

Reaching the Largest Unreached People Group You Never Considered

White Paper on Reaching the Deaf
Worldwide with the Gospel

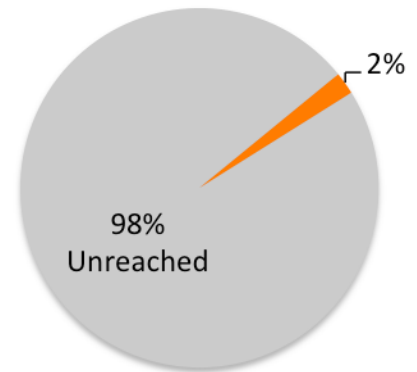


OVERVIEW

As of 2023, Deaf people – considered as a global people group – represent one of the largest people groups worldwide that is unreached and unengaged with the Gospel.¹ It is estimated that out of 70 million Deaf people worldwide,² less than 2% of Deaf people are Christ followers.³

What led to this situation, and how do we take action to reach this great unreached people group? This white paper describes some of the common misunderstandings regarding the Deaf, some common but mismatched approaches to ministry among the Deaf, and what is working today. This paper does not assume that the reader has a substantial background in Deaf ministry, sign language, or Deaf culture, and it provides links to further resources on some of these subjects as appropriate.

70 Million Deaf



Part 1: Misunderstandings

In “Misunderstandings – What You May Not Know About the Deaf,” we examine fundamental misconceptions about Deaf people that lead to problems in Deaf ministry.

Part 2: Deaf Ministry Approaches

In “Deaf Ministry Approaches – A Mismatch of Values,” we identify three approaches to Deaf ministry that seem helpful but are disconnected from the underlying needs of Deaf communities.

Part 3: Lessons Learned

In “Lessons Learned – Best Practices in Deaf Ministry,” we identify three criteria that any quality Deaf ministry should evidence.

Part 4: Next Steps

In “Next Steps – Where Do We Go from Here?” we provide some practical suggestions for how you can engage in this vital area of ministry, even if your ministry does not directly involve Deaf people.

In order to finish the task of making disciples of every nation and people group, we need to address the needs of the Deaf. Find out how you can be a part of this amazing growing movement.

Part 1: Misunderstandings

What You May Not Know About the Deaf

Why is it that 2000 years after Christ walked this earth, a vast majority of Deaf⁴ people have not encountered the gospel, *even in countries saturated by churches and Scripture*? In order to understand the situation, let's first consider some common misunderstandings among (even well-intentioned) hearing believers that have led to the mismatch between the needs of the Deaf and the ministry provided.

Myth: *All Deaf people read well.*

If you are a hearing person, recall how you learned to read. You most likely became fluent in your spoken language prior to entering school by hearing it from others. By the time you entered school, reading was just an actualization of the spoken language you knew well.

Deaf people do not have this same experience. Deaf children who enter school are faced with learning an entirely new (phonetic) language through written means without sound, often without having had much exposure to any language at home. In many countries, Deaf children have very limited opportunities for quality education,⁵ which severely limits their ability to read. The task is clearly not impossible, as there is a small number of Deaf people worldwide who can read well, but for the vast majority of profoundly deaf people, written language never becomes their heart language in the same way that sign language does.

Myth: *Deaf people have access to all of the information that the hearing people around them do.*

Because a majority of Deaf people worldwide struggle with reading proficiently,⁶ they will not acquire a large amount of information through written text. By definition they also miss information communicated by auditory means. If you eliminated all of the information you received by reading and hearing, how would you learn about the world around you? Most written information is not available in sign language.

Myth: *Sign language is universal, the same around the world.*

While SIL International has catalogued over 149 sign languages⁷ worldwide so far, there are estimated to be around 375 sign languages total.⁸

Myth: *Sign language is just written/spoken language in a signed format.*

Sign languages used in Deaf communities are real, vibrant, rich, and full languages. True natural sign language does not have a one-to-one sign-to-word correspondence with a local spoken language; instead, sign languages have their own grammar and linguistic structure.⁹

They are multi-layered three-dimensional languages with multiple aspects occurring simultaneously in communication, not just what is happening with the hands. They are languages as valid as English, Russian, or Mandarin, and they can convey every complex or abstract concept that a spoken language can.

There have been attempts by hearing educators to represent spoken languages in sign format on the hands, but this type of signing is not a natural language.

