

# Deaf-Centric Expression of Biblical Language, Symbols, and Culture

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## Background

While estimates range, approximately only 2% to 4% of Deaf people have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ (Silent Blessings, 2024). Of the large population of deaf and hard of hearing individuals, there is a significant subset that identifies within the Deaf community. Rather than shared ethnic background, the Deaf community's distinct and vibrant culture has strong roots in shared language and experience.

There is a widespread lack of access for Deaf individuals to fully engage in a church, either through interpreted ministries or Deaf churches. Many well-intentioned individuals have created ministries that disempower Deaf individuals with subjection to hearing organization and methods. This leads to common Deaf experiences of isolation and denial of proper accessibility.

Individuals that identify as part of the Deaf community have distinct language and cultural differences from the mainstream hearing culture. This poses unique challenges related to navigating cross-cultural ministry and requires understanding specific nuances of Deaf ministry for both ministry workers and interpreters.

### Relevant Cross-Cultural Ministry Themes

- Awareness of one's own ethnocentrism and biases
- Development of rich understanding of target culture
- Flexibility in format of worship, teaching, and service structure
- Need for recontextualization

### Challenges in Deaf Ministry

- Heavy focus on written texts with complex figurative language
- Cultural gap between Christian language and Deaf audiences

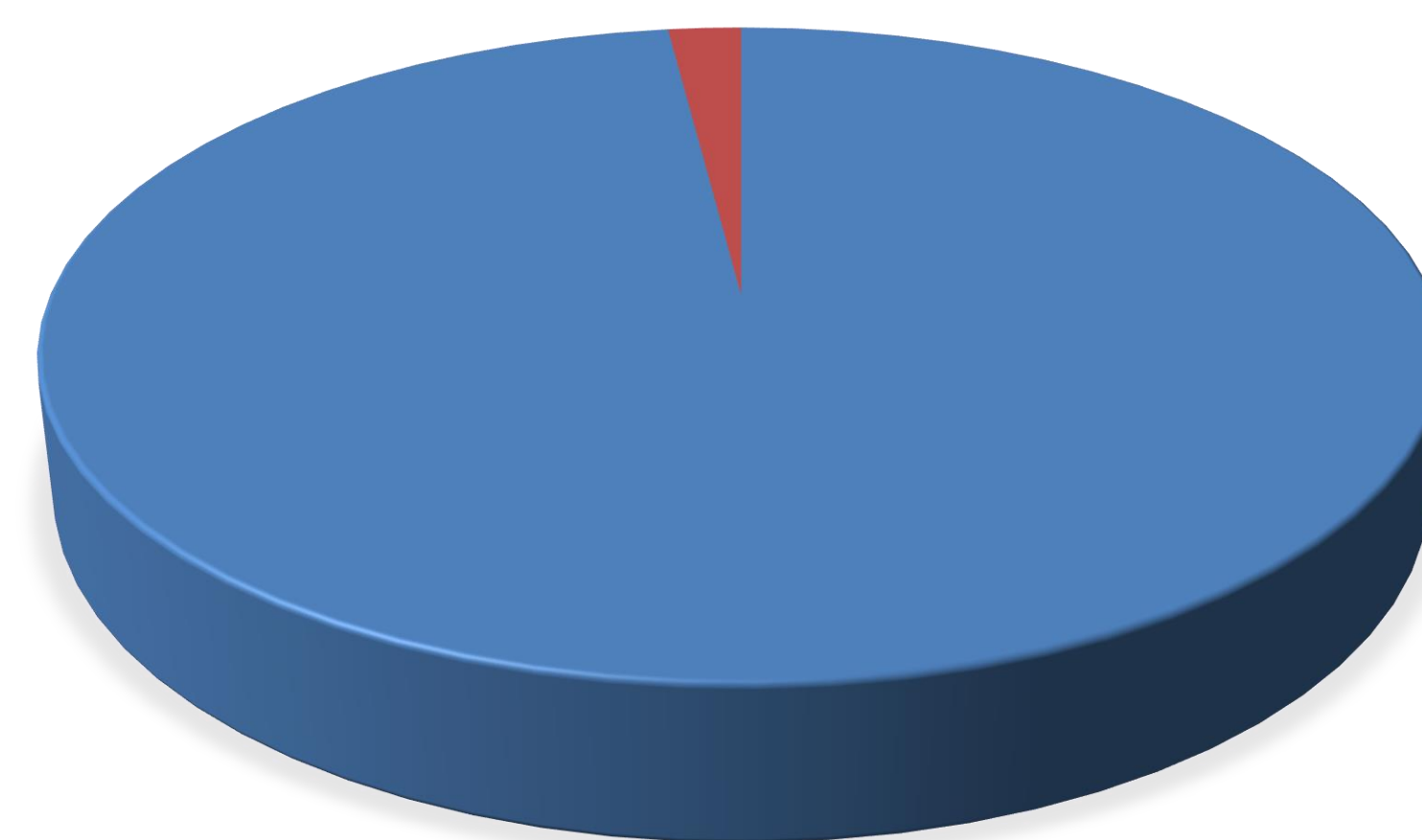
### Applications

- Deaf churches with Deaf-centric preaching and structure
- Interpreters increasing Biblical and cultural knowledge to effectively portray the message both linguistically and culturally
- Provision of more comprehensive access in churches -> full inclusion

