profession of faith of individuals. The religion and the number of minor believers were listed based on the report from their Christian parent or parents. The census takers did not interact with any children. Minors under the age of 15 were considered as Christians if they met any of the following criteria:

⁸⁵ Eugene Arnaud, *La Palestine ancienne et moderne*. Berger-Levrault. 1868, 32. *avalite havilah*.

⁸⁶ Elkan, Adler, *Jewish Travelers*. Routledge. 4 April 2014), 61. ISBN 9781134286065. (accessed 16 December 2023).

⁸⁷ Genesis 2:10–11, Genesis 10:7, Genesis 25:18,

⁸⁸ "Puntland profile". *BBC News*. 11 July 2011. (accessed 12 December 2023).

⁸⁹ R. K. Sinha, *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*. Vol. 44 (1983), 593-598. Published By: Indian History Congress.

1. The children reside in an intact household where at least one parent is Christian.
2. The children come from a family that has experienced separation but currently live with a Christian parent.
3. The children are under the care of a Christian guardian and are being raised in a Christian institution.

No one received payment for their involvement in the census. However, a local donor contributed USD 200 (two hundred) to cover essential expenses, such as meals, travel, communication, and internet connection.

Many Christians agreed to have their voices recorded during the census, which made the process easier to manage. However, for those who didn't want to be recorded, their information was taken in writing using encrypted and password-protected electronic devices. Several Somali Christian leaders either provided a written record of the Christians they served or sent a list to the census takers. After verifying the integrity of these leaders, most of the lists were accepted at face value. However, some lists were declined as they did not meet the requirements, and others were accepted only after being thoroughly rewritten to meet the census requirements.

This census had four significant limitations:

1. Firstly, some districts in southern Somalia where there are known local Christians could not be accessed due to the presence of a radical Islamist group that controls these areas. Census takers were even advised against calling these Christians to avoid putting their lives in danger. Additionally, public access to smartphones, tablets, laptops and internet connections is banned in these districts.
2. Secondly, there are Christians who live in small, isolated islands, far away villages and nomadic settlements who do not have access to modern communication. These Christians were not counted as they could not be reached.
3. Thirdly, some Christians preferred to avoid interacting with other Christians for security reasons and did not cooperate with the census takers; they were not counted.
4. Lastly, census takers in southern Somalia faced language barriers in some areas where people spoke different dialects or languages.⁹⁰ This led to confusion and difficulty in accurately recording the number of Christians in those areas.

⁹⁰ The minority languages spoken in Somalia include: Bravanese (Chimwiini or Chimbalazi), Kibajuni, Mushunguli, Tunni, Garre and Jiiddu.

The census takers collected information on the person's faith, Christian background, discipleship training, worship attendance, marital status, interfaith marriages, literacy, languages spoken, and employment. All the collected data was carefully analyzed overtime.

To ensure security, all the electronic equipment used for the census will be wiped clean, making data recovery impossible. Likewise, any paperwork related to the census will be burned at a designated time. However, specific authorized devices in safe foreign countries will retain critical census data.

Important Findings

On average, only a small percentage of ethnic Somali Christians have been baptized, discipled, or attended regular worship services. Regular worship services are defined as weekly or monthly gatherings of local believers.

There are prominent ethnic Somali Roman Catholic families in Djibouti, Somaliland, and Ethiopia. Members of these families have held or still hold senior government positions, such as government ministers, members of parliament, and ambassadors. A recently published book provides a detailed list of these influential Somali Roman Catholics.⁹¹

It is important to note that most Somalia Christians live in the country itself, while the majority of ethnic Somali Christians from Djibouti, Somaliland and Ethiopia reside overseas.⁹² In Kenya, the majority of ethnic Somali Christians are refugees from Somalia, Somaliland and Ethiopia. It is worth noting that about 50% of ethnic Somali Christians in Ethiopia are Ethiopian-born and hail from the Somali Region of Ethiopia. The rest are refugees from Somalia and Somaliland.

⁹¹ Aweis A. Ali, *Understanding the Somali Church*. Nairobi, Kenya: KENPRO Publications, 2021, 43-49.

<https://www.somalibiblesociety.org/download/understanding-the-somali-church.pdf> (accessed 09 December 2023)

⁹² It is worth noting that ethnic Somali Christians, who mostly have Roman Catholic roots and hail from Somaliland, Djibouti, and Ethiopia, are among the most affluent and highly educated populations in Sub-Saharan Africa. This is one of the reasons they can afford to live in the Western world. Despite being, on average, more educated than their Muslim counterparts, Somalia Christians, both Protestant and Roman Catholic, continue to face economic struggles due to the severe persecution they endure.

Somali Clans with the Highest Number of Christians

Daarood

Ogaadeen (mainly Maxamed Subeyr), Majeerteen (mainly Maxamuud Saleebaan) & Dhulbahante (mainly Cali Geri).

Honorable mention: Warsangeli & Mareexaan.

Digil & Mirifle

Xarin (mainly Addimoole), Ayle (mainly Reer Xaajoow) & Geledi (mainly Maama Suubis).

Honorable mention: Eelaay & Laysaan.

Dir

Isaaq (mainly Habar Awal, Habarjeclo & Arab), Gudabiirsi (mainly Aadan Yoonis) & Reer Agoon (mainly Reer Bayle).