Myth: *Young Deaf children learn most of their language and information from their parents, just like you did.*

Deaf people worldwide are a unique people group unlike any other minority spoken language community. Approximately 90% of Deaf children are born to hearing parents (both mother and father are hearing).¹⁰ Of these hearing parents, a vast majority of them never learn enough sign language to have an extended conversation with their children, even in the United States.¹¹ This means that most Deaf people do not learn language from their parents, and live in a communicatively dysfunctional household. Instead, they typically learn sign language (and thus, information) from other Deaf individuals when they enter a Deaf educational environment.

This experience leads many Deaf people to have closer relationships with other Deaf people than with their own hearing parents. They may consider Deaf friends to be their “family.” And because this Deaf experience in hearing households is fairly universal worldwide (in both developed and developing countries), Deaf people from different countries have a much closer cultural relationship than Deaf and hearing individuals from the same country.

Myth: *If Deaf people were given the option to become hearing, they would.*

Sign language and common experiences of Deaf individuals in a hearing world cause them to form an identity of their own, one directly associated with their deafness and quite different from their surrounding hearing community. This identity is so strong that many Deaf individuals, if given the choice to suddenly become hearing, would choose to remain Deaf. Deaf individuals do not view themselves as broken hearing people, but instead as a people with a rich language, culture, and set of experiences unique to them. In this way, they are different than every other “disability” group, as their “disability” creates a linguistically and culturally unique people group.

As such, the term “hearing impaired” should be avoided in describing individuals in the Deaf community. Deaf people want to be described in terms of who they are, not by what they are not.

Part 2: Deaf Ministry Approaches

A Mismatch of Values

It is estimated that among the 70 million Deaf worldwide, less than 2% have understood the gospel. Why is this the case?

Historically there appear to have been three approaches by hearing churches to minister to Deaf individuals. These approaches, while well-intentioned, do not address the deep needs of the Deaf community.

Approach #1: *Provide written Bibles.*

As we have seen, sign language is the heart language of the Deaf. Sign languages are the only ones that Deaf people can acquire through natural language acquisition processes. Even if quality educational opportunities were available to Deaf individuals so that they could learn written language well as a second language, it would never become their heart language. Thus, a printed Bible will never connect a Deaf person to the Word of God in the way that sign language-based Scripture can.

So out of around 375 sign languages worldwide, how many have a completed sign language translation of the Bible? One. Only one sign language (ASL) has translations of the Old and New Testament completed. **Most do not have a single verse.**

This is an issue not just within the Church. Deaf people worldwide experience a lack of access to information in religious institutions, whether they are mosques, temples, or churches. Many Deaf are hungry for spiritual truth, but they have no access to information. This leads to a great opportunity (as the Church can now step in and provide that much-needed truth), but also provides opportunity for great error (as false teachings, when provided in a medium that connects with Deaf people, can easily spread through the Deaf community).

Approach #2: *Provide interpreters in worship services.*

Some churches elect to provide a sign language interpreter for the Deaf who are present. While this is a heartfelt attempt to provide access to information for Deaf people, there are a number of reasons that this is not ideal for the Deaf community:

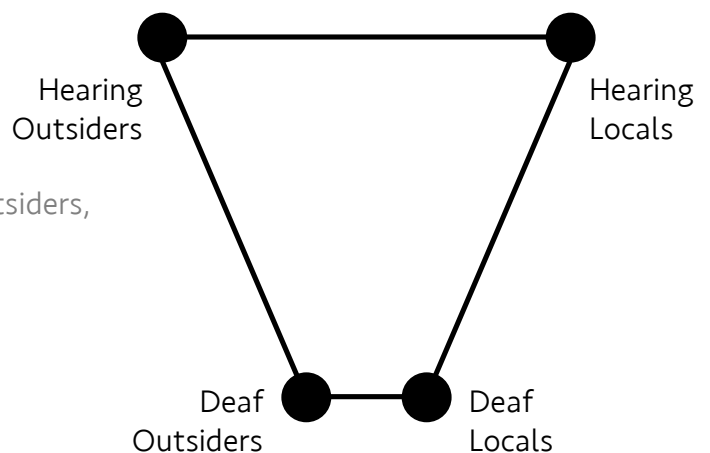
- a. **Deaf Worship Styles:** Deaf people do not worship in the same way that hearing people worship. Simply turning hearing songs into sign language does not mean they will connect with the hearts of Deaf people. The inspiration that hearing songs provide to hearing people is usually closely tied to the music and rarely communicated well through the interpreter.