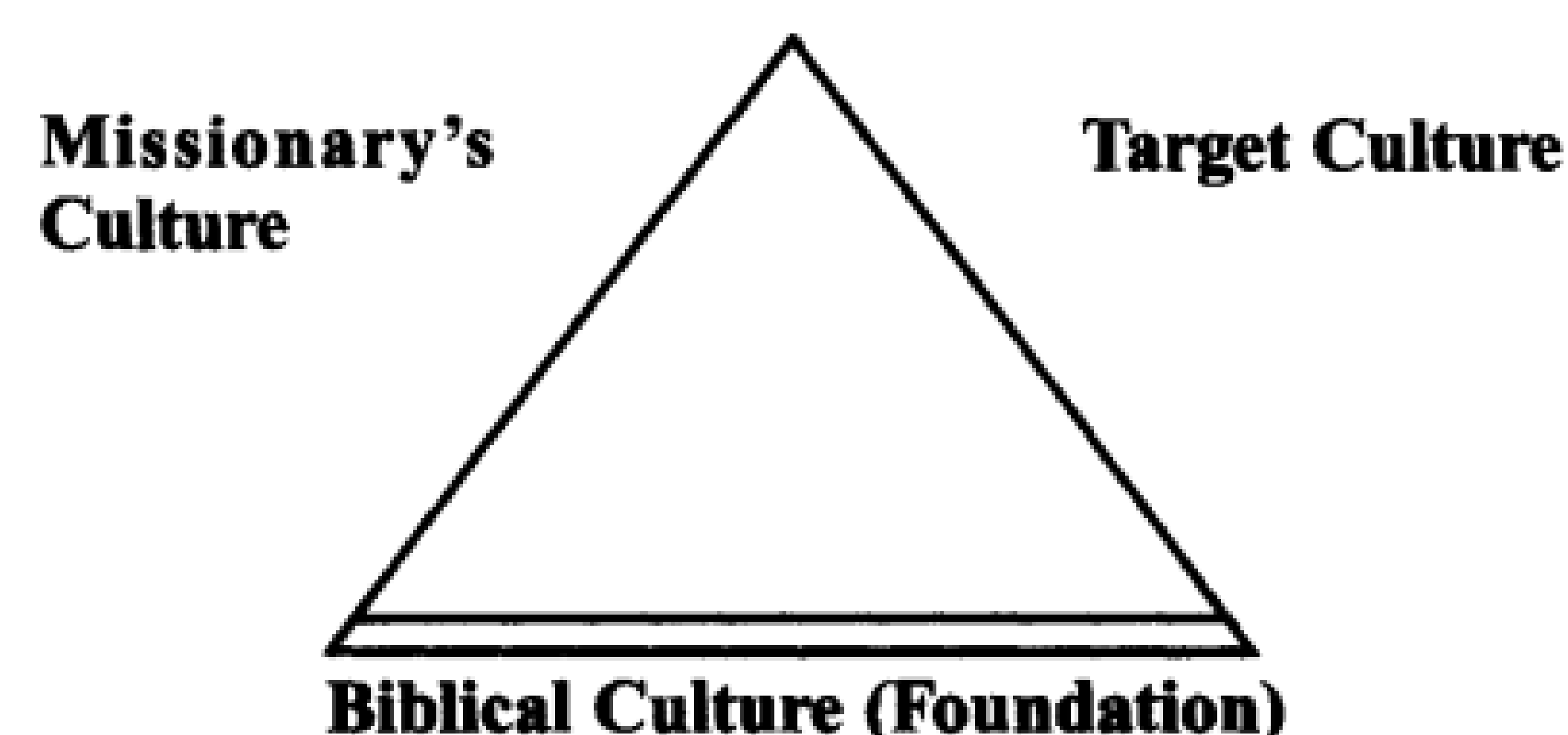
## Research Question

How can the hearing centered language, symbols, and culture of the Bible be effectively portrayed to Deaf audiences in American Sign Language?

PERCENTAGE OF DEAF THAT KNOW CHRIST



**Figure 1.** Only 2% to 4% of Deaf people have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ (Silent Blessings, 2024).



**Figure 2.** Effective cross-cultural ministry requires extensive knowledge and understanding of all three relevant cultures. Neglecting any of the three will create an imbalance and impede communication and ability to minister. (Menconi, 1996, p. 522)

## Methods

This study will be conducted through comprehensive interviews with three Christian Deaf pastors and three Christian certified American Sign Language/English interpreters. Obtaining perspectives of both parties is imperative for obtaining a comprehensive overview of the use of American Sign Language in religious settings. Deaf pastors will provide a perspective with greater theological background and knowledge of Deaf culture. Interpreters will add insight on expressing specific common Christian language that occurs in hearing settings.

The participants will be selected through connections in the field. The common themes of their methods for approaching overall communication and specific language or symbols will then be qualitative assessed.

## Predicted Results

The projected common themes from this research include:

1. understanding and explaining the Biblical cultural background and context
2. avoiding literal translation
