

# WORD *Alive*

Wycliffe Bible Translators of Canada • Summer 2009

Let  
*Hands  
Speak*  
& Eyes Listen

*Wycliffe aids Bible translation  
into sign languages for the Deaf.*

*New  
Director  
Named*

---

*JAARS  
Receives  
First Kodiak  
Aircraft*

---

*Missio Dei in  
the Midst of  
Uncertainty*

**Word Alive**, which takes its name from Hebrews 4:12a, is the official publication of Wycliffe Bible Translators of Canada. Its mission is to inform, inspire and involve the Christian public as partners in the worldwide Bible translation movement.

**Editor:** Dwayne Janke

**Designer:** Laird Salkeld

**Senior Staff Writer:** Doug Lockhart

**Staff Writers:** Janet Seever, Deborah Crough

**Staff Photographer:** Alan Hood

**Director of Communications:** Dave Crough

**Word Alive** is published four times annually by Wycliffe Bible Translators of Canada, 4316 10 St NE, Calgary, AB T2E 6K3. Copyright 2009 by Wycliffe Bible Translators of Canada. Permission to reprint articles and other magazine contents may be obtained by written request to the editor. A donation of \$12 annually is suggested to cover the cost of printing and mailing the magazine. (Donate online or use the reply form in this issue.) Printed in Canada by McCallum Printing Group, Edmonton.

**Member:** The Canadian Church Press, Evangelical Press Association.

**For additional copies:** [media\\_resources@wycliffe.ca](mailto:media_resources@wycliffe.ca)

**To contact the editor:** [editor\\_wam@wycliffe.ca](mailto:editor_wam@wycliffe.ca)

**For address updates:** [circulation@wycliffe.ca](mailto:circulation@wycliffe.ca)

**Note to readers:** References to "SIL" are occasionally made in *Word Alive*. SIL is a key partner organization, dedicated to training, language development and research, translation and literacy.



*Partners in Bible Translation*

**Wycliffe Canada Vision Statement:** A world where translated Scriptures lead to transformed lives among people of all languages.

### Translating Scripture, Transforming Lives

Together with partners worldwide, we serve indigenous people through language-related ministries, especially Bible translation and literacy. Our goal is to empower local communities to express God's love in Word and deed—for personal, social and spiritual transformation. Wycliffe personnel currently serve globally in nearly 1,500 language projects for more than a half billion people. However, about 2,400 minority groups still wait for the power of God working through their own languages. Wycliffe invites you to participate in this effort through prayer, service and funding.

**Canadian Head Office:** 4316 10 St NE, Calgary, AB T2E 6K3. Phone: (403) 250-5411 or toll free 1-800-463-1143, 8:30 a.m.–4:30 p.m. mountain time. Fax: (403) 250-2623. Email: [info@wycliffe.ca](mailto:info@wycliffe.ca)

**Cover:** Estrella Camacho, Catalan Sign Language Bible translator, leads worship at a Deaf church service near Barcelona, Spain (see story, pg. 24). Photograph by Alan Hood.

## In Others' Words

"... The Scriptures obtain full authority among believers only when men regard them as having sprung from heaven, as if there the living words of God were heard."

—John Calvin (1509-1564),  
French theologian and reformer,  
in *Institutes of the Christian Religion*

# [foʊ wɔːd] Foreword

## Give Me a Sign (Name)

Dwayne Janke



Photographer Alan Hood and I were with 15 African sign language Bible translators for only a few days when they began brainstorming about us. They insisted that we have sign names—standard cultural practice for anyone who visits or joins a group of Deaf\*.

Our Wycliffe colleague Harry Harms had finger-spelled our names D-w-a-y-n-e and A-l-a-n for the translators, who were being trained at the Deaf Opportunity OutReach (DOOR) centre in Nairobi, Kenya. But that couldn't replace a real sign name; one based on some important or distinct physical or non-physical characteristic of ours. I had fears these young, fun-loving Africans would want to represent my larger-than-average nose or my balding head. Who would want to get labelled with those names?