- b. **Context:** In hearing sermons and other church communication, there are often many references to jokes, songs, Bible verses, and other information that Deaf people do not know about. In order for Deaf people to understand the reference, an interpreter must back up and provide context for the reference. However, by the time this can be accomplished (if at all), the speaker is off on a completely different subject.
- c. **Deaf Learning Styles:** Storying is a highly valued means of communicating information in the Deaf community, a commonality shared with hearing communities lacking a written language. By contrast, hearing sermons often involve bits of information taken from various places, connected by a common phrase or idea. This approach can be nearly impossible to follow for a Deaf person.
- d. **Interpreter Skills:** While this is not true of all church interpreters, in many cases, an “interpreter” provided by a church is not skilled or certified, but instead is simply a person who may have had a semester of sign language at a local community college. They are not proficient, and this lack of proficiency leads to many errors, additions, and omissions when interpreting. This can turn a well-planned, impacting, and theologically correct sermon into a disjointed, heretical mess.
- e. **Deaf “Ministry”:** Even if none of the four issues above were present, one of the most significant issues with the approach of simply providing an interpreter in a church service is that it reduces Deaf people to objects of a ministry, whereas God has created them to be ministers. Deaf people were created with gifts and talents to lead, teach, encourage, etc., but they cannot exercise these gifts in a context where language and cultural barriers are constantly present.

Approach #3: *Provide hearing leadership.*

Hearing people in the church have more access to training and information, so there is a tendency to leave a hearing person in charge of a Deaf ministry. But this should never be a long-term solution. Instead, there should be a concerted effort to train, equip, and encourage Deaf leadership within a Deaf ministry. Deaf people should become the providers of ministry, and hearing people should provide appropriate support and encouragement.

In a related issue, when an outside organization wants to work internationally among a local Deaf community, there are four groups involved in the process: hearing outsiders, Deaf outsiders, hearing locals, and Deaf locals. Which is most closely tied to the local Deaf community? See the illustration at right.



Because Deaf outsiders and Deaf locals share many common experiences (and thus, many common values), they connect much more easily than hearing and Deaf locals do. Thus, Deaf ministry done on an international scale should always try to involve Deaf leadership.

Part 3: Lessons Learned

Best Practices in Deaf Ministry

So how do we tell if an organization is “doing Deaf ministry right”? What should be present to ensure that ministry will have a long-term, deep impact on the Deaf communities it desires to serve? Take a hard look for the following:

Criterion #1: *Deaf people should be the main providers of ministry.*



As we have seen, Deaf people are best reached by other Deaf people, whether on a local or international level. This means that any ministry serious about reaching the Deaf in a particular community should work primarily through Deaf people active in that community. If no Deaf believers can be found to work in the community, the primary responsibility of the ministry is to grow Deaf believers who can do so. The goal is for Deaf believers to have initiative and ownership in the work.

Criterion #2: *The ministry should be actively developing and equipping Deaf leaders.*

It is one thing to say it would be nice to have Deaf leaders; it is another thing to have a clear plan for developing and multiplying Deaf leaders in an organization. Deaf ministries should be actively developing Deaf leaders at all levels, and the Deaf should be providing this training (see Criterion 1).



Criterion #3: *The ministry should be developing and using resources in sign language.*

In order to build leaders and train Deaf workers to be the providers of ministry, accessible resources must be developed. However, all sign languages have an extreme lack of resources available in those sign languages. That means that Deaf ministries must make a serious commitment to creating quality resources that support their Deaf workers, or they must work in close coordination with other ministries that create such resources.

In particular, there is a great need for the development of Bible story and Bible translation resources that will give unreached Deaf communities quality initial access to Scripture. No sign language currently has a full Bible translation, and most do not have one verse of Scripture translated. The development of sign language Bible translations multiplies Deaf ministry by placing tools in the hands of other Deaf ministries.



Criterion #4: *The ministry should be reproducible and sustainable.*

The role of any ministry should be to work itself out of a job. If ministry empowers local believers in a way that those local believers can subsequently reproduce in the lives of others, it will create a movement that expands the work far beyond the direct reaches of the ministry itself.

Part 4: Next Steps

Where Do We Go from Here?

The future ahead for Deaf ministry is an exciting one. If you find you are a hearing individual or organization with a passion to help change the world for one of the largest unreached, unengaged people groups, here are five things you can do right now.

1. Provide Funding and Support to Successful Deaf Ministries and Organizations

As of right now, it is estimated that among the approximately 1800 language groups that are unengaged with the gospel, 15-20% of them are sign language groups among Deaf communities. At the same time, out of all of the funds going to reach new unengaged groups, far less than 15% of these funds are being directed to sign language translation projects and Deaf ministries. There are only a few translation organizations and ministries that promote Deaf leadership and have a track record of training Deaf people to reach other Deaf. Supporting these organizations that already have experience and expertise is one of the most direct ways to impact the spreading of the gospel among Deaf people worldwide.