3. choosing Deaf-centric vocabulary to explain listening and expressing
4. presenting Biblical narrative in American Sign Language (ASL) stories.

This research is relevant for Christian interpreters and Deaf ministry workers to improve their expression of religious content in American Sign Language with greater clarity and connection to Deaf audiences.

## Future Work

The field of Deaf ministry and faith-based interpreting has limited research in many areas. Much of the information on analyzing Christianity in the Deaf community is not recent, and therefore, likely outdated. Especially in light of the completion of the American Sign Language Bible translation, studies need to be updated. While there are some smaller ethnographic studies on Deaf ministry and religious interpreting, researchers could gain a wider perspective by conducting some general studies with larger sample sizes. Further research could be conducted to compare the effectiveness of spoken to signed interpreted services with Deaf churches. Researchers can also investigate the impact of a hearing bias on religious interpreting. Further study also needs to be conducted on what specific Biblical passages and concepts Deaf individuals struggle to connect with and ones that are especially meaningful.

## References

- Menconi, M. L. (1996). Understanding and relating to the three cultures of cross-cultural ministry in Russia. *Missiology*, 24(4), 519-531. <https://doi.org/10.1177/009182969602400405>
- Silent blessings: Deaf ministries.* (2024). Silent blessings: Deaf ministries. Retrieved March 5, 2024, from <https://www.silentblessings.org/who-we-are/>