Honorable mention: Akiisho & Biyo Maal.

Hawiye

Abgaal (mainly Habar Hintiro), Habargidir (mainly Cayr & Sacad) & Murusade (mainly Habar Cayn).

Honorable mention: Xawaadle & Baadi Cadde.

Jareer (Somali Bantu)

Mushunguli (mainly Mushambare), Shiidle (mainly Garmagalaay) & Reer Shabeelle (mainly Reer Geeddoow).

Honorable mention: Baajuun.

Marginalized Clans

Madhibaan & Gabooye

Somali Clans with the Lowest Number of Christians

Daarood

Carab Saalax, Sawaaqroon & Dashiishle

Digil & Mirifle

Garre, Bahoraat & Geledle

Dir

Ciise, Gaadsan & Fiqi Muxumed

Hawiye

Gaal Jecel, Sheekhaal & Jeele

Jareer (Somali Bantu)

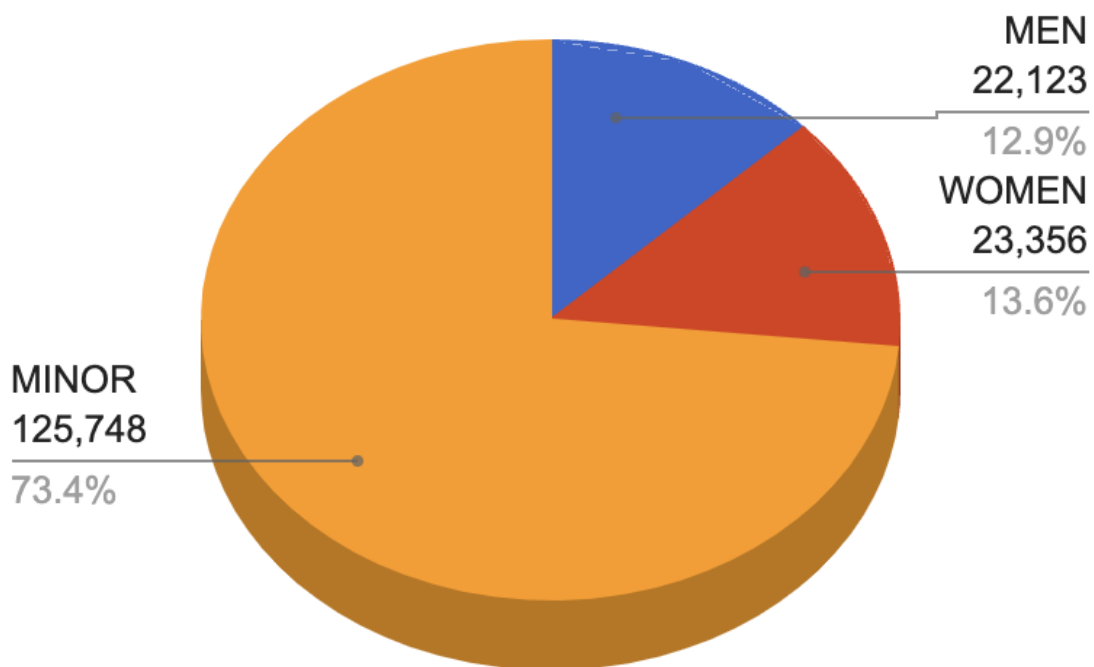
Moorshe, Bandhabow & Kaboole

Marginalized Clans

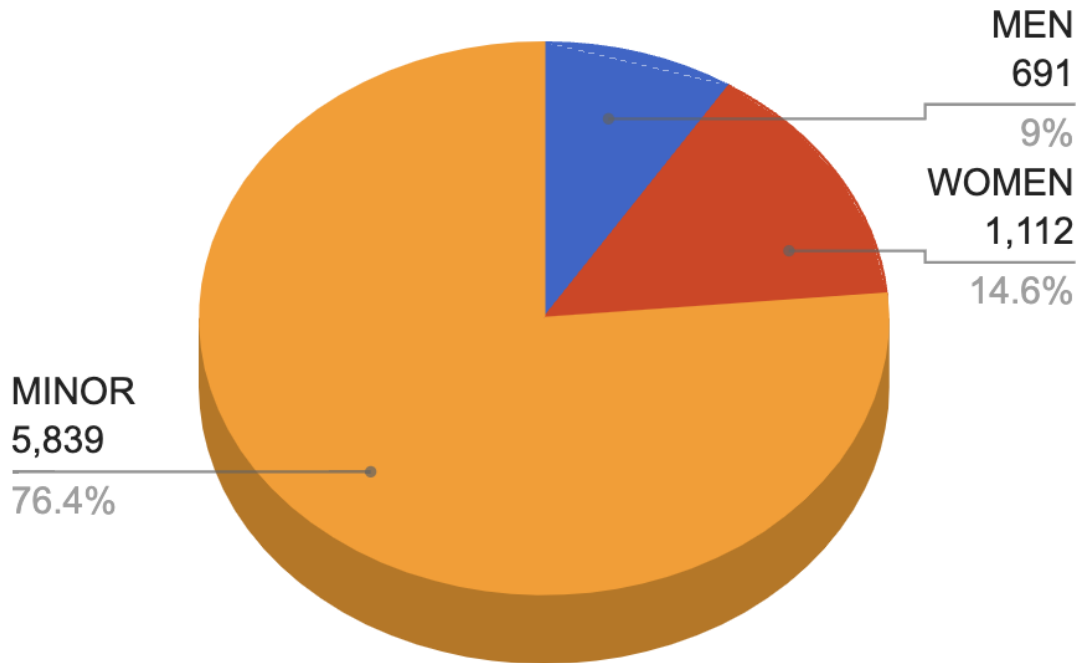
Yibir, Tumaal & Jaaji

Statistics

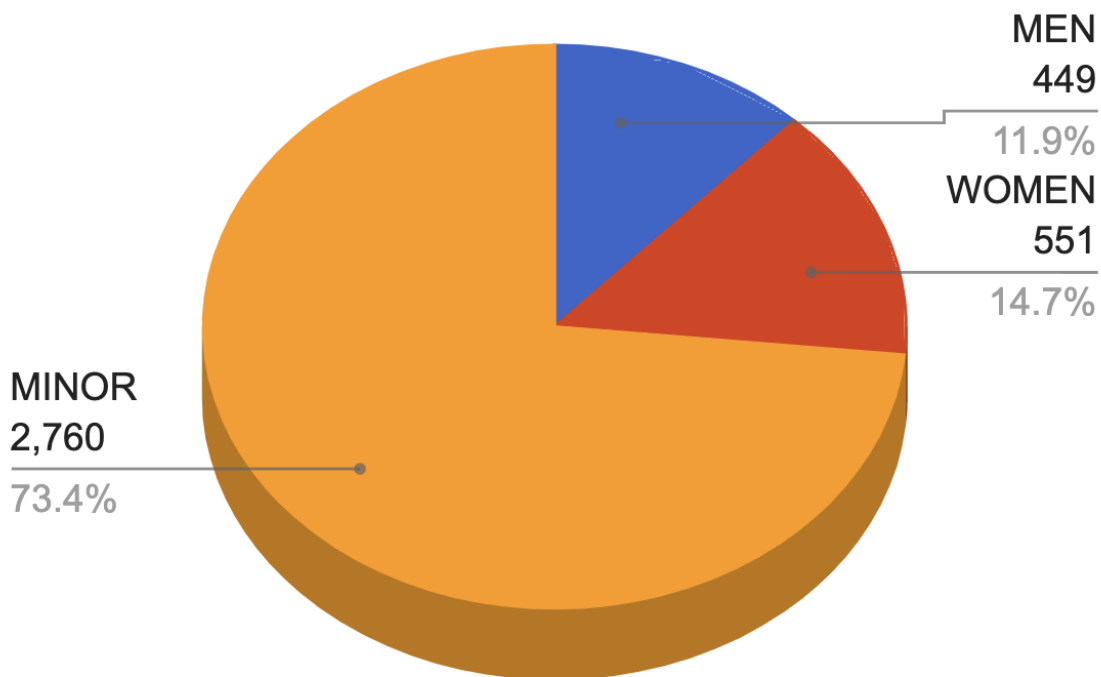
SOMALIA CHRISTIAN POPULATION: 171,227 (2023 CENSUS)



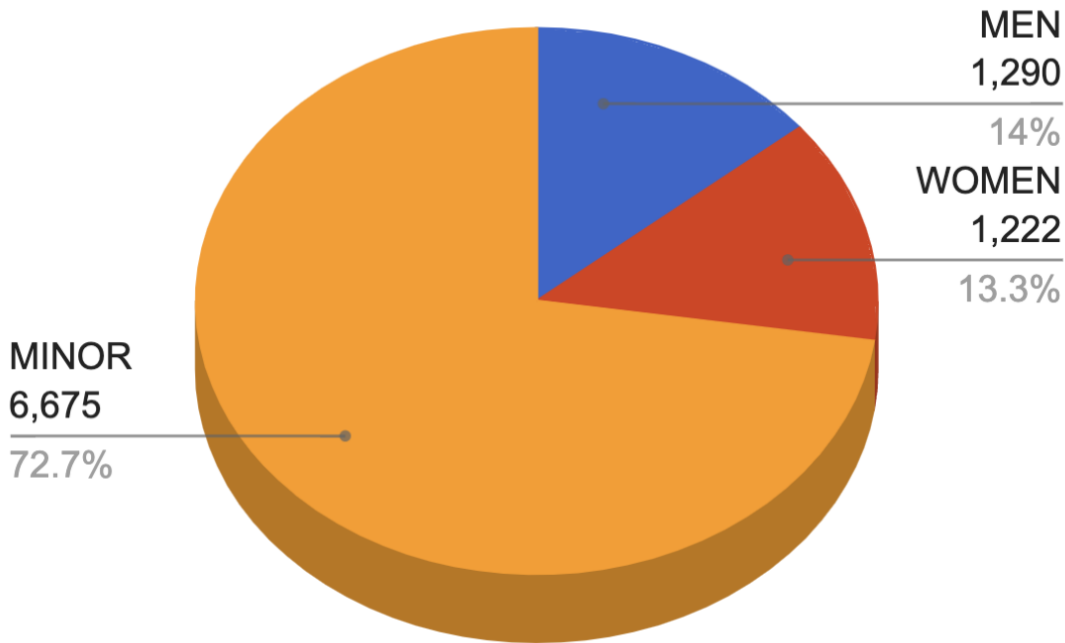
SOMALILAND CHRISTIAN POPULATION: 7,642 (2023 CENSUS)



