

An Introduction and
Guide to Sharing
Christ with
the Deaf

THE DEAF

 CHRISTAR[®]

AN ANSWER TO OUR OWN PRAYER

Have you ever found as you lifted up a particular concern before the Lord, that God nudged you to be a part of His answer to your own prayer? In recent years, as we've asked the Lord to raise up more workers to serve in His harvest fields, He has laid one group on our hearts over and over: the Deaf who live among Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim peoples. And now, He's allowed us to be a part of reaching these often unnoticed and frequently marginalized communities.

The vast majority of the Deaf around the globe have no access to the treasure we hold in Jesus Christ. Just 2% have been introduced to the good news, and many live in parts of the world mostly or completely untouched by the gospel.

Many of these least-reached people are separated from the larger Hearing society around them, and as a result have even fewer opportunities to learn of the good news. In some cultures, being deaf is seen as a curse, and members of the Deaf community are neglected by and isolated from those who can hear. Furthermore, misconceptions about the Deaf often prevent believers from seeking to reach them with the good news.

Simply bringing the gospel to the places where the Deaf live isn't enough. Because Deaf communities have distinct sign languages, cultures and worldviews, to effectively reach them, we need to send followers of Christ who can be accepted in Deaf society, respect their unique gifts and challenges and communicate the good news in their sign languages.

We're thrilled that Charstar workers devoted to ministry in Deaf communities are now on the field! By God's grace, we eagerly anticipate seeing many more begin serving among these least-reached people.

We desire to plant churches among the Deaf who are living amid populations of Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists for the same reason we serve among Hearing peoples: God has promised there will be people from every nation, tribe, people and language (including sign languages) worshiping around the throne of God. We align ourselves with the promise that salvation in Christ is not just for the Hearing, but for the Deaf as well.

Sincerely,



Dr. R. Stephen Coffey
Director, Charstar U.S.

OPEN DOORS TO REACH THE DEAF



Among the approximately 70 million people worldwide who use a sign language as their first or primary language, 98% are least-reached: They don't have access to a church that preaches the gospel in their language and worships in a way that's relevant in their culture. Unless followers of Christ bring the good news to them with an approach and in a language they can understand, they won't have the opportunity to know and worship our Savior.

**Just 2% of the Deaf worldwide
have been introduced to Jesus.**

Although we sense the urgency of bringing the gospel to all least-reached people, the present is a particularly opportune time to reach the Deaf. In years past, it wasn't possible to share the gospel with the Deaf in their heart language without having a face-to-face conversation. Now, technology has made it possible to communicate the gospel to the Deaf across distances, through means such as video and online networking.

In addition, God is giving many Deaf believers in developed countries a burden to reach other Deaf, both in their communities and around the world. And, in recent years, God has increased awareness of the Deaf among Hearing believers and burdened them to see the Deaf also know and worship Jesus.

COMMON MYTHS



It's likely that only 5% of the estimated 400 sign languages worldwide have any Scripture portions available. So, especially among the Deaf, it is imperative that believers build relationships and personally share the good news in culturally relevant ways. With newer channels of communication like video and online networking, opportunities to communicate the gospel are opening as never before.

However, misunderstandings about the Deaf often prevent Christians from working to share the gospel among them. Even in places with many followers of Christ, Deaf communities can remain isolated from the gospel. Often the Deaf are "hidden least-reached": without access to a church that proclaims the gospel in their language and worships in their culture, even if those in the surrounding Hearing community have opportunities to learn about Jesus.

Misconceptions About Reaching the Deaf

Myth #1: The Deaf can just read the gospel.

Although some Deaf people are able to read, many struggle to fully understand written materials. Written languages are based on spoken languages, which the Deaf have never heard. As a result, it's inherently more difficult for them to read as they've never heard the sounds that letters symbolize. They can't "sound out" words and instead must learn to recognize combinations of letters, almost like memorizing a phone number for each word.

In addition, sign languages have unique structures and idioms—they're not word-for-word translations of spoken languages. Even when Deaf people can read the written form of the language spoken where they live, it is still a "foreign" or "second" language to them—not the language of their hearts!

Myth #2: The Bible is available in sign language.

