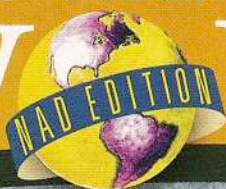


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# ADVENTIST WORLD



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# Do We Hear Them?

By  
LARRY R. EVANS

*Inclusion and recognition are the path to ministry with deaf individuals.*



**Top:** KENYA: A Deaf quartet in Nairobi. **Right:** KOREA: Larry Evans, liaison for GC International Deaf Ministries (front row, second from right) signs along with a Deaf Adventist church group in Korea. **Opposite page:** BRAZIL: A Deaf Sabbath school class in Hortolandia







## *Kindness is a language the deaf can hear and the blind can see.*

—MARK TWAIN

In many ways it was a Sabbath like any other. As a representative of the Seventh-day Adventist world church headquarters, I frequently speak in churches and other meetings while traveling on business. This particular Sabbath I had the privilege of addressing a group of church members attending a large regional gathering in Brazil. To close my message, I invited the group to stand together and hold hands during prayer. Nothing unusual about that—except that in this situation I was inadvertently exhibiting insensitivity toward the people before me, who were Deaf.<sup>1</sup>

“We don’t hold hands,” one person gently explained to me, “because we use them to pray. Instead, we sometimes touch feet with one another as a symbol of unity while one person uses their hands to pray and the rest of us look on.” Fortunately, I hadn’t asked them to bow their heads and close their eyes!

Developing a ministry for Adventists worldwide who are Deaf is part of my current responsibilities as associate in the General Conference Stewardship Department and liaison to the church’s International Deaf Ministries. For more than two decades I’ve gradually been learning about this unique culture, whose feelings of isolation, exclusion, and aloneness while living in a hearing world often go unnoticed. This experience taught me, however, that I still had much to learn.

### **A Worldwide People Group**

Estimates of the number of Deaf in the world are difficult to substantiate. Reports range from 93 million to more than 300 million, although it’s likely that

those termed “hard of hearing” are being included. According to Deaf World Ministries, if the Deaf “were gathered together in one place they would comprise the fourth-largest nation in the world.”<sup>2</sup> Suffice it to say, there’s a large international population of Deaf. Because they have difficulty communicating with the hearing world, few of us realize what a vast mission field they represent.

It’s estimated that only 2 percent of those within the Deaf culture are Christian.<sup>3</sup> To compound the challenge of sharing the gospel message with them, there is no single commonly used sign language. Within some countries, multiple sign language dialects are used. Recent research by Wycliffe Bible Translators concluded that nearly 400 identifiable deaf languages exist worldwide, for which only 40 have a Bible translation in some visual form.<sup>4</sup> That alone should cause us to pause and consider the urgency to reach out to this distinct people group.

Unlike some people groups, the Deaf are not gathered in specific geographic areas. Instead, they’re embedded within the general population and often connecting with them is difficult. One of the greatest challenges, however, hangs on the misunderstandings of who the Deaf are.

### **Disability Versus Culture**

It may surprise some, but if given the opportunity not all Deaf would choose to hear. I have asked large groups of Deaf in various countries, “If it were possible for you to hear, would that be something you would

want?” More than half said no. Why? Because for the Deaf, relationships are vital, and to become hearing would essentially mean leaving their cultural world of relationships.

One of the first thoughts that often comes to mind when hearing the term *deaf* is of someone who is disabled—but disabled compared with whom? Compared with the hearing, of course—as if every person, whether hearing or deaf, is proficient in every way. This concept is promoted with public signage often referred to as “signs for the handicapped,” when what the signs actually indicate is a lack of accessibility. No culture as a whole would appreciate being identified as “disabled.” It’s understandable that many Deaf are sensitive to this label.

There’s much more to deafness than not being able to hear. For example, the bond that the Deaf have with one another is very strong. It transcends the inability to hear as others do. Deaf cultures are as resilient and meaningful as other world cultures.

“Culture” is a reference to the full range of learned behavior patterns and a sense of identity. Deaf gatherings such as worship or Communion services, potlucks, or get-togethers with friends are filled with distinctive behavior patterns. Their language includes facial and hand expressions for communicating—not just words but a whole range of concepts.

