

World Watch Research

# Rwanda: Background Information

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## Copyright and sources

World Watch Research has divided up the previously named Full Country Dossier into two separate documents:

- Background country information (published annually in summer)
- Persecution dynamics (published annually in January).

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## Map of country



Rwanda: Population (UN estimate for 2024)	Christians	Chr%
14,415,000	13,226,000	91.8

*Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., World Christian Database, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024*

## Recent history

Rwanda is a landlocked country in the Great Lakes region of Africa - one of the most volatile areas on the continent. Approximately 84% percent of the population is Hutu and 14% Tutsi.

Germany arrived in what is currently called Rwanda in 1894 and opted to rule the region via the Tutsi king. Germany lost its colonial territories following defeat in the First World War and Rwanda was subsequently placed under Belgian administration. The Belgians also ruled the country via the Tutsi king. The country declared independence on 1 July 1962 from the Belgian administered UN trusteeship.

On 6 April 1994 a plane carrying Rwandan President Habyarimana and Burundian President Cyprien Ntaryamira - both Hutu - was shot down and the two presidents were killed. In what was called the

'100 days of slaughter', the Rwandan Armed Forces (FAR) and Hutu militia (the Interahamwe) went from home to home killing Tutsi and moderate Hutu politicians. The slaughter continued and on 13 May 1994 the UN Security Council agreed to send in 5,500 troops, mainly from the Organization of African Unity. However, as there was a disagreement as to who should cover the cost, the deployment was delayed. Radical Hutus continued the massacre. On 4 July 1994, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) captured Kigali and the Hutu government fled to Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo). The international community was ashamed of its inability to save thousands of lives. In 2013, US President Clinton said that "if the USA had intervened in Rwanda, roughly 300,000 lives could have been saved." The then UN Secretary-General Kofi Anan also joined President Clinton in extending an apology to the Rwandan parliament.

The 1994 Rwandan genocide is considered to be one of the darkest moments in the second half of the 20th century. It claimed the lives of more than 800,000 people. This dark history has created an environment of background fear and the government is using the memory of those atrocities to its advantage. Paul Kagame is still leading the country since the end of the genocide in 1994.

Some clergy from the Roman Catholic church were also implicated in the genocide. RefWorld [summarized](#) the complicated issue that divided the Catholic church in an article dated 6 March 2008:

- "Although there are reports of priests and nuns offering protection and standing up to Hutu 'death squads' (ibid.; IWPR 1 Dec. 2006; RNS 5 Jan. 2008), there are also accounts of certain members of the clergy being complicit in the genocide (ibid.; The New York Times 12 May 2002; ibid. 10 June 2001; IWPR 1 Dec. 2006; BBC 20 Sept. 2004). There are also allegations that some senior clergy members were closely connected to those who planned the genocide or remained silent during the killings (The New York Times 10 June 2001; ibid. 12 May 2002; see also RNS 5 Jan. 2008; IWPR 1 Dec. 2006). A 5 January 2008 news article by the Washington-based Religion News Service (RNS) states that in Rwanda, 'stories circulated ... of a hierarchy [in the Roman Catholic Church] that condoned ethnic hatred from the pulpit, and of top church leaders who held positions of prominence in the Hutu government that orchestrated the genocide' (RNS 5 Jan. 2008)."

The 2020 COVID-19 crisis was used by many dictators to curtail basic human rights and Paul Kagame used the opportunity to effectively decimate opposition in the country. Some Christian groups, who had already been placed under heavy pressure from the government, were told to permanently shut down all their places of worship.

As reported by [BBC News on 18 July 2024](#), Paul Kagame once again won the July 2024 Rwandan presidential election with an overwhelming majority, securing more than 99% of the vote. This victory surpasses his previous records, where he won with 98.63% in 2017. Voter turnout was exceptionally high at 98%. Critics argue that such a high margin of victory indicates the restricted political space in Rwanda, as several prominent opposition candidates were barred from contesting.

## Political and legal landscape

Rwanda is a unitary republic state. It has a bicameral national assembly consisting of a Senate with 26 seats and a Chamber of Deputies with 53 seats. The president is head of the state and is elected by universal suffrage. In 1991, Rwanda adopted a more democratic Constitution and in May 2003, the

country presented a new draft Constitution for the referendum, which was accepted and came into effect on 4 June 2003. It was amended several times, most recently in 2013.

Rwanda has been accused by international observers of poor governance, lack of rule of law, and the absence of democracy. Chatham House, writing in 2014, stated: “[Over the past two decades](#) the ruling party has presided over a period of stabilization, reconstruction, and development but has also been the subject of controversy and criticism regarding governance, human rights, and the reach of the state.” On the positive side, the government has tried to eliminate corruption by introducing reforms in different sectors; however, the independence of the judiciary of the country is still questionable.