At least 95% of sign languages have no Bible translation. Unless believers communicate the gospel to the Deaf in their language, they can't learn of the hope of Christ through the means of communication that is most accessible to them.

Myth #3: All Deaf people use the same sign language.

Each of the hundreds of sign languages used around the world has its own unique structure and figures of speech. To reach all of the Deaf worldwide, the gospel needs to be communicated in all of these languages, through believers who enter Deaf communities and through the Bible translated into each of these languages.

Myth #4: Ministries to the Hearing also reach the Deaf.

Even if a Deaf person has access to printed Scripture and lives in a place with many Christians, there's a good chance he or she hasn't been introduced to Jesus. Although the Deaf may look like the Hearing people in the surrounding community, they don't identify with the culture of that community. Just as we don't expect members of Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist communities to cross cultures in search of the good news, we don't expect the Deaf to seek the gospel outside of their culture. Followers of Christ must enter Deaf communities and share the message of Christ in relevant ways.

Often the Deaf are "hidden least-reached."

REFLECTING JESUS *to a Deaf Neighbor*



Like all people who don't yet know the hope of Christ, the Deaf need to see Him reflected in the lives of His followers. Although members of the Hearing community can't share the gospel in the language of their Deaf neighbors' hearts without learning to sign, they can demonstrate the love and compassion of the God who sent His Son for them. The following tips can help you relate to a Deaf person in a way that's respectful and considerate, allowing you to be a reflection of Jesus and represent Him well.

Let Them Take the Lead

Your Deaf neighbor likely navigates communication with the Hearing community on a regular basis, and knows what works for him or her. Follow your neighbor's lead, seeking to do what's comfortable for that person. If you're not sure what's helpful and what's a hindrance, don't be afraid to ask!

Be Prepared

If you know your neighbor prefers to communicate with you through writing, be prepared! Carry a pen and paper or a tablet on which your neighbor can type, rather than expecting him or her to have writing implements on hand. Other forms of electronic communication such as texting, Facebook messaging, emailing or simply typing text on your cell phone and passing it back and forth can also be helpful tools in connecting with someone who prefers to communicate with the Hearing through writing.

Make Eye Contact

Eye contact is a foundation for effective communication, and it's often especially important in Deaf communities. Since the Deaf communicate visually, breaking eye contact during a conversation with a Deaf person is like covering your ears while speaking with a Hearing person. Be sure to look your neighbor in the eye.

Be Visible

Position yourself directly in front of the person, and make sure he or she is looking at you before you begin to communicate. (If you need to get a Deaf person's attention, try a simple tap on the shoulder.) If it's within your control, make sure there's adequate lighting.

Speak Normally

If you're interacting with someone who reads lips, speak at a normal pace and volume and don't over-enunciate—exaggerating your speech can make it harder for your friend to determine what you're saying. Be sure to keep your hands and any objects away from your mouth, and don't eat, drink or chew gum while you're speaking. Keep in mind that only about 30% of speech can be read on the lips, and be prepared to use other means of communication if the Deaf person requests it—remember, let him or her take the lead!

Be Patient

Many times, it can take a while to figure out the best means of communication, and even longer for it to feel comfortable. Be patient! Taking the time to determine how the two of you can have an effective conversation is a way to demonstrate that your Deaf neighbor—and what he or she wants to communicate—is important to you.

If you're having trouble getting your point across or don't understand what your neighbor is trying to say after several tries, don't brush it off! Comments like “don't worry about it” or “it wasn't important” may be well-intentioned, but they convey that communicating with your friend isn't worth the effort, and are considered a major insult.

Share Resources in Sign Language

Help your Deaf friend learn about the gospel by sharing resources that communicate it in sign language. Websites like deafbibles.com and deaf.bible offer Bible stories and Scripture that can help your friend understand the good news.

Be a Friend

Apart from the differences in language, building a friendship with a Deaf person happens the same way as getting to know a Hearing person. Look for common interests and opportunities to be kind. Invite them to join you at a football game, share a batch of cookies or help your neighbor rake leaves. Remember him or her at Christmas and other holidays. Ask God to give you opportunities to be a friend and to make Himself visible through you.

