

The Deaf of El Salvador

The El Salvadoran Sign Language Community



There is an estimated 15,000 deaf signers in El Salvador, 0.25% of the population of El Salvador. The deaf community of El Salvador indicates that they are composed of mainly three language groups: roughly 65% use Salvadoran Sign Language (LESSA), about 20% use a Salvadoran variety of American Sign t deaf university graduates are now between 22 and 27 years of age. There are three deaf associations in El Salvador. In response to past and present social oppression, the Deaf community is very engaged in struggles for equal access to information, employment, and social and civil rights.

Language (ASL) (either mixed with LESSA or following Spanish word order), and 10% use a combination of Costa Rican Sign Language (LESCO) and LESSA. In addition, roughly 5% live in rural areas and may use home signs. Bilingualism among ASL and LESSA users is common. Generational deaf families tend to use LESSA.

Most deaf Salvadorans work as low-paid laborers, although some are teachers or work with computers. The deaf community has not historically had access to quality education (Caceres 2001); however, advocacy of the deaf community and deaf education has been slowly improving and expanding to serve more geographic areas over the last 15 years. Five public schools and one private school serve deaf students exclusively.

There are also various mainstream and alternative educational opportunities. A group of the deaf indicated that the deaf community's highest needs are: improved deaf education, developed and expanded use of LESSA, and standardization and certification for the interpretation vocation. The Bible in Spanish is largely inaccessible to most deaf Salvadorans because of low Spanish literacy levels. A team from San Salvador is currently working toward a LESSA Bible translation. Deaf people congregate at a variety of Catholic or Evangelical Christian churches and Jehovah's Witness Kingdom Halls where services are translated through an interpreter. There are two deaf congregations which conduct services in Salvadoran variety ASL.

Primary Religion:

Christianity

Disciples (Matt 28:19):

Almost none

Churches:

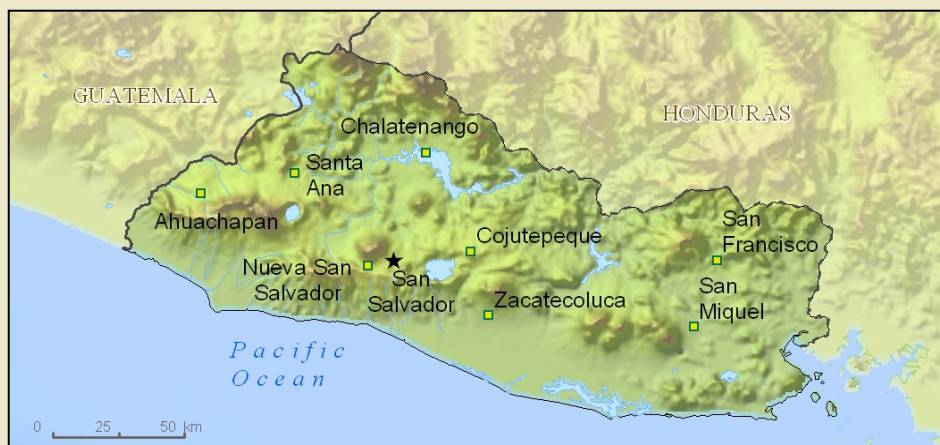
None

Scripture Status (Matt 28:20):

Unavailable

Population (date):

15,000 (2009)



The El Salvadoran Sign Language Community

Have They Heard the Gospel?

Hindrances to Scripture

The Spanish Bible is inaccessible to most deaf Salvadorans. There are widely distributed Jehovah's Witness ASL Scripture, but deaf Salvadorans express it to be unintelligible. While there are interpreted Catholic, Evangelical and Jehovah's Witness services, deaf Salvadorans express frustration at the low quality of interpretation. Two churches are directed by a deaf pastor, who uses Salvadoran variety ASL. Most services are not directed in a culturally Deaf way. A San Salvador team is working toward a LESSA Bible translation. Because of variation, it may not meet the needs of other segments of the Salvadoran deaf community.

Response to the Gospel

While attendance at Catholic, Evangelical and Jehovah's Witness churches seems to be stable or slowly climbing, few deaf people appear to be growing in their faith. Many attend church in order to socialize with other deaf people or as "good" religious practice. Perhaps 0.017% (250 people) out of the current deaf population of 15,000 are self-professing, active Christ followers.

