

The Deaf of Colombia

The Colombian Sign Language Community



Deaf people in Colombia are a linguistic group, not an ethnic, racial, or tribal group. Ethnically they reflect a similar mixture to the general population: perhaps about 5% black, 20% white, and 70% mixed, and possibly 5% indigenous. There may be around 100,000 deaf people in the country (about 0.2% of the general population, roughly 3 times the percentage for the developed world) but no one knows for sure, because no government agency counts the deaf.

They are found mostly in the lower socio-economic strata of society. Due to very inadequate education, many deaf are unemployed or under-employed and poor. Social pathologies of all kinds are more common among the deaf than among the general population: illiteracy, sexual abuse, divorce, teen-age pregnancy, prostitution, and homosexuality.

Very few deaf have meaningful relationships with their families, since few family members learn sign language. Especially in rural areas, many deaf are effectively household servants in their family homes.

Few deaf have any active spiritual life. Churches with interpretation for the deaf are few, and deaf-led churches using sign language are even fewer. The deaf are low-hanging fruit for marginal groups. There are more deaf Jehovah's Witnesses than deaf Evangelicals.

Primary Religion:

Nonreligious

Disciples (Matt 28:19):

0.5% Evangelical

Churches:

3 Deaf led/15-20 hearing led

Scripture Status (Matt 28:20):

Work in progress

Population (date):

Approximately 100,000



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Have They Heard the Gospel?

Call Themselves Christian (%)	10%
Believe In Jesus As God And Only Savior (%)	0.1%
Have Not Heard Who Jesus is (%)	90%
Number Of Pastors Comment (Pastors)	1 To the best of our knowledge, there is one deaf person serving as a pastor. There are several hearing (aka cross-cultural) folks serving in pastoral roles.
Number Of Missionaries Working Comment	4 We know of four foreign missionaries focused on the deaf. There are several Colombians (hearing) as well.
Response To The Gospel	Several hearing churches offer interpretation of their services for the deaf. While this is a valiant effort to be applauded, it has been largely unsuccessful in converting many deaf to the gospel. Historically many of these deaf groups within hearing churches show growth for a time, only to see a decline as the deaf move on to another church. Actual growth due to conversion has been very little. Recently three deaf-led congregations have been planted, which have produced some actual growth. This model has been highly resisted by many hearing churches.
Any Hindrance To Scripture Distribution?	Due to very low reading levels, most deaf have no access to a written Bible they can understand in Spanish, their second language. Video translation into sign language has been done for some portions, but distribution and use have proven very difficult.
Bilingualism	In recent years the deaf have begun to have contact with deaf in other countries via video chat. Colombian SL is similar enough to many other SL's that some communication is possible. Living in a country that uses Spanish, most deaf can read some Spanish, though very few can read enough to deal with government forms, the newspaper, or the Bible. Almost all deaf would count as "functionally illiterate" in Spanish. Almost no TV programs have closed captions, and almost no deaf can read the few captions that are available.

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What Kind Of Missionaries
Are Needed?

Cross-cultural missionaries are definitely needed. I am aware of a total of 4 such missionaries to the deaf in Colombia. I have also heard of one other couple who work with a very secretive organization, so I cannot confirm their presence.

Areas where cross cultural missionaries who will bother to learn Colombian Sign Language could contribute include:

- Literacy in Spanish.
- Life skills such as handling money, getting and keeping a job, preventing sexually transmitted diseases.
- Practical vocational skills for employment.
- Evangelism.
- Personal discipleship, especially of leaders.
- Leadership development in ministry and church planting skills.
- Planting churches with deaf leadership (note: Hearing-led churches for the deaf do not work well.) Missionaries are doing work that trained hearing Colombians could do but aren't currently.

Number of Congregations
Serving Group

3 deaf led and 15 to 20 hearing led

Number of Congregations Using SL
In Their Services

3

Primary Language of Communication
and Trade

Spanish

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Status of Christianity

Church Growth

Bible Schools open to the deaf, equivalent to a one-year full-time curriculum

Religion & Response

Attitude To Christianity

Somewhat receptive

Attitude To Religious Change

Somewhat receptive

Spiritual Climate And Openness

In line with the country as a whole, generally quite open.

Recommended Approaches

Deaf sharing with other deaf, equipping them for evangelism. People going to new areas without deaf work.

Scripture

Is The Word Of God Translated?

Bible translation in progress, and the story of Jonah was published in 2000. Jesus film scheduled for publication in 2003 by International Missions Board (Southern Baptist).
Medium: book of line drawings and illustrations. The first portion (1 New Testament book) specifically for the deaf was published in 2011

Medium:

Book of line drawings and illustrations.

Other Forms Of Gospel Available

Literature: No

Other Forms Of Gospel Available

Recordings: No

Other Forms Of Gospel Available

Film/Videos: No

Other Forms Of Gospel Available

Radio: No