CHRISTAR'S MINISTRY



As followers of Christ, we have a treasure in God and His kingdom. The good news is that this treasure is not limited to certain places or people. It is for all peoples—from every language, people group and nation. At Christar, it is our joy to communicate the unsurpassed value of this treasure by serving the needs of others through our lives, professions, skills and words.

Christar is motivated by a passion to establish churches among the least-reached. We trust the Lord to work through us as we send teams to cultivate Christ-honoring transformation in Deaf communities throughout the world where He is not yet known or worshiped.

“The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.”

Matthew 9:37b-38 (NIV)

Building on a Heritage of Serving the Least-Reached

Through the Deaf Initiative, Christar is expanding its church-planting efforts to include reaching the Deaf with the good news. God has already begun to bring workers to Christar to serve among these least-reached people. We're seeking more believers with the passion, call, language skills and Deaf culture experience to join teams already working among Hearing peoples and begin reaching out to Deaf communities within the same regions. To do that, we need to develop a dedicated mobilizing team to identify candidates. We're asking God to call many new workers so we can do among the Deaf what we have been doing for since 1909 in other communities: cultivating Christ-honoring transformation where He is not yet worshiped!

We're thankful for increasing efforts by various agencies to translate the Bible into sign languages. And we praise God that numerous organizations are reaching the Deaf with the gospel. It's our joy to join the movement and to plant churches in Deaf communities living among Buddhists, Hindus and Muslims.



WHAT NOW?



Partnering With Christar to Minister Among the Deaf



Pray:

- Ask God to raise up workers with a passion to reach the Deaf and the ability to enter least-reached communities.
- Pray that believers in Deaf churches will have a burden for Deaf communities around the world.
- Ask God to enable Christar to effectively collaborate with other organizations ministering among the Deaf.
- Pray for open doors for ministry in Deaf communities.
- Pray for wisdom as Christar seeks to effectively bring the gospel to Deaf communities.
- Ask God to provide the funds needed to launch this critical new outreach.



Go:

We'd love to talk with you about how God could use you for His glory among the Deaf! Give us a call at [214-838-3800](tel:214-838-3800) or email us at go@christar.org.



Give:

Your gift to the Deaf Initiative will help Christar identify and train new workers to serve among the Deaf, helping us launch this new outreach to these hidden least-reached people. Go to christar.org/deaf-initiative to learn more.

Helpful Resources

Below are selected resources on the Deaf and ministering among them. The following aren't a replacement for active involvement with Deaf individuals and the wider Deaf community, but they can serve as good starting points for understanding the Deaf and learning sign language.

For more, visit christar.org/deaf.

Websites:

American Sign Language Nook (ASLNook.com): Teaches American Sign Language to all ages, including young children, through videos created by a Deaf family.

American Sign Language University (lifeprint.com): Provides an enjoyable way to learn American Sign Language, originally designed for use in conjunction with college-level ASL classes.

Deaf Bible (deafbibles.com): Provides videos of God's Word in the sign languages of eight countries.

Deaf Bible Society (deafbiblesociety.com): Offers the Deaf Bible app and online Bible, as well as information about the Deaf.

Door International (doorinternational.org/why-deaf): An organization seeking to bring God's Word and reproducing Christian fellowships to the Deaf of the world; provides information on the Deaf and reaching out to them.

Handspeak (handspeak.com): Offers American Sign Language resources that include a dictionary and tutorials.

World Federation of the Deaf (wfdeaf.org): A global organization that works to ensure equal rights for the Deaf around the world.

App:

The ASL App (theaslapp.com): A free mobile app that teaches conversational American Sign Language.

Books:

Understanding Deaf Culture: In Search of Deafhood, by Paddy Ladd. Multilingual Matters, 2003.

For Hearing People Only: Answers to Some of the Most Commonly Asked Questions About the Deaf Community, its Culture, and the "Deaf Reality," by Matthew S. Moore and Linda Levitan. Deaf Life Press, 2003.

Inside Deaf Culture, by Carol A. Padden and Tom L. Humphries. Harvard University Press, 2006.



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Quran references are from The Holy Quran, translated by Abdullah Yusuf Ali. (New Delhi: Goodword Books, 2003).

Statistics regarding the world Muslim population taken from the Pew Research Center (pewresearch.org).

Statistics regarding least-reached people taken from Joshua Project (joshuaproject.net).