Funding and other support (e.g., providing building space for Deaf ministries) are critical to Deaf ministry. Deaf people worldwide have unusually high unemployment rates due to

limited access to quality education and training, which makes solely supporting Deaf ministry through Deaf funding an impossible task.

2. Help to Provide Training within Deaf Ministries

The number of Deaf people who are equipped to train and support ministry among the Deaf is limited. If your organization has expertise in training others in spreading the gospel (for instance, in Bible translation, in church planting, etc.) and you are willing to have others modify that training to fit the needs of the Deaf, you can connect with Deaf ministries working in those areas to help provide access to that training for Deaf leaders.

3. Material Resource Development

If your ministry produces material resources, and those resources would be of value to Deaf ministries (if translated into sign language and adjusted to match Deaf culture and learning styles), providing access to those resources for a reduced cost or free of charge, and allowing Deaf ministries to modify the material to fit a Deaf audience, would accelerate the process of material resource development, as Deaf ministries do not need to reinvent the wheel.

4. Connect Deaf Ministries to Other Hearing Organizations

Your ministry may not be actively working in the Deaf community, but it may have connections to other hearing organizations that are working in an area where a Deaf ministry is working. In this case, your organization can help build bridges between the active Deaf ministry and the surrounding hearing organizations, introducing the organizations to the Deaf ministry and encouraging them to engage in meaningful ways with the Deaf, remembering the key approaches outlined in Part 3.

5. Encourage Education and Advocacy

Many hearing organizations are fully unaware of the unique needs in the Deaf community, and some may be trying to work with the Deaf using mismatched approaches outlined in Part 2. You can play a role in pointing hearing organizations to resources like this that can help them learn about the Deaf and how best to minister to them.

DOOR International is a translation and training organization whose mission is to bring God's Word and reproducing Christian fellowship to the Deaf worldwide. DOOR is a member of the Wycliffe Global Alliance and the Forum of Bible Agencies International. For more information about the ministries of DOOR or to support work among the Deaf, visit <http://www.DOORInternational.org/> or contact DOOR by email at info@doorinternational.org.

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¹ Up front, we must admit that reliable statistics regarding the Deaf community are difficult to come by. Some of this is related to a confusion in counting people who are deaf versus people who are Deaf. Another comes from a lack of census information from countries related to this issue; many countries do not ask, for instance, if sign language is a language used at home. Thus, most statistics you find are rough estimates unless otherwise noted.

² World Federation of the Deaf, <http://wfdeaf.org/>

³ Deaf Missions, published in Mission Frontiers Magazine, <http://www.missionfrontiers.org/issue/article/the-deaf>. See also information from the International Mission Board's Deaf Affinity Group, <https://www.imb.org/deaf/>

⁴ Hearing loss occurs at various levels in individuals, and terminology is loosely used to distinguish these levels. A person is "hard of hearing" if they have some hearing loss, but enough hearing to be able to hear and understand, at least moderately, a spoken language. If they have substantial hearing loss to the point where spoken language is difficult or impossible to understand, they are considered "deaf." There is a significant distinction between the terms "deaf" and "Deaf." The word "deaf" with a lowercase d refers to a level of audiological receptivity, i.e., their lack of ability to hear. The word "Deaf" with a capital D refers to individuals who share a common culture related to their use of sign language, their values and views as Deaf individuals, their rules for behavior, etc. These individuals may have varying degrees of hearing loss.

Gallaudet University, Laurent Clerc National Deaf Education Center, <http://bit.ly/1M24i22>

⁵ World Federation of the Deaf, <http://wfdeaf.org/our-work/human-rights-of-the-deaf/>

⁶ "Over the last 40 years, results from numerous studies have indicated that deaf children have significantly poorer reading comprehension, literacy skills, and overall depressed academic achievement in general when compared to their hearing peers..." The Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4886322/>

⁷ SIL International, <http://www.sil.org/sign-languages>

⁸ There is general consensus among major sign language translation organizations (DOOR International, SIL International, Deaf Bible Society, etc.) that the number of 375 sign languages is closer to the actual number.

⁹ See, for example, the National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, <https://www.nidcd.nih.gov/health/american-sign-language>

¹⁰ U.S. Statistics available from the National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders, <https://www.nidcd.nih.gov/health/statistics/quick-statistics-hearing>

¹¹ Ibid.