Sometimes hearing persons may unintentionally appear insensitive to the Deaf because of not understanding the ways of their culture. And just as there is no single, common, world-



wide Deaf language, so too do Deaf cultures vary from region to region. The road of kindness begins with an intentional sensitivity to the personhood of the Deaf and the culture to which they belong.

### Unique Characteristics of the Deaf

Understanding grows by showing a genuine interest and listening intentionally. In order for that to happen, however, we must recognize some of the unique characteristics found among the Deaf. A few of the more notable and helpful insights include:

**1.** *Deaf language is an acknowledged language and for most in the hearing world it's a foreign language.* It's visual and gesture-based, and has its own idiomatic expressions. Communication with the Deaf goes beyond the mastery of the language. It's also connected to the relationship established with the person. By communicating from the heart, a huge first step is taken.

**2.** *Deafness is not a sign of weaker intelligence.* Most Deaf have a different learning process than that of hearing persons but "different" does not mean inferior. A deaf person usually thinks, not in terms of words, sentences, or abstractions, but rather in the context of visual, spatial, and concrete thought patterns.

**3.** *Deaf and hearing humor differs.* Because much of hearing humor is based on wordplay, the Deaf may or

may not "get it." They have their own sense of humor, which is obvious in any Deaf gathering. Many Deaf will laugh when they see others laughing at hearing humor, but in reality they often don't see the humor of the joke.

**4.** *Deaf music is rhythm- or beat-based.* It has three elements: timing, flow, and coordination. Hearing music has three elements as well: melody, harmony, and rhythm. Don't conclude that Deaf people are not musical because they cannot hear.

**5.** *The Deaf are visually oriented.* It's important for them to sit where there is an unobstructed line of sight with the signer. Many prefer the front of the church, where there are fewer visual distractions. A Deaf speaker is both the director and actor of the message.

By recognizing and appreciating these unique characteristics, those who are hearing can come to realize that the Deaf aren't disabled. They are "abled" differently from hearing people, and have abilities not usually found among the hearing cultural groups. Kindness sees the individual and affirms their personal worth.

### Are We Listening?

Although the Deaf actively share their concerns and hopes, their words often fall upon "deaf ears." I first realized this some 25 years ago while serving in North America as a special assistant to a conference president for multicultural ministries. I was attend-

ing pastoral meetings when I noted that our conference's only Deaf pastor didn't understand a word being said. He was attending simply out of loyalty. So I invited him into my office, and with the aid of a computer I shared highlights of the meetings.

"Why didn't I think of hiring an interpreter?" I wonder now. That experience served as my introduction to the Deaf culture.

### A Changing Landscape

Times are changing, and an arising awareness of Deaf cultures is gradually developing. Recently, at a meeting of the Deaf in Nairobi, Kenya, I learned of several Adventist Deaf who were attending Sunday churches. These churches were the only places in which they could worship in their own language. I was delighted when this group chose to attend the church meeting in Nairobi and to worship with us on Sabbath. They also brought their friends along to the Sabbath services. The union president in that region is now requesting each conference in his territory to educate and hire at least one Deaf pastor.

In Korea, a church facility for the Deaf was recently purchased. The local members say they are very grateful to have a place in which they can now worship and also use as a Deaf evangelistic center.

During a large meeting of the Deaf in Brazil, the enthusiasm of presenters



## ADVENTIST Deaf Ministries Web Sites

COMPILED BY LARRY R. EVANS

- Brazilian Seventh-day Adventist Web site for the Deaf:  
**[www.surdosadventistas.com.br](http://www.surdosadventistas.com.br)**
- Russian-Ukrainian site:  
**[www.deafasd.com](http://www.deafasd.com)**
- Three Angels Deaf Ministries:  
**[www.3angelsdeafministries.org](http://www.3angelsdeafministries.org)**

- Southern Deaf Fellowship  
(Sabbath service streamed each week):  
**[www.deafchurchonline.org](http://www.deafchurchonline.org)**
- Canadian Deaf Ministries International:  
**[www.deafhope.org](http://www.deafhope.org)**





**UKRAINE:** A group of Deaf young adults from Eastern Europe sight-seeing in Kiev following a division-wide deaf congress

and attendees, the ministry reports, and the resources exhibited revealed just how much a team of dedicated Deaf and hearing lay leaders can actually accomplish by working together. The vitality and exuberance displayed by the Deaf youth at that same meeting illustrated the strong witnessing potential of young adults.