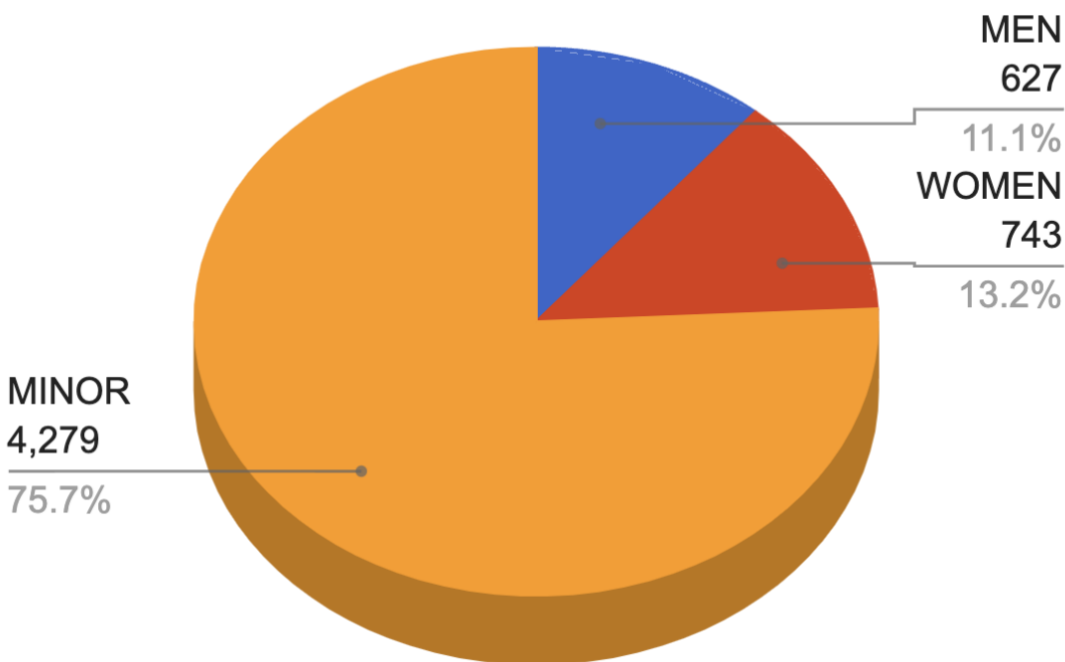
ETHNIC SOMALI DJIBOUTIAN CHRISTIAN POPULATION: 3,760 (2023 CENSUS)



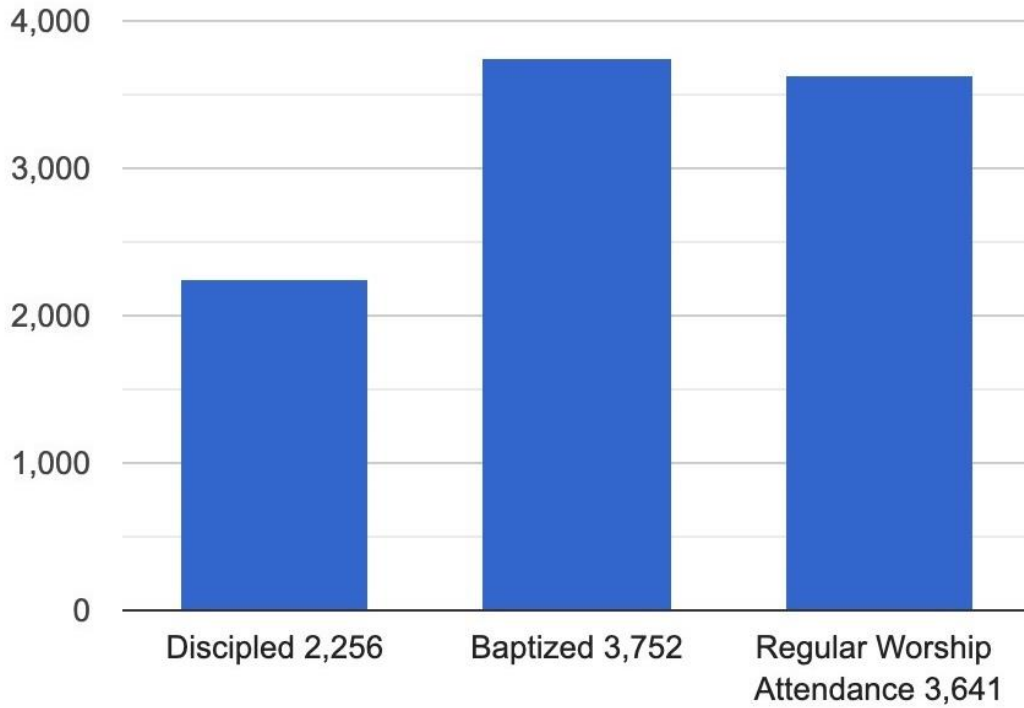
ETHNIC SOMALI CHRISTIAN POPULATION IN ETHIOPIA: 8,917 (2023 CENSUS)