Bilingualism

Many LESSA users have conversational ability in a Salvadoran variety of ASL. Many primarily Salvadoran variety ASL users are fluent in LESSA. Some of those who use the LESCO-LESSA mix in the eastern region can code switch to using the San Salvador LESSA variety. Since Spanish is not a native language for most deaf Salvadorans, only a small percentage have enough bilingualism in Spanish to benefit from Spanish literature or complete higher education using it. In general, literacy in written Spanish increases with each subsequent generation among those who have attended school since childhood.

Are Cross-Cultural Missionaries Needed?

Training for quality education, development of LESSA and materials in LESSA, and interpretation standardization is needed. Cross-cultural missionaries could be those who do not share Deaf culture (hearing people) or those that do not share Salvadoran culture; both types are needed to train pastors, leaders, and Bible translators.

Number of Christian Congregations Serving Group

Most Christian congregations serving deaf people are found in the San Salvador metro area while rural areas have fewer congregations.

The El Salvadoran Sign Language Community

Number of Congregations Using Primary Local Language

There are three language varieties in use in the Salvadoran deaf community. There are no congregations which primarily use either LESSA or LESCO in their services. Two congregations (led by the same deaf Salvadoran pastor) use the Salvadoran variety of ASL in their services, although many of his congregants are from the LESSA-using community.

Language of Outside Communication or Trade

Spanish

The El Salvadoran Sign Language Community

Group Description

Geographical/Environmental

Location	South of Guatemala, southwest of Honduras, north of and across the bay from Nicaragua.
Climate	Tropical; rainy season (May to October); dry season (November to April); tropical on coast; temperate in uplands

Language/Linguistics

Attitude Towards Mother Tongue	Very receptive
Second Languages	ASL, Spanish
Other MT of this Group	Spanish, ASL, LESCO, Home sign or gesture.
Other Groups Speaking Language	None
Linguistically Related	ASL and possibly other Central American sign languages.
Neighbor Languages	LenSeGua (Guatemalan Sign Language) LESHQ (Honduran Language) LESCO (Costa Rican Sign Language)
Sign	

Literacy

Adult Literacy	In Spanish, very few adults are literate enough to read and write well.
Literacy Attitude	In LESSA, language and literature development is viewed as one of the top three desires of the deaf community and is viewed as crucial to the survival of the culture. (In Spanish) Literacy is viewed positively and as a key to the success of the community, although to a lesser extent than that in LESSA.
Active Program	Literacy Circles for the Deaf, the Ministry of Education bilingual education program
Publications in Mother Tongue	None.
Comments	Some videos have been made by members of the deaf community and posted on the Internet as a way to disperse information.

Economics

Unemployment Rate	The unemployment rate for El Salvador is estimated at 6.3% for the year 2008. The unemployment rate for deaf Salvadorans is much higher than this, as reported by the deaf community. Typical deaf occupations include mechanics, sewing, vending, construction, janitorial work, woodwork, hairstyling, and factory jobs.
Modernization/Utilities	The deaf Salvadoran community utilizes the modern tools used by the communities in which they live, whether they are in urban and developed or rural/less developed areas.

The El Salvadoran Sign Language Community

Community Development

Clothing	Typical Western Clothing
Transportation	Public motorized transportation and walking. A few deaf people in the capital have cars. Few have driver's licenses.
Infant Mortality Rate	2.2%
Life Expectancy	72.33 years
Comments	Mortality rates reported are for the entire country, but it is anticipated that they are similar for the Salvadoran deaf community.

Society

Family Structures	The cultural nuclear family has been weakened by wars in recent generations. Many children are raised by their mothers and grand mothers. Deaf children, when grown, tend to relationally separate from their birth families in order to associate more with other deaf people.
Social Habits/Groupings	Deaf Salvadorans tend to associate mostly with other deaf Salvadorans, at a deeper level than they do even with their hearing families.
Identification with Nat'l Culture	The deaf community of El Salvador feels that they are a sub-culture of the wider Salvadoran community; being deaf makes them unique from Salvadoran hearing culture and being Salvadoran sets them apart from other deaf communities.
Self Image	Depressed
Attitude to Outsiders	Somewhat resistant
Attitude to Changes	Somewhat receptive
Cultural Change Pace	Medium
Local Language Broadcasting	Less than 20 min daily
Comments	Some important announcements and news broadcasts are interpreted into LESSA on TV. No broadcasts are produced by deaf people or native signers.

