

What can my church do? (cont'd)

Mobilization

- Encourage the Deaf church or ministry to adopt a Deaf people group in another country, commit to its engagement for five years, and develop plans for how volunteers can follow through.
- Encourage the Deaf church or ministry to invite visiting home and/or international missionaries working with the Deaf to come and share about personal connections and involvement.
- Seek opportunities to reach out to the Deaf at universities and Deaf schools in their respective states.
- Join international missionaries during their annual meetings as part of a mission trip in order to encourage, serve, and support those who live and work on the field.

What is keeping the gospel from them?

There is no consistent, reliable Scripture in the heart language of the Deaf. Most struggle at various levels with English. Also, it is common for agencies and churches to use hearing people in efforts to reach the Deaf. Leaders in various settings tend to take paternalistic approaches to Deaf ministry instead of training that empowers the Deaf to lead and establish Deaf churches. Hearing models of church (including the same educational requirements for pastors) have not led to reproduction of Deaf churches or disciples. Several generations of dependency have produced Deaf Christians who often are the recipients of ministry but never are given the opportunity to minister shoulder-to-shoulder with hearing people in reaching their own people. The vision may have been shared, but it has never been transferred in a way that empowers Deaf believers to carry out the Great Commission equally with hearing people working with the Deaf. Instead of indigenous methods being developed, there has been a continued effort to adapt hearing approaches to church planting and ministry.



www.peoplegroups.info

If you cannot locate this people group in your community, find them online at

www.peoplegroups.info, a site sponsored by the North American Mission Board, SBC.

What are their needs?

The key needs among the Deaf include salvation, indigenous churches, resources, and relevance. Most are lost and have never been given a clear, indigenous presentation of the gospel message in a contextually-relevant format in their heart language. Access to Deaf churches with Deaf leaders is often very limited since most Deaf ministry models do not lend themselves to handing off responsibility to Deaf disciples. There is a great need for resources among the Deaf ministries and churches in North America. The lack of Deaf-driven, indigenous materials, resources, opportunities for service, training, and recognition have limited the “voice” of the Deaf who desire to take responsibility and have spiritual relevance in their own communities.

Information may be updated by writing peoplegroups@namb.net.

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Deaf of North America

Who are the Deaf?

Deaf people are people with a hearing loss. They comprise several different groups in North America. Usually, how they are categorized depends on how they view themselves, not their level of hearing loss. Whenever people with a hearing loss refer to themselves as “Deaf” (capital “D”), those people make a profound statement about their association with their community and cultural identity. They do not view their deafness as a disability, but see themselves as belonging to a people group where ASL/CSL (American Sign Language/Canadian Sign Language) is their heart language.

While there are 10 million who cannot hear (hard-of-hearing, hearing impaired, etc.), because they have varying limitations when it comes to their ability to hear and have a strong cultural identity with the hearing community, there are an approximately 1.65 million people who may be identified as Deaf. These are those who make up the “core” Deaf community. The Deaf community typically has been ostracized and faced discrimination. Although advances continue to be made in communication technology and methodology, the Deaf often have limited access to general information that is available for—and taken for granted by—the hearing public.



**Population in North America:
10 million**

**Language(s) “spoken” by the Deaf:
American Sign Language (ASL)
and/or Canadian Sign Language (CSL)**

**Top 5 locations with highest
population of Deaf in North America:**

1. New York City, NY
2. Los Angeles, CA
3. Chicago, IL
4. Houston, TX
5. Dallas/Ft. Worth, TX

What is their heritage?

There is a rich heritage among the Deaf community, and it centers on its culture. Vital elements included as part of the culture are history, educational institutions, drama, art, humor, storytelling, and language. The uniqueness of these elements is often misunderstood by the majority, hearing culture. Even though it parallels many cherished forms of expression and organization, it seldom intersects unless the majority culture has forced its will intentionally focused on the Deaf. Since heritage, values, and language are usually passed on by other Deaf youth and adults, the traditional means of transferring influence within the Deaf community usually bypasses the physical family since few Deaf children have Deaf parents.

“Deaf people tend to be interested in spiritual things and demonstrate a desire to maintain harmony with the various spiritual forces in the world around them.”

What are their beliefs?

The Deaf in North America are as religiously diverse as most of the rest of the population. That is not to say that a high percentage of them attend church on any given week. Catholics, evangelicals, and many of the cults, especially the Jehovah’s Witnesses, have reached out to Deaf communities. Evangelicals seem to lead the way in efforts to engage Deaf communities but often do so with a more paternalistic approach and view the Deaf more as objects of ministry, instead of co-laborers in the plan to reach their own. Deaf people tend to be interested in spiritual things and demonstrate a desire to maintain harmony with the various spiritual forces in the world around them. This often results in syncretism among the belief systems of the Deaf who attend church, however, this is largely due to the fact that most approaches to reach them are based on adapting hearing methods, structures, and strategies. Training and empowering Deaf disciples to take leadership responsibilities is a key element lacking in plans for outreach and in local Deaf ministries.

What can my church do?

Endvisioning — beginning with the end in mind

- Start with a survey locating Deaf (not hearing) networks.
- Plan a Deaf Awareness Day that is churchwide to raise interest and convey lostness.
- Invite Deaf leaders to speak and strategize with your church’s mission leaders about how to start a group strategically.

Prayer — focusing on the people as well as calling out workers to the harvest

- Pray that Deaf men and women would be willing to respond to the call of God on their lives to take leadership responsibilities in their churches and ministries.
- Pray that Deaf men, women, and youth will respond to the call of God for mission work— as volunteers and as long- and short-term personnel.
- Pray that interpreters would facilitate training and empower Deaf men and women to assume leadership among their congregations and ministries so the interpreters can work themselves out of a job.
- Pray that churches with ministries “to” the Deaf will begin see the Deaf as a people group with a need to develop indigenous resources and not as disabled people who need accommodation and adaptation.
- Lead people to pray for the lost Deaf in the cities on North America and around the world.
- Pray that Deaf men and women would be willing to respond to the call of God to assume leadership in their churches and ministries.

Transition a Deaf Ministry To a Deaf Church

- If your church has a Deaf ministry, begin investing and training leaders to assume more responsibility and seek ways that fully empower them.
- Work with the Deaf members of the hearing church to develop a strategic plan with an endvision that moves them to become their own congregation.
- Instead of utilizing hearing people who know signs to integrate the Deaf into a hearing congregation, consider using these signers to win and train the Deaf, and group them into indigenous Bible studies.
- Conduct a survey that locates Deaf networks; have a Deaf Awareness Day in the church; and invite Deaf Christian leaders to speak and strategize with mission leaders on starting groups strategically.

Scripture

- Work with the churches that are currently developing what is being called “a StoryOne Network” to make the Bible more accessible to the Deaf through the translation of Scripture stories into ASL. (StoryOne is an IMB project. To participate, e-mail deaf@imb.org.)
- Find ways to train local Deaf leaders in StoryOne practices that allow broader participation of Deaf believers in the local church and Deaf ministry.
- Give to Scripture translation projects currently being pursued both in North America and around the globe.
- Encourage interpreters to learn the processes of StoryOne translation in order to provide accurate, relevant Scripture stories for Deaf Christians.

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