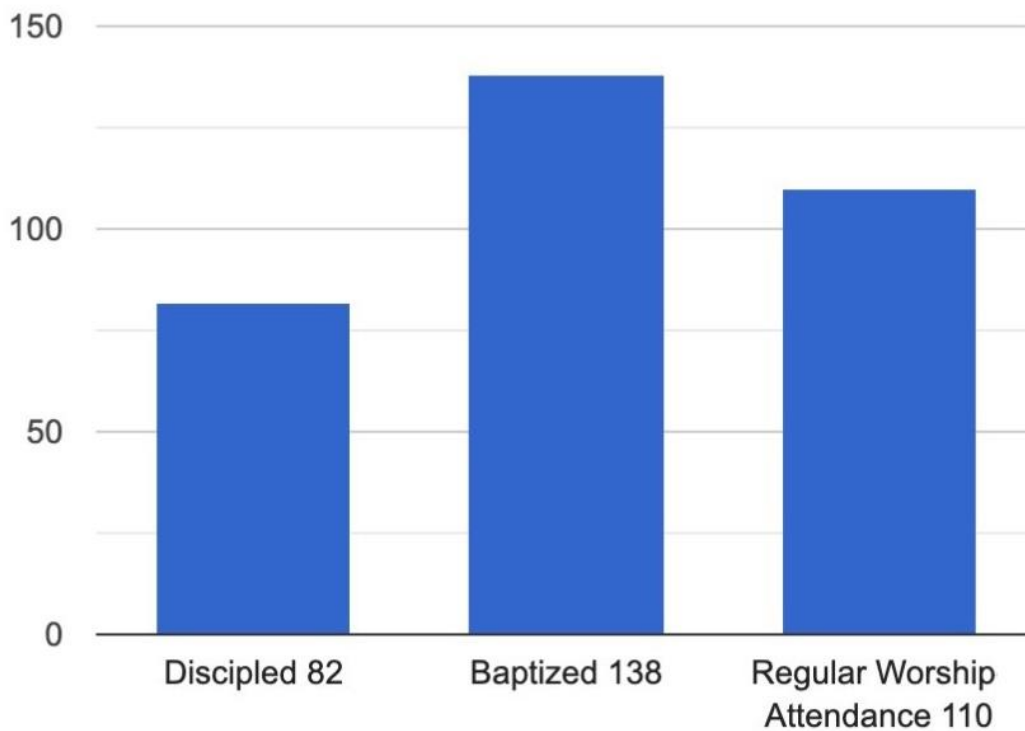
ETHNIC SOMALI CHRISTIAN POPULATION IN KENYA: 5,649 (2023 CENSUS)



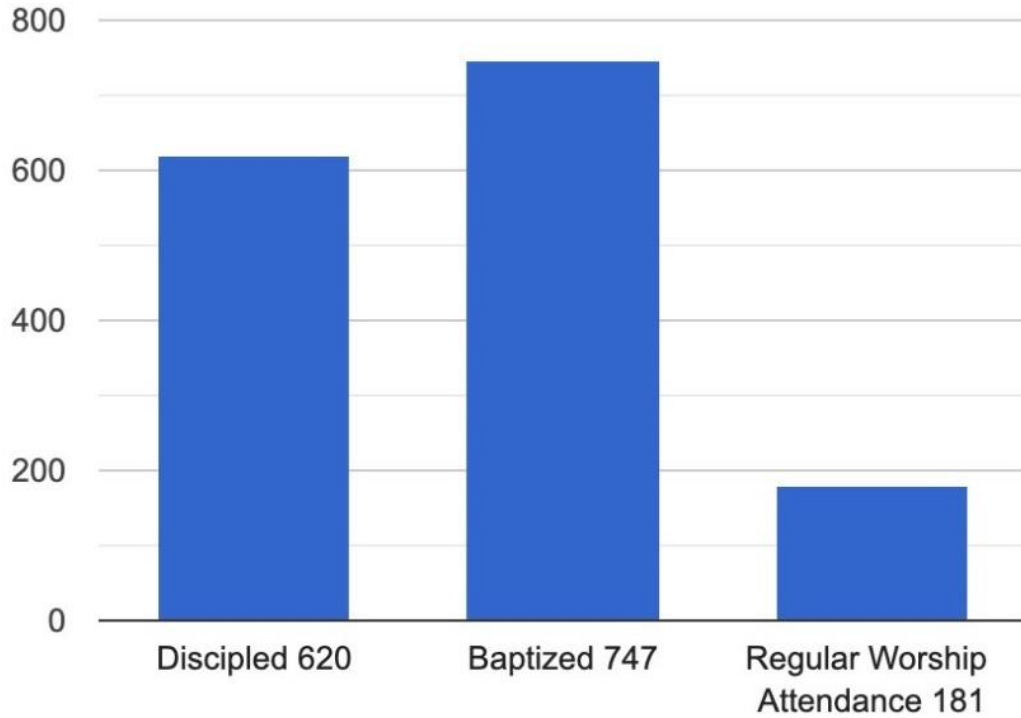
SOMALIA: DISCIPLESHIP, BAPTISM & WORSHIP ATTENDANCE (2023 CENSUS)



