Despite this significant need there is still considerable misunderstanding about Bible translation into sign languages and about the nature of sign languages themselves. Sadly, through poor awareness and understanding, it is possible that opportunities for vital ministry are being missed and the needs of Deaf communities overlooked, so this short briefing seeks to cover the key issues to be aware of as we all work to provide a Bible for Everyone.

**What can I do...**

Your first action should be to find out about the Deaf community in your country and the sign languages being used. How many are using sign languages? Is it an officially recognized language? How active is Deaf culture and are there Deaf churches and schools and an Association for the Deaf? Do some churches offer signed interpretation during services? Has any translation of the Bible into sign language been carried out already and how well is this used and accepted?

Discovering this information and contacting some of these organizations will help you to assess the need for sign language scriptures in your country.

**... and where can I get help?**

Global Bible Translation and Global Mission Exchange are working together to provide help and support in several ways:

- We can provide information and advice if you want to consider a project for the Deaf community in your country.

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**For further reading:**

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http://www.doorinternational.com/hearing/deaf-culture
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**Familiar questions**

“Isn’t a sign language just a set of signs for a spoken language?”

“I thought there was just one sign language used everywhere?”

“But Deaf people can see so why can’t they use our printed Bibles?”

If any of these comments seem familiar to you it’s not surprising, because these are very common ideas and questions. If you have lived in the ‘hearing’ world all your life and haven’t had contact with a Deaf community or Deaf culture you will inevitably have wrong ideas, or at least many unanswered questions.

**What is a sign language?**

A sign language is a visual language which uses a system of manual, facial and body movements as the means of communication. It has its own syntax and complex spatial grammar and is not in any way inferior to a spoken language; in fact in some ways it is a richer form of communication. In common with spoken languages a sign language may be used in different countries around the world and in some countries there are several sign languages in use.

Sign languages have their own origins and are quite distinct from the languages spoken in a country. For example American Sign Language and French Sign Language are part of the same sign language family and American Sign Language (ASL) is not at all similar to British Sign Language (BSL).
The significance of Deaf identity

Some missions are now describing the Deaf communities of the world as one of the largest and most unreached people groups in the world. In a world where the only complete sign language New Testament is in American Sign Language and no sign language has anything close to a complete Bible this is not hard to understand! But the idea of the Deaf as a people group is helpful for other reasons and vital to understand when trying to communicate in the most effective and appropriate way.

Def people as a linguistic minority have a common experience of life, and this is reflected in Deaf culture. Beliefs, identities, history, values and traditions are shared by Deaf people and Deaf culture is at the heart of Deaf communities. In some countries the Deaf community experience discrimination in the areas of employment, education and the legal system, and even if this has been corrected in recent years, the community may have an inherent mistrust of ‘hearing’ culture and society.

In societies across the world Deafness has often been wrongly equated with lack of intelligence and Deaf people have been deprived of equal opportunities. The histories of Deaf communities are full of examples of Deaf people suffering the inappropriate demands of a hearing culture instead of being allowed to communicate visually.

Why translate the Bible into sign languages?

For those who learn a sign language as their first language it quickly becomes the basis of their entire life experience: it is the way by which they express themselves, gain information and develop relationships. If they are going to encounter God’s Word and understand His message of love it has to be through this language, their ‘heart language’ - they need the Bible in sign language!

What is the UBS doing about this?

Our vision in the UBS is for a large number of Bible Societies to support and take part in Bible translation for sign languages so that scripture will become available for the first time in unreached Deaf communities. We are already working in several countries with international partners like SIL, DOOR and APSDA and essential local partners such as churches, Deaf schools and Associations and the Deaf community itself. But much more needs to be done: major sign languages used by millions of people are still without any verses from the Bible!

Early work started in some Bible Societies about 20 years ago, and there are projects now in a few, but during recent years sign language translation has received little attention. Now there are several reasons to give this ministry a new emphasis: there is improved understanding about how to create effective projects; there is greater sharing of skills and resources between ministry partners and technology provides better support for both the translation process and the distribution and use of the completed video translation.

‘Those who were not told about him will see, and those who have not heard will understand.’

Romans 15:21

(GNT)
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