Fortunately, through consensus, they decided on representing something less embarrassing: my glasses and beard, a distinct combination among this group. To introduce myself to other Deaf from now on, I make a fist just in front and to the side of my eye, with the heel of my hand pointing ahead and my thumb and index finger outstretched above and below my eye. That's the "glasses" part. Then I open that same hand and rub my fingers down the side of my face. That's the "beard" part. My sign name is literally "Glasses-Beard."

I felt more accepted by the Deaf having this sign name and they were always excited to see me use it, which I did for the rest of our trip this past September. Still, it was difficult to really enter the Deaf

world beyond a superficial level without knowing the sign languages they speak to share their deepest thoughts and emotions. A huge communication barrier divides us.

Similarly, it is very difficult for God's truth in His Word to enter and impact the lives of the Deaf, unless it comes in their heart languages—sign languages. For this reason, Wycliffe workers are on the cusp of an accelerating effort to translate Scriptures into the 200-400 estimated sign languages used by Deaf people worldwide.

In this issue of *Word Alive*, we take you to Africa and Spain to see this cutting-edge translation work in action. We also have stories about related efforts to: 1) develop software to aid in sign language animation, 2) offer sign language translation training, and 3) determine the translation need in Asia (by a Canadian).

I have no doubt that God wants many more names of Deaf people in His Book of Life, just as He does hearing folks. And maybe there will even be an extra column of information in that book... titled "Sign Name." 🌱

Without knowing the sign languages that the Deaf use to share their deepest thoughts and emotions, a huge communication barrier divides us.

\* To emphasize that Deaf cultures are distinct from hearing cultures, people often write "Deaf" when referring to a linguistic-cultural group, and "deaf" for the audiological condition of people. This approach is used in this magazine.



6

## Contents

### Features

Articles By Dwayne Janke • Photographs by Alan Hood

6 **It's a Time of the Signs** Led by a Kenyan farmer and aided by Wycliffe expertise, DOOR International mobilizes Deaf sign language Bible translators in Africa.

18 **Vital Signs** Diagnosis: Many of the world's Deaf are in spiritual ill health. Part of the prescription: translate God's Word into sign languages.

24 **Signs Along the Way** As God leads, Wycliffe's Steve and Dianne Parkhurst are juggling not one, but two, sign language projects in Spain.

### Departments

2 **Foreword** Give Me a Sign (Name).

4 **Watchword** Wycliffe Canada Board Names New Director.

34 **Beyond Words** Ring of the Lord's.  
*Photograph by Alan Hood*

35 **Last Word** *Missio Dei* in the Midst of Uncertainty.  
*By Kirk Franklin*



18



24

**Corrections:** For various reasons, several mistakes were made in the Spring 2009 issue of *Word Alive*. Danny Foster actually coordinates *training* for translation projects in the Uganda-Tanzania Branch of SIL International. In the page 6/7 photo, he is driving through Lamadi, not Musoma. In photos on page 3 (top) and page 12, Foster is visiting Mikumi National Park. *Word Alive* regrets the errors.

# Vitals

Diagnosis: Many of the world's Deaf are in spiritual ill health. Part of the prescription: translate God's Word into sign languages.





**W**hen you ask Geoffrey Hunt why Bible translation for the world's Deaf is so important, he is quick to spell out the facts.

"They're the last people to hear anything about anything, and that includes spiritual things," says Hunt, leader of the sign language leadership team for SIL International, Wycliffe's partner organization. "I've heard them described as the most unevangelized group in the world."

Sadly, he says, the gospel has been embraced by only about two per cent of the world's 20 million Deaf (the total population figure Hunt is comfortable using, though estimates vary widely). Lack of accessible Scriptures is a major reason for the spiritual ill health among the Deaf.

But why can't the Deaf just read the Scriptures in the languages of wider communication of their country: Spanish in Spain or Swahili in Kenya, for example?

"For one thing," says Hunt, "it's not their language, so they are having to use a second language, a foreign language, really, in order to understand it."

"Secondly, the words as they are written usually represent sounds. They've never heard these sounds. They've never heard these words used in context and so it is like learning a set of telephone numbers for each concept. Reading is very hard for the Deaf."