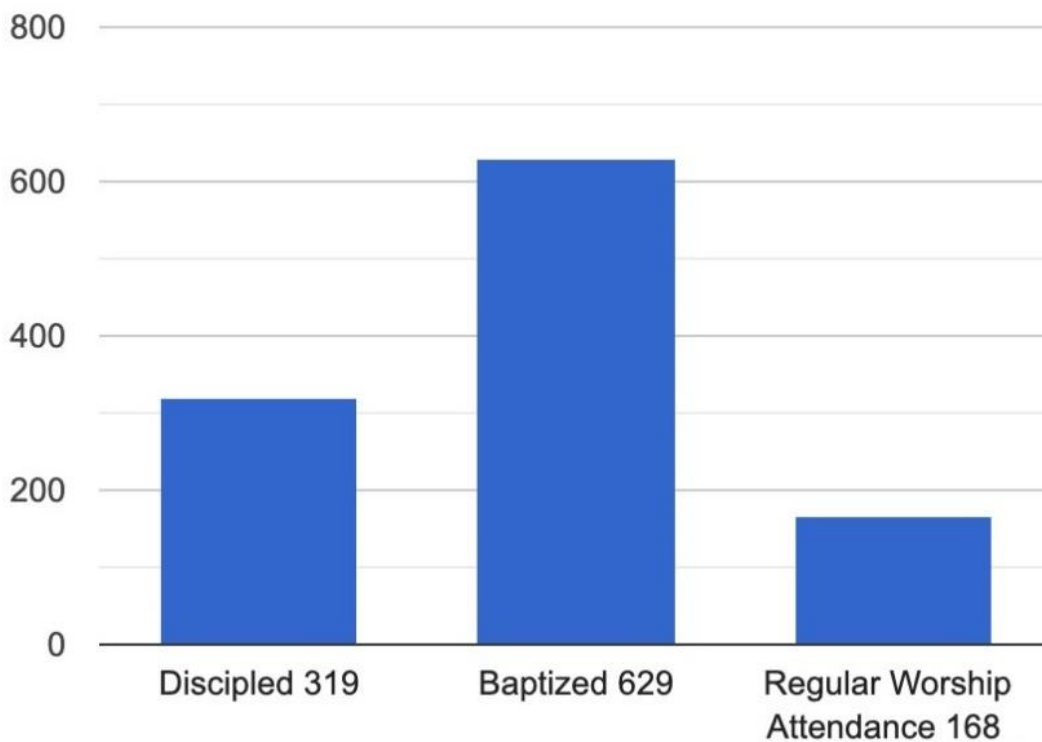
SOMALILAND: DISCIPLESHIP, BAPTISM & WORSHIP ATTENDANCE (2023 CENSUS)



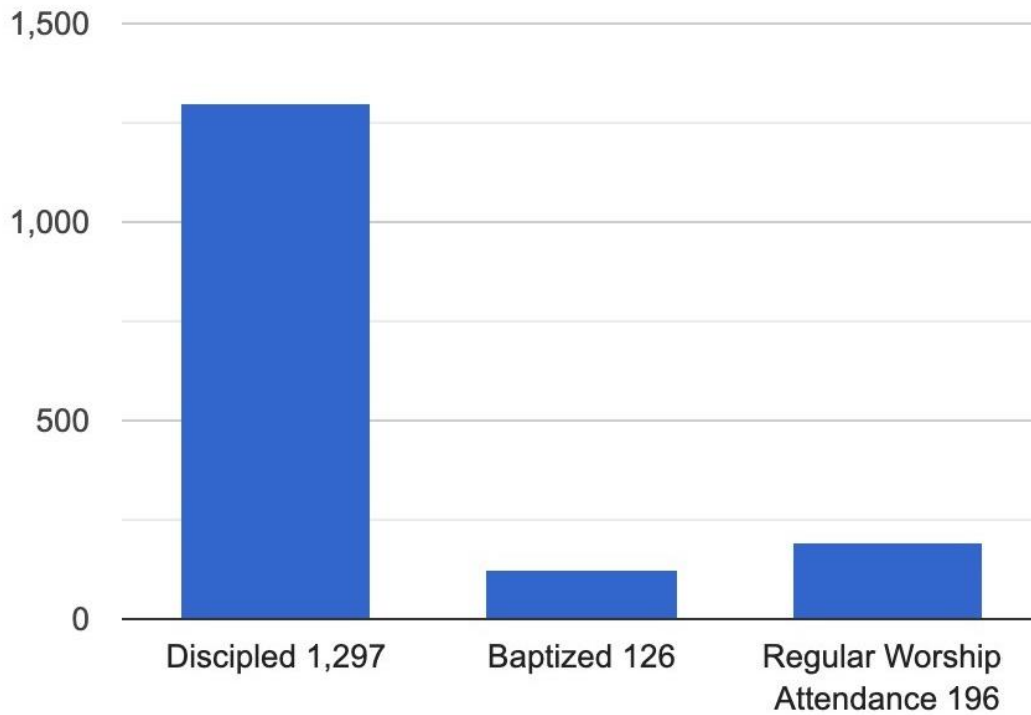
ETHNIC SOMALI DJIBOUTIAN CHRISTIANS: DISCIPLESHIP, BAPTISM & WORSHIP ATTENDANCE (2023 CENSUS)