In September 2018, the government enacted a new law determining the organization and functioning of religious groups and non-governmental organizations associated with religious groups. According to the US State Department ([IRFR 2023 Rwanda](#)):

- The law stipulates preachers with supervisory responsibilities must possess a degree in religious studies from an institution of higher learning or any other degree with a valid certificate in religious studies issued by a recognized institution.

According to [Freedom in the World 2024 Rwanda](#), the country scored 23 out of 100 and is rated as "Not Free." The report highlights:

- **Political rights:** Rwanda scored 8 out of 40 in this category. The report highlights the lack of free and fair elections, with President Paul Kagame and the ruling Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) maintaining power through repressive measures, including surveillance, intimidation, and the suppression of political opposition. The electoral process is heavily controlled by the government, making it virtually impossible for opposition parties to operate freely.
- **Civil liberties:** Rwanda scored 15 out of 60 in civil liberties. The report notes that freedom of expression is severely restricted, with journalists, commentators, and opposition figures facing arrest, torture, or enforced disappearances. The government also tightly controls religious institutions, requiring them to meet stringent regulations, and academic freedom is limited by the state's enforcement of official narratives.
- **Freedom of expression and belief:** The report emphasizes the lack of free media, with heavy censorship and self-censorship among Rwandan journalists. The government imposes strict controls on religious practices and monitors academic discourse, stifling any critical discussion of sensitive topics, such as the RPF's actions during the civil war and genocide.
- **Associational and organizational rights:** Rwanda scored poorly in this area, with the government exerting significant control over civil society organizations. NGOs face onerous registration and reporting requirements, and those focusing on governance and human rights are particularly scrutinized. Trade unions and labor organizations are also restricted, with limited freedom to engage in collective bargaining or strikes.

Furthermore, as reported by [Human Rights Watch 2024](#) (Rwanda country chapter), Rwanda's 2024 election saw President Paul Kagame secure a significant victory. However, Human Rights Watch added that this outcome should be understood within the context of a highly restricted political environment. Commentators, journalists, and opposition activists who criticized the government continued to face severe reprisals, including abusive prosecutions, enforced disappearances, and even unexplained

deaths. For instance, journalist John Williams Ntwali died in suspicious circumstances, which were inadequately investigated by authorities.

Additionally, Rwanda's involvement in the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo has drawn further international condemnation. The Rwandan army's support for the M23 armed group has been linked to war crimes and exacerbation of a humanitarian crisis in the region. Despite these issues, Rwanda remains one of Africa's fastest-growing economies, although high youth unemployment persists. The international community continues to criticize Rwanda's human rights record, while Kagame's government maintains a firm grip on power, stifling any substantial opposition. The tension between the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Rwanda escalated to the point where the DRC accused Rwanda of interfering with the country's Global Positioning System (GPS), posing a "significant risk" to both commercial and humanitarian flights, as reported by [BBC News \(30 July 2024\)](#).

### Gender perspective

The country has seen an increase in women's political participation. The country held elections in 2018 in which [women filled 64%](#) of the seats (UN Women, 13 August 2018).

## Religious landscape

Rwanda: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	13,226,000	91.8
Muslim	705,000	4.9
Hindu	720	0.0
Buddhist	0	0.0
Ethnic religionist	425,000	2.9
Jewish	0	0.0
Bahai	27,400	0.2
Atheist	39	0.0
Agnostic	30,000	0.2
Other	0	0.0
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

According to different sources, the churches in Rwanda face:

- **Stringent legal and registration requirements:** Religious groups are subjected to onerous legal requirements to obtain official status, including the need for their leaders to hold advanced academic degrees in religious studies. These regulations are particularly difficult for smaller, less affluent religious organizations to meet, effectively barring them from operating legally.
- **Use of noise ordinances as a pretext:** The government has used noise pollution laws as a pretext to suppress religious practices, particularly targeting smaller churches and mosques. For example, the government has restricted the Muslim call to prayer via loudspeakers under the guise of noise control, unfairly targeting these religious practices while other non-religious events face less scrutiny.
- **Targeting smaller, independent churches:** The government has disproportionately targeted smaller, independent religious groups, closing thousands of places of worship that lack the resources to comply with the government's stringent requirements. This selective enforcement makes it difficult for these smaller churches to legally continue their religious activities.
- **Monitoring of and intervention in religious affairs:** The Rwandan government frequently monitors and intervenes in the internal affairs of religious organizations. This includes preventing the formation of new religious groups that do not align with government interests, thereby limiting the diversity of religious expression and restricting the ability of communities to freely practice their faith.