Deaf children who come through the American school system, for example, on average end up with a Grade 4 reading level in English.

"Now some people make it; the brilliant ones make it. But the gospel was never intended for just the brilliant ones," stresses Hunt. "If you go to the New Testament, Jesus was out in the countryside teaching the ordinary people."

### **Turning An Ear To The Deaf**

Hunt and his wife Rosemary began their years of service in 1971, among the Hanga [HUNG-ah] of northern Ghana. In 1983, after closely working with local people, the Hanga New Testament was published—the 200th involving Wycliffe and SIL.

Before the Scriptures came, there were no churches or Christians among the then 3,000 to 4,000 Hanga people. Today, the situation is much different.

Hunt, currently living near the Wycliffe U.K. main office at Horsley's Green in

The choir at Harvest Mission Deaf Church in Nairobi, Kenya, uses Kenyan Sign Language to sing a song for the congregation of more than 80. This vibrant church, which operates totally in sign language, is a rarity among the world's Deaf. The gospel has been embraced by only about two per cent of the Deaf, and lack of Scriptures in their signed heart languages is a major reason why.

England, points to Josiah, a Hanga fetish priest who found Jesus as Lord and Saviour in the pages of God's Word in his mother tongue. Today he is a pastor, wanting to build a church that will hold 5,000 people.

"When I see what the Lord has done among the Hanga in Ghana because they have the Scriptures . . .," says Hunt, his voice trailing off with emotion.

Hunt's personal knowledge of the Hanga situation illustrates the potential he envisions for the Word of God among the Deaf—if it was available in their mother tongues, their sign languages.

**"Now some [deaf] people make it; the brilliant ones make it. But the gospel was never intended for just the brilliant ones."**

Unfortunately, the Deaf have been among the last people to be considered for Bible translation. In fact, while Wycliffe has worked among language groups, like the Hanga, for more than seven decades, it has only more recently focused some attention on sign languages.

Many Deaf sign languages only developed within the past several hundred years, says Hunt, as increasing groups of Deaf congregated in sufficient numbers in urban areas. "Sign languages develop where there is a need, and if there is no established sign language there, they will develop one to fill the vacuum."

These visual, iconic forms of communication are distinct from region to region and country to country.

**"Sign languages develop where there is a need, and if there is no established sign language there, they will develop one to fill the vacuum."**

In the late 19th century, some social engineers and educators in the Western world decided that all Deaf people should be taught to lip read and speak the surrounding oral language they never heard, to integrate them into the hearing world.

"It took about a hundred years for people to really

find out that it really doesn't work," says Hunt. These kinds of integration efforts have helped create the animosity Deaf people often feel towards domination by the surrounding hearing society.

### A Bit Of History

Wycliffe personnel have been involved in sign language work since the late 1980s, including early research and translation in Mexico, Spain (see story, below) and then Colombia. Starting in the mid-'90s, a sign language emphasis was added to linguistic and translation training courses run by SIL at the University of North Dakota (see sidebar, below). Survey of sign languages has started in the Americas, Eurasia and Asia. SIL has also begun sign language-related work in partnership with DOOR International (see story, pg. 6), Southern Baptist's International Missions Board and United Bible Societies.

About a year ago, a more formal sign language leadership team was created for Wycliffe to give clearer direction to a ramped-up sign language translation effort, currently involving about 50 Wycliffe personnel worldwide. Included on the leadership team is a key representative from the Deaf community, Stuart Thiessen of DOOR International (see related story, pg. 15). Increased Deaf perspective is crucial to the future work, says Hunt. "As an international group, we want to be able to make strategic decisions."

### 230 And Counting

Today, sign languages have a growing profile in Wycliffe efforts to see every language receive a Bible translation that needs one. But how many sign languages are there? Officially, SIL's *Ethnologue* of the world's languages lists 121 sign languages. But that falls well short of what the sign language team anticipates will be added in future editions after more research.

"We're expecting quite a few more," Hunt

**More On The Web:** To see a list of officially recognized sign languages in the *Ethnologue*, visit <[www.ethnologue.com](http://www.ethnologue.com)>, click "Language Family" & then "Deaf sign language."

says. "We know of about 230 at the moment and we are expecting over 400 in total."