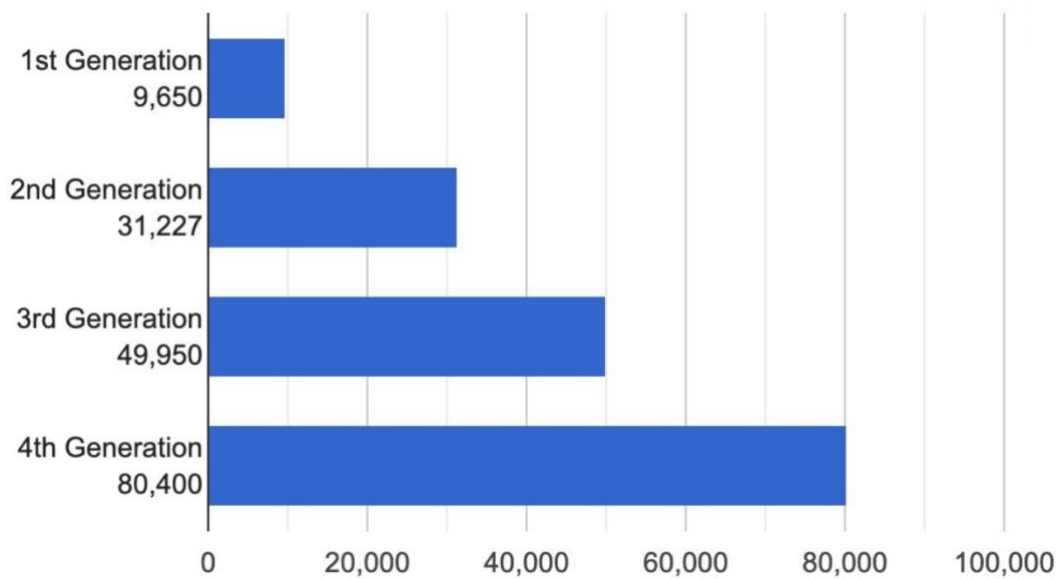
ETHNIC SOMALI CHRISTIANS IN ETHIOPIA: DISCIPLESHIP, BAPTISM & WORSHIP ATTENDANCE (2023 CENSUS)



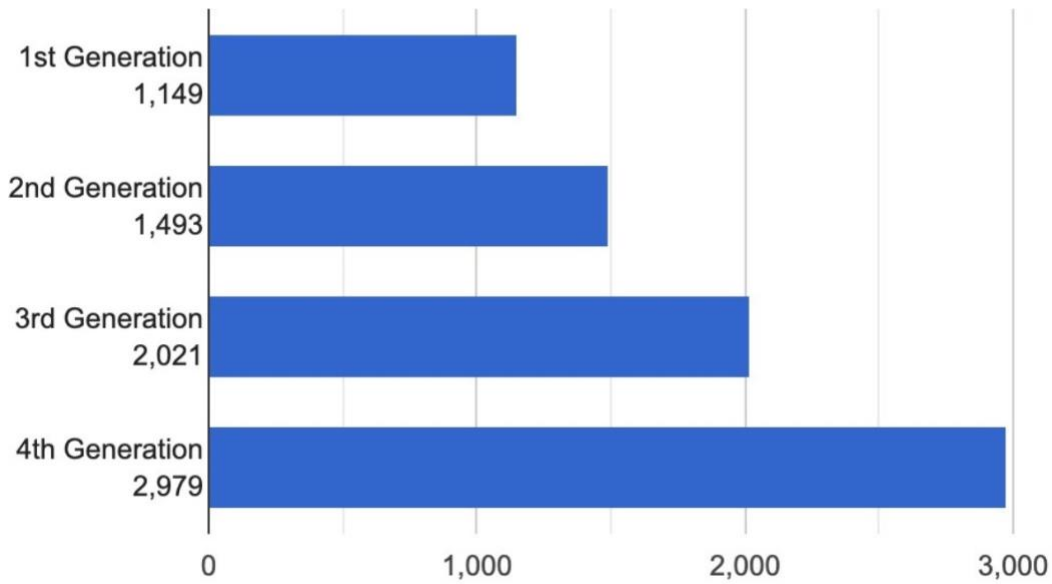
ETHNIC SOMALI CHRISTIANS IN KENYA: DISCIPLESHIP, BAPTISM & WORSHIP ATTENDANCE (2023 CENSUS)



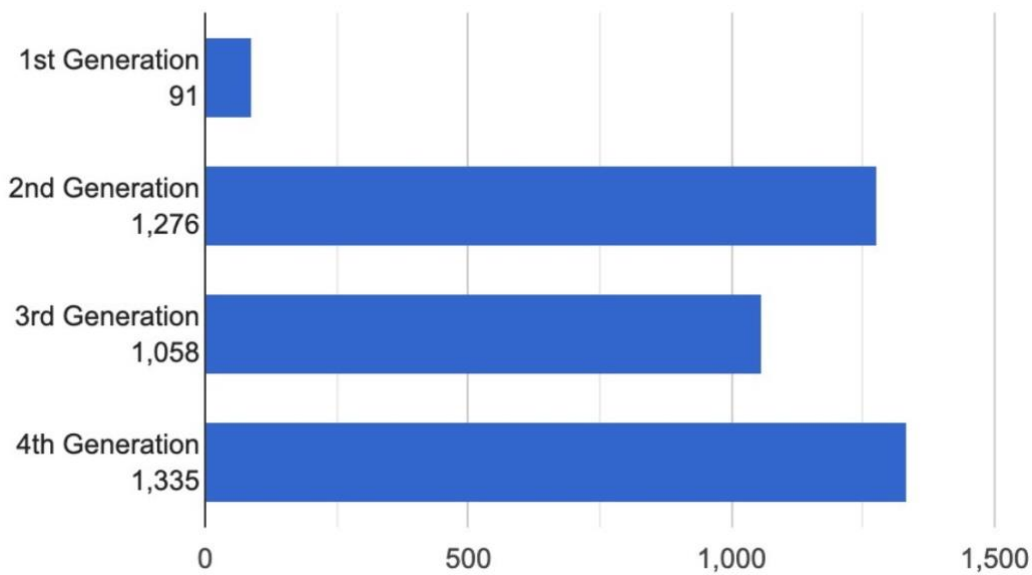
SOMALIA: A CHRISTIAN HERITAGE (2023 CENSUS)