## Economic landscape

In general, the small East African nation's economy relies largely on agriculture, tourism and mining.

As reported by the [World Bank's Macro Poverty Outlook Rwanda](#) (15 April 2024):

- **Economic growth and challenges:** Rwanda's economy grew by 8.2% in 2023, driven by services, manufacturing, and construction. Despite this, the country faces significant challenges, including high public debt, vulnerability to climate change, and the need for greater private sector investment to sustain growth and productivity. Inflationary pressures have eased, but the economy remains susceptible to external shocks and internal risks like weather-related disruptions.
- **Poverty and inequality:** Despite impressive growth, poverty remains a significant issue in Rwanda, with 52% of the population living below the international poverty line. The country also faces high inequality, as reflected by its Gini index of 43.7. The government aims to reduce poverty through job creation and improved public services, but progress is slow, and the benefits of growth have not been evenly distributed.
- **Public debt and fiscal management:** Rwanda's public debt reached 71.6% of GDP in 2023. The government is committed to fiscal prudence, focusing on improving revenue collection, reducing subsidies, and enhancing the governance of state-owned enterprises. Despite the rising debt, the government's reliance on concessional loans helps maintain debt sustainability, but the outlook is subject to risks, including external economic disruptions and climate-related challenges.
- **Outlook and risks:** The GDP is projected to grow at an average of 7.6% between 2024 and 2026, supported by a rebound in agriculture, increased tourism, and continued investment in infra-

structure. However, risks remain, including potential global economic downturns, reduced external demand, and the increasing frequency of climate shocks, which could disrupt agricultural output and affect food security.

According to the African Development Bank's [Rwanda Economic Outlook](#) (accessed 7 October 2024):

- Rwanda's economic growth is projected to moderate, with an average growth rate of 6.6% expected in 2024 and 2025, primarily due to anticipated climate shocks affecting agriculture.
- Inflation is forecasted to decrease to 7.0% in 2024 and further to 5.2% in 2025, as supply chains stabilize and international commodity prices fall.
- The fiscal deficit is projected to improve further, reaching 6.4% of GDP in 2024 and 5.9% in 2025, underpinned by continued fiscal consolidation and stronger revenue mobilization.
- The current account deficit is expected to widen slightly in 2024 before narrowing again in 2025, supported by recovering tourism and increased remittances.
- Rwanda's focus on structural transformation is set to intensify, with international development partners and initiatives like the African Continental Free Trade Area Adjustment Fund providing crucial support for sustainable and inclusive growth.

According to Heritage Foundation's [2024 Index of Economic Freedom](#) (updated October 2023):

- Rwanda's economic freedom score stands at 51.6, ranking it 135th out of 184 countries globally and 30th out of 47 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. This score categorizes Rwanda's economy as "mostly unfree," marking a decline of 0.6 points from the previous year.
- The country's economic freedom is hampered by a weak rule of law, persistent corruption, and inefficiencies in its regulatory environment. Despite some reforms supporting economic expansion and poverty reduction, challenges remain in judicial effectiveness and government integrity, which continue to discourage long-term economic development.
- Rwanda's economic landscape is characterized by relatively high scores in property rights and government integrity compared to global averages, but it lags behind in areas like judicial effectiveness and labor freedom. The regulatory environment is poorly institutionalized, impacting business freedom and labor market vibrancy.
- Trade freedom remains constrained by high tariffs.

## Social and cultural landscape

According to the [World Factbook Rwanda](#) (accessed 7 October 2024) and [UNDP Human Development Report Rwanda](#) (data updates as of 13 March 2024):

- **Main ethnic groups:** Hutu, Tutsi, Twa (Pygmy). According to the [World Atlas](#) (accessed 1 July 2021): Hutus make up 84%, Tutsis 15% and Twa (Batwa) 1% of the population. Originally the Tutsis were herdsmen and the Hutus farmers.
- **Main languages:** Kinyarwanda (official, universal Bantu vernacular) 93.2%, French (official), English (official), Swahili/Kiswahili (official, used in commercial centers), other 6.3%, unspecified 0.3% (2002 est.).
- **Average population growth:** 1.8% (2021 est.)
- **Urban population:** 17.6% of total population (2021)
- **Rate of urbanization:** 3.07% annual rate of change (2020- 2025 est.)