Hunt says every nation seems to have an average of two sign languages—probably a conservative number.

To clarify the number of sign languages, plenty of language survey is needed. So far, SIL has three surveyors in the Americas, one in Africa and two in Asia (including a Canadian, see pg. 22). Another one is coming on board to do survey in the Pacific. She is from Sweden, the first Deaf member in Wycliffe.

Other Deaf members are in the application pipeline preparing to join the team in various sign language-related roles. It is



Ugandan Sign Language.



Tanzanian Sign Language.



Ghanaian Sign Language.



Spanish Sign Language.



Catalan sign Language (northeast Spain).

## A New Kind of Class

Each summer for 57 years, SIL has trained Bible translators and language workers through its linguistic courses at the University of North Dakota (UND). But since 2002, a new kind of class has been available.

The unique teaching is geared to those wanting to translate God's Word for the Deaf.

It's not surprising that Wycliffe member Albert Bickford set up the courses. Now SIL-UND director, Bickford has been an enthusiastic advocate, as well as an adviser, networker and researcher for sign language Bible translation within Wycliffe, since the mid-1980s.

Offering sign language-related training was an obvious step in the push to provide God's Word to the Deaf, says the 54-year-old Minnesota native. "In 2002, we had students from around the world who were involved with 10 different sign languages."

This past year, four deaf students and eight hearing students proficient in American Sign Language (ASL) attended the courses. ASL is

used in classes with or without interpretation in English.

"It is better if a class or meeting involving Deaf people can be conducted entirely in sign," he explains. "That allows everyone to participate fully and normally."

At least 10 SIL-UND students are now serving in sign language work on the field, with another five-10 still preparing to go.

Bickford's vision is to see the number of deaf students grow. The curriculum also needs further fine-tuning to meet the developing field needs, he says.

"I'm just happy and grateful," Bickford adds, "to have had the opportunity to see this one part of what God is doing to bring His Word to Deaf people around the world."

**More on the Web:** For details about SIL-UND signed language courses, visit <[www.und.edu/dept/linguistics/catalog.htm](http://www.und.edu/dept/linguistics/catalog.htm)> & click "Signed languages."

One common misconception among hearing people is that the world's Deaf use one, universal sign language. In fact, there are likely up to 400 sign languages globally. *Word Alive* photographer Alan

Hood took these multiple frames of people as they signed the phrase "God's Word is powerful!" in five sign languages. The differences from country to country, and even within countries, are quite apparent.



## Sign Language Translation for the Deaf

■ Countries where Bible or Bible story translation, or preparatory work, is underway for sign language.

■ Countries where a sign language translation of the New Testament is completed.

Source: Mark Penner, on behalf of the United Bible Societies Sign Language Study Group.



challenging, however, to make a large, hearing-based organization like Wycliffe “Deaf friendly,” says Hunt. It may be best to second these workers to Deaf-run agencies, such as DOOR

**“We know of about 230 [sign languages] at the moment and we are expecting over 400 in total!”**

International. “We’ve got to find the right way to empower the Deaf.”

Wycliffe could use 30 couples and/or individuals in a fairly short time. This includes hearing personnel who Hunt says must know a sign language “really fluently” and have exposure to the Deaf as a basis to succeed on the field.

“We need people in a whole range of services. We need people who . . . are going to be able to work with Deaf groups, to empower them to do their translation,” says Hunt. “We need

people that can coordinate so the Deaf are the leaders of the projects but the hearing people are there to support what the Deaf want to see happen.”

This will include providing administration and getting resources for sign language projects, such as: funding, translation materials, training and translation consultants. It is estimated that the worldwide effort will need at least 50 Bible translation consultants to specifically check work done in sign language.

### 3D Solutions

Beyond getting personnel, there is the challenge of how to present translated Scriptures in sign language, says Hunt. While the stages in sign language Bible translation are generally similar to those for

## ‘Hope’ for Asia’s Deaf

At 74 years of age, many people would be enjoying retirement. Not Hope Smith.\* She is still making a contribution to Bible translation as the only Canadian serving in sign language-related work with SIL, Wycliffe’s partner organization.