Education/Youth

Primary Schools	6 schools for the Deaf, 17 pull-out classrooms for deaf students, 21 Literacy Circles for the deaf (alternative education)
Secondary Schools	1 school for the Deaf, several EducaMe (Independent Study) programs
Language of Instruction in	LESSA and Spanish in public schools, Salvadoran variety ASL the private school.
Language of Textbooks	Spanish
Unmixed Schools	6
Problems/Needs	Quality of education, early intervention, strengthening LESSA development

Religion

Religions	Roman Catholic Christianity Evangelical Christianity Jehovah's Witness
Primary Religion	Roman Catholic Christianity

The El Salvadoran Sign Language Community

Status of Christianity

Church Growth

Reached Status	Unreached
Total Believers	Perhaps 150
Pastors	1
Churches	2
Bible Schools	2
Comments	The two Bible schools are both informal training groups; one through Efata, the deaf church, and the other through Iglesia Nuevo Pacto.

History of Christianity Group

Year Began	1982
By Whom	Pastor Mario Estrada and related Southern Baptist ministers
Significant Events	Establishing of Escuela Cristiana de Sordos, 1987

Scripture/Literature/Media Status

Translation Status	Definite Need, Work in Progress
Available Scripture	Spanish, none
Available Form	Future: Video
Hindrances to Scripture Distribution	The Bible is largely inaccessible to most deaf Salvadorans. There are widely distributed Jehovah's Witness scriptures distributed in ASL, but deaf Salvadorans express that they are unintelligible. While there are interpreted Catholic, Evangelical and Jehovah's Witness services, only two churches in the country are directed by a deaf pastor, who uses a combination of Salvadoran variety ASL and LESSA. Most services are of little cultural relevance because they are directed in a Hearing, not Deaf, cultural way. Many deaf Salvadorans also express frustration at the low quality of interpretation in church services. A team from San Salvador is working toward a Bible translation in LESSA but because of geographical sign language variation, it may not reach the Scripture needs of other segments of the Salvadoran deaf community.

Reason for Urgent Need Explained	Scripture is not available in an understandable form to this people group. There is lots of desire to grow but the inaccessibility of God's word hinders this and makes believers and others susceptible to heresy and deception.
----------------------------------	---

Comments	The Bible is available in the wider language of communication, Spanish, but is only accessible to the small percentage of those who read Spanish well.
----------	--

The El Salvadoran Sign Language Community

Missions/Churches Working Among Group

Organization #1	Iglesia Bautista Miramonte and Toni McAndrew with LAM
Main Ministry	Evangelism and Church Planting, literacy in Spanish, Bible Translation
Adherents	20-30
Number of Congregations	1
Use of Local Language	3-5 (by people not of this people group)
Total expatriate missionaries	1
Total national missionaries	2-5
Total local workers	20
Comments	The Bible Translation group is comprised of about 20 people from 3 different churches, but is housed in IBM
Organization #2	Efata Deaf Church
Main Ministry	Church Planting, Evangelism, Discipleship
Adherents	90-100
Number of Congregations	2; one in San Salvador and another in Sonsonate
Use of Local Language	This church utilizes Salvadoran variety ASL.
Total Expatriate Missionaries	0
Total National Missionaries	0
Total Local Workers	1 pastor and about 10 lay workers
Comments	The leaders of this church believe that ASL is appropriate for use in church, and discourage the use of LESSA in church.
Organization #3	Escuela Cristiana para Sordos
Main Ministry	Education, Literacy, Evangelism
Adherents	80
Number of Congregations	1
Use of Local Language	0
Total Expatriate Missionaries	0
Total Local Workers	15-20: 7 deaf teachers, hearing teachers, administrators, staff, and support network
Comments	This school uses Signed Exact Spanish adapted from ASL.

Responsiveness

Attitude to Christianity	Somewhat receptive
Attitude to Religious Change	Somewhat resistant
Spiritual Climate and Openness	Somewhat indifferent desire and strong need
Comments on Responsiveness	Deaf Salvadorans tend to respond openly to the gospel when it is presented to them in a culturally and linguistically Deaf way. When this does not happen, those who do attend church do not seem to grow or learn. They may sit through a service, but benefit little from the truth because it is not presented in their language or in a culturally relevant way.
Recommended Ways to Reach Group	Begin work with the government's Ministry of Education in order to train the educational system in early intervention and bilingual education; provide the new Bible Translation team with training, resources, financial support, and prayer support.

The El Salvadoran Sign Language Community

Current Needs

Educational quality improvement, LESSA Literature development, Standardization of the interpreting vocation, advocacy within the wider society and for human rights, Bible translation, access to media and information.

Items for Prayers

All of the above; in addition, prayer for reconciliation between factions that have formed within the community.