- **Expected years of schooling:** 11.2 years
- **Literacy rate, adult (ages 15 and older):** 73.2%
- **Employment to population ratio (ages 15 and older):** 82.8%
- **Unemployment, total:** 1.0% of labor force
- **Unemployment, youth (ages 15-24):** 1.7%
- **Human Development Index (HDI) score and ranking:** Rwanda ranked 160th with a score of 0.543
- **Average life expectancy at birth:** 69.0 years
- **Gender Development Index (GDI):** 0.945
- **Gender inequality index (GII):** 0.402

According to [UNHCR's Operational update \(December 2023\)](#):

- **Refugees:** As of 31 December 2023, Rwanda hosted a total of 134,593 refugees and asylum seekers, mainly people from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (62%) and Burundi (37%).

## Technological landscape

In relation to some of its neighboring countries, Rwanda has been rapidly advancing in technological development, positioning itself as a regional tech hub in East Africa. The country has invested heavily in its ICT infrastructure, with a focus on expanding internet connectivity, mobile technology, and digital services. Rwanda's government has implemented various initiatives to foster innovation, such as the Kigali Innovation City, which is designed to be a tech and innovation hub that supports startups, research, and development in the ICT sector. Additionally, the country has made significant progress in mobile payments and digital financial services, contributing to greater financial inclusion. The development of the Rwanda Online Platform (Irembo), which offers government services digitally, further exemplifies the country's commitment to leveraging technology for public service delivery and economic growth.

The 2024 report from [BuddeComm](#) on Rwanda's telecom market highlights significant developments in the sector, particularly regarding mobile and broadband services. Rwanda's mobile sector, which was slow to liberalize, has seen major changes, including the end of the monopoly held by MTN Rwanda and the consolidation of the market into a duopoly between MTN and Airtel after the acquisition of Tigo by Airtel. The country's mobile infrastructure has been rapidly upgraded to LTE, following the regulator's decision to allow MTN and Airtel to build their own LTE networks.

In addition, the fixed broadband sector has been expanding, albeit slowly, due to limited infrastructure and high costs. However, the rollout of national backbone networks and connections to international submarine cables has increased internet bandwidth and reduced reliance on satellite connections. The report also notes the launch of Starlink's satellite broadband services in Rwanda, which aims to connect most schools by the end of 2024, as well as efforts to provide mobile satellite connectivity in underserved rural areas through partnerships with companies like Intelsat and Africa Mobile Networks.

Internet usage in the country is low. According to [Datareportal Digital 2024: Rwanda](#) (23 February 2024) / survey date - January 2024:

- **Internet penetration:** Rwanda had 4.91 million internet users at the start of 2024, representing an internet penetration rate of 34.4%. This indicates that just over a third of the population has access to the internet, reflecting ongoing efforts to expand digital connectivity across the country.
- **Social media usage:** Social media adoption remains relatively low, with 930.4 thousand users, accounting for 6.5% of the total population. This suggests that while social media is growing, it still has significant room for expansion as more Rwandans gain access to digital platforms. As of January 2024, 36.2% of Rwanda's social media users were female and 63.8% male.
- **Active cellular mobile connections:** Mobile connectivity is widespread in Rwanda, with 12.29 million active cellular mobile connections. This figure is equivalent to 86.2% of the total population, highlighting the importance of mobile technology in the country's digital landscape.

## Security situation

Rwanda's security situation, while stable on the surface, is increasingly challenged by the government's authoritarian practices and its involvement in regional conflicts, particularly with the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Domestically, the Rwandan government has been widely criticized for its heavy-handed approach to maintaining control. This includes stifling political dissent, engaging in extensive surveillance, and limiting civil liberties. The government's emphasis on a unified Rwandan identity, while crucial for national cohesion, has not fully addressed underlying ethnic tensions. These latent divisions contribute to a climate of fear and mistrust among citizens, undermining long-term stability and security within the country.

Regionally, Rwanda's security dynamics are deeply intertwined with its actions in the DRC. The Rwandan government has been accused of supporting the M23 rebel group, which has been active in North Kivu province, displacing hundreds of thousands of people and exacerbating regional instability. This support has led to heightened tensions between Rwanda and the DRC, with incidents such as the January 2023 missile attack on a Congolese fighter jet by Rwandan forces, claiming it had violated Rwandan airspace. This incident, among others, has brought the two nations close to open conflict.

Moreover, Rwanda's alleged interference with the DRC's Global Positioning System (GPS), which poses significant risks to both commercial and humanitarian flights, further strains relations between the two countries. The deteriorating diplomatic ties between Rwanda and the DRC have not only led to aggressive rhetoric and mutual accusations but have also drawn in regional powers, complicating the security situation in the Great Lakes region. The involvement of East African Force troops from Kenya, Uganda and Burundi highlights the escalating nature of the conflict and the broader regional implications of Rwanda's actions.