“I have enjoyed my work, and the Lord has given me good health, so I see no need to cut back yet!” says Hope, who previously spent 30 years in a Scripture translation project for a Southeast Asia language group of 15,000.

In the past 10 years, Hope has been doing language survey research for Deaf signed languages in Asia, a crucial step in determining Bible translation needs.

Hope, whose dad was an interpreter, has been interested in sign language since she was a child. While serving in Asia in 1992, Hope took American Sign Language classes “just for fun.” She developed some fluency in the language through

further instruction while periodically back in Canada.

SIL colleagues in Asia asked Hope to do research in several countries. She was subsequently assigned to conduct language surveys for the Asia area. Hope has surveyed sign languages in nine countries and so far one of them has a translation project underway.

Survey begins by getting as many Deaf contacts as possible from a country’s Deaf association or Deaf schools, usually in the capital city. With help from a signer of the language, Hope videotapes several Deaf individuals signing 240 items from a list. These signs from several individuals in a province or state are compared to the signs found in other provinces or states in the same country to see whether one or more sign languages are used there.

Doing sign language survey among the Deaf has not been

easy. Hope has climbed mountains to reach isolated groups of Deaf, experienced hypothermia, and taken dozens of airplane flights in just one country to gather data. She’s also experienced culture shock interacting with the Deaf.

As she finishes up writing her most recent survey report, Hope is not sure what her next assignment will be. But she is sure of the need for Scriptures for Asia’s Deaf communities so they can understand God’s truth.

“In one country that I visited,” she says, “there were said to be about one million believers, but we met only one Deaf believer and one other Deaf who was interested. That was an extreme case, but all over Asia, except for the Philippines, the situation is not much better.”

\* pseudonym used for the surname, due to sensitivity



Geoffrey Hunt, leader of the sign language leadership team for SIL International, Wycliffe's key partner organization, views an early example of 3D sign language animation. Animation is an important emerging technology for presenting Bible translations in sign language for the world's Deaf.

spoken languages—drafting, exegetical work, community testing, and consultant checks—the formats are different.

Text in translations for spoken/written languages can easily be changed on a computer screen. However, sign language translations ultimately must be done on video, explains Hunt.

**“We need people who . . . are going to be able to work with Deaf groups, to empower them to do their translation.”**

Correcting and editing such a presentation is time consuming and technically difficult.

In addition, some videotaped signers who present translated Scriptures may not be accepted by all Christian Deaf groups (Protestant vs. Catholic, for example). Other Deaf signers, living in countries with sensitive political or religious situations, do not want to be pictured for fear of suffering persecution.

To deal with these technical and social challenges, a team at JAARS, Wycliffe's technical arm, has been asked to create special software used with inexpensive equipment (see related story, pg. 28). It will visually capture the movements of Deaf persons signing Bible translations and transfer them into 3D animated characters.

“We want this to be a tool that anybody in a Deaf community can use,” says Hunt.

### **Not An Accident**

Ultimately, though, Bible translation in sign language is about more than techniques and strategies. It's about providing Scriptures to help the Deaf understand the special place that God holds for them in His heart. Hunt points to two specific Bible passages.

One is the account in Exodus, when God tells Moses at the burning bush: “Who gave man his mouth? Who makes him deaf or mute?” (Exodus 4:11 NIV)

“For the Deaf,” says Hunt, “it is so important for them to know that God made them, to realize that they weren't just an accident.”

The second passage is Jesus' healing of the Deaf man in the New Testament (Mark 7:31-35). Christ took the man aside by himself, a unique approach among all of Christ's miracles performed on people.

**“For the Deaf, it is so important for them to know that God made them, to realize that they weren't just an accident.”**

“One—Jesus had time for the Deaf person. That's very important,” explains Hunt. “Two—he took him away from the crowd. When Deaf

people are among crowds, they are really confused. It is important that they can come away and be separate.

“These two stories give the Deaf a sense of value. They are valued people.”

And if God values the Deaf, He certainly wants to speak to them in their heart language. 🌿