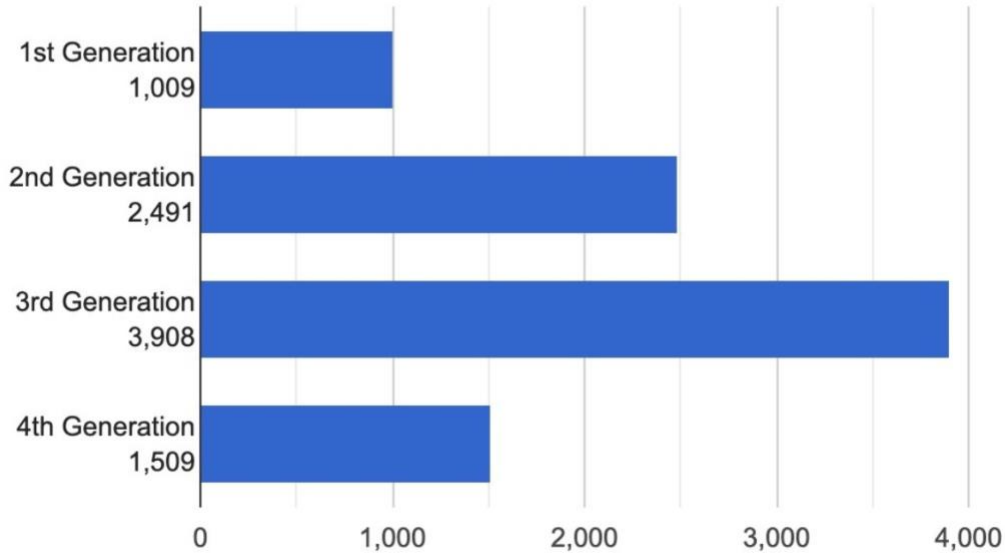
SOMALILAND: A CHRISTIAN HERITAGE (2023 CENSUS)



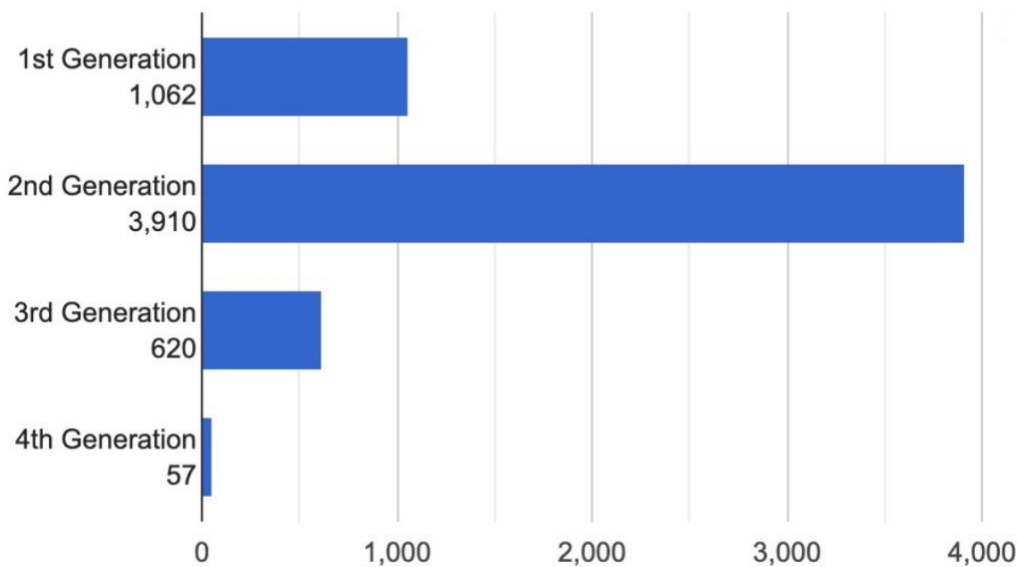
ETHNIC SOMALI DJIBOUTIANS: A CHRISTIAN HERITAGE (2023 CENSUS)



ETHNIC SOMALI CHRISTIANS IN ETHIOPIA: A CHRISTIAN HERITAGE (2023 CENSUS)



ETHNIC SOMALI CHRISTIANS IN KENYA: A CHRISTIAN HERITAGE (2023 CENSUS)



About the Bureau of Statistics

The Somali Bible Society’s Bureau of Statistics is responsible for gathering and analyzing data for the Bible Society and its members, including churches, ministries, and mission organizations. The Bureau is responsible for censuses, statistics, and forecasts. The bureau can be reached at info@somalibiblesociety.org