## Christian origins

As in many other African countries, the first Christian missionaries to arrive in Rwanda were the Roman Catholic White Fathers. According to Storica Mente (last accessed 15 February 2023): “Between 1900 and 1910, the [White Fathers](#) had acquired a decisive advantage in the Rwandan territory with respect to the German army by constructing seven missionary stations.” By the time the Germans were forced to leave the country during the First World War (1916), ten mission stations had been opened.

Other Christian denominations followed the White Fathers. As described by BU School of Theology (last accessed 27 March 2024), 1907 saw the arrival of the first Protestant missionaries, German Lutherans from the [Bethel Mission](#) (also known as the Evangelische Missionsgesellschaft für Deutsch-Ostafrika). These German Lutherans founded eight mission stations, along with two commercial sites to compete with Muslim traders. Before they too were forced to leave the country, the Lutherans had managed to edit a translation of the four Gospels and a textbook in Kinyarwanda (the Rwandan language).

After the Belgians took over control of the country from Germany, they allowed other missionaries to enter. As a result, the Seventh-Day Adventist Church from the USA (1916), Anglicans of the Church Missionary Society (1921), Danish Baptists (1938), Swedish Pentecostals (1940), and the Free Methodist Church (1942) from the USA came to the country to work among the local population, building schools and hospitals. In particular the Roman Catholics invested in education and founded the majority of schools operating in the country.

## Church spectrum today

Rwanda: Church networks	Christians	%
Orthodox	1,500	0.0
Catholic	5,828,000	44.1
Protestant	4,764,000	36.0
Independent	1,690,000	12.8
Unaffiliated	944,000	7.1
Doubly-affiliated Christians	0	0.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>13,227,500</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	3,036,000	23.0
Pentecostal-Charismatic	2,661,000	20.1

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

**Orthodox:** Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. **Roman Catholics:** All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. **Protestants:** Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world’s 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not

Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. **Independents:** Christians who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). **Unaffiliated Christians:** Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. **Doubly-affiliated Christians:** Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. **Evangelical movement:** Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. **Pentecostal-Charismatic:** Church members involved in renewal in the Holy Spirit, sometimes known collectively as "Renewalists".

Rwanda has been a Catholic majority country since the colonial days under Belgium. Some Catholic leaders openly oppose the growth of non-traditional church groups.

## Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the Research & Reports pages of the Open Doors website:

- <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/>.

These are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom):

- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Rwanda>
- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>.

## External Links

- Recent history: summarized - <https://www.refworld.org/docid/49b92b279.html>
- Recent history: BBC News on 18 July 2024 - <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cnk413ze07lo>
- Political and legal landscape: Over the past two decades - <http://www.chathamhouse.org/event/rwanda-under-rpf-assessing-twenty-years-post-conflict-governance%20>
- Political and legal landscape: IRFR 2023 Rwanda - <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-report-on-international-religious-freedom/rwanda/>
- Political and legal landscape: Freedom in the World 2024 Rwanda - <https://freedomhouse.org/country/rwanda/freedom-world/2024>
- Political and legal landscape: Human Rights Watch 2024 - <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/rwanda>
- Political and legal landscape: BBC News (30 July 2024) - <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c19kxg3vz8eo>
- Political and legal landscape: women filled 64% - <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2018/8/feature-rwanda-women-in-parliament>
- Economic landscape: World Bank's Macro Poverty Outlook Rwanda - <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/099557404052473182/IDU1a0c1a3691845d148621a38416f0423b9e4c8>
- Economic landscape: Rwanda Economic Outlook - <https://www.afdb.org/en/countries/east-africa/rwanda/rwanda-economic-outlook>
- Economic landscape: 2024 Index of Economic Freedom - <https://www.heritage.org/index/pages/country-pages/rwanda>
- Social and cultural landscape: World Factbook Rwanda - <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/rwanda/>
- Social and cultural landscape: UNDP Human Development Report Rwanda - <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data#/countries/RWA>
- Social and cultural landscape: World Atlas - <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/ethnic-groups-of-rwanda.html>
- Social and cultural landscape: UNHCR's Operational update (December 2023) - <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/106269>
- Technological landscape: BuddeComm - <https://www.budde.com.au/Research/Rwanda-Telecoms-Mobile-and-Broadband-Statistics-and-Analyses>
- Technological landscape: Datareportal Digital 2024: Rwanda - <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-rwanda>
- Christian origins: White Fathers - [https://storicamente.org/cristofori\\_1](https://storicamente.org/cristofori_1)
- Christian origins: Bethel Mission - <http://www.bu.edu/missiology/missionary-biography/c-d/church-john-edward-1899-1989/>