The power of inclusion and recognition can be life-changing for both the hearing and the Deaf.

### Continued Challenges

Unfortunately many challenges still exist. A Canadian Deaf person tells of the suffering endured—all alone—as a result of a serious family crisis. Because the individual was Deaf, the obstacles involved in communicating with and getting support from the hearing world were too difficult to surmount. In France a group of Deaf Adventists wrote, “The Deaf often go unnoticed and are seldom even considered [part of the church]. They face exclusion in a society of hearing and sometimes in the church.”

A challenge in the United States is having limited funds available to hire interpreters for the Deaf in order to make worship services and other church meetings and events meaningful for them. A hearing wife of an active and employed Deaf pastor interprets her husband’s sermons for hearing individuals who attend their Deaf church, reasoning that she and

her husband “want to be an example to the hearing people by doing to others what we would like done for us.”

### Reaching Out to the Deaf

The implications behind three small words can make a huge difference when ministering with other cultures, including the Deaf. These words are “to,” “for,” and “with.” Ministry “to” implies no interaction and represents the least effective approach. Ministry “for” does show a higher level of concern but doesn’t reflect an interaction. A ministry emphasizing “with” opens the door for partnership and mentorship. It’s with this approach that the following suggested ministry strategy is outlined:

- *Love and compassion.* The foundation for any effective ministry is motivated by this twin combination.

- *Listening and observing.* Imposed strategies are neither welcomed nor appreciated. Get to know the “hearts” of the Deaf in your community.

- *Empathetic understanding.* Identifying with the Deaf comes through genuine interest and involvement with them.

- *Transparency and trust.* The Deaf are wary of hearing individuals who continually make promises but don’t follow through. Trust takes time to develop, but it’s the key to a lasting relationship.

- *Partnership in structuring for mission.* The Deaf aren’t ignorant. They have experience, ideas, and insights. Partner with them for ministry.

- *Development of Deaf leadership.* Any long-term ministry impact must be built around the development of more, not less, Deaf leadership at all levels of the church. This is a critical step if mission to the unreached Deaf is to be pursued seriously. We must not limit Deaf involvement only to ministries for the Deaf. They have valuable contributions for the full range of the church’s ministry.

- *Implementation of Deaf-sensitive mission strategies.* This is possible if the previous steps have been followed.

The ministry of “with” far exceeds

the limitations of ministries characterized by “to” and “for.” Such a ministry underscores the great need for more Deaf pastors and interpreters. We would do no less for any other unreached people group.

As paradoxical as it may seem, having blind, deaf, and hurting individuals among us are all important ingredients for the body of Christ if it is to become whole, and reminds that no part of the body is dispensable (see 1 Cor. 12:22, 23). They provide the opportunity for the true character of the church to reveal itself.

Ellen White emphasized this point when she wrote, “It is in the providence of God that ... the blind, the deaf, the lame ... have been placed in close Christian relationship to His church.... This is God’s test of our character.”<sup>5</sup>

The ways we relate to one another in this world of diversity speak volumes about who we are as individuals and as a church. In bold contrast to the conventional wisdom and practices of the world, the church must stand as a beacon of hope demonstrating that the value of a person begins with the heart. The prevailing question that every part of the body of Christ must ask is: “Do we hear them?” If so, how will we respond?

Kindness is but the first step, but it is where the journey must begin. ■

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<sup>1</sup> The author is emphasizing the fact that deaf individuals comprise a unique culture and therefore refers to them as “the Deaf” in this article.

<sup>2</sup> [www.deafworldministries.com/CDA\\_project.htm](http://www.deafworldministries.com/CDA_project.htm).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Wycliffe Bible Translators provided this information to the author via e-mail.

<sup>5</sup> Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 3, p. 511.



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