

OUR MANDATE: TO SEE ALL BELIEVERS EQUIPPED TO DISCIPLE OTHERS, INCLUDING THE DEAF.



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Every person on earth has the right to know and understand the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is our job as the Church to work in the power of the Holy Spirit with all the wisdom and insight that God can give us to make this access a reality for every person. The Deaf are no exception to this.

The Deaf deserve to have access to the gospel like anyone else and so far they have been left behind. Even in gospel-rich America, only 2% of the Deaf have come to faith in Jesus. They are a hidden, unreached people in the midst of all others. The *Ethnologue*, (www.ethnologue.com) lists 130 sign languages but as it says in the article on page 22, “researchers estimate the actual number of sign languages may exceed 400. However, no sign language anywhere in the world has a complete Bible, leaving the Deaf as the most Bibleless group in any population.” While the Deaf are not a single people group, no other group in the world of similar size lives under such “Scripture poverty.” This issue of MF is about changing this unacceptable situation and equipping the Deaf to make disciples of the Deaf so that all the Deaf have access to the gospel.

Simply having a sign language translator in our “hearing” church services will not work. Sermons are geared to people who have grown up hearing, reading, and understanding spoken languages well. Simply translating spoken languages into sign language will not convey the truths of Scripture in the heart language of the Deaf. It will also certainly not equip the Deaf to take the message of the gospel to other Deaf people and their communities. They need the Bible in their own sign languages.

It will take concerted and tenacious effort to overcome the communication barriers that have kept the Deaf isolated from the gospel as well as from those within their own families and communities. We are talking about potentially hundreds of millions of people who are currently cut off from the gospel.

Solid figures are hard to come by. The Deaf are often difficult to find because they are hidden away in

families who feel shame at having a Deaf child and few hearing people know their sign language well enough to communicate with them. But there is renewed hope for changing these circumstances.

Twenty-five years ago we featured ministry to Deaf people in *Mission Frontiers*. Since then there has been a growing number of concerned Christian leaders who have been working to reach the Deaf with the gospel and employing the latest technology to do so. It is now conceivable that with dedicated effort we can see all the Deaf have access to the Bible in a sign language they can understand. It is a definable task. It will only take time, talent, resources and commitment in order to see complete Bibles in each of the hundreds of sign languages that will need a translation.

But a sign language translation in every language that needs one is only the first step toward training and equipping the Deaf to reach the Deaf. Equipping the Deaf to reach the Deaf must be our ultimate goal. Because hearing people cannot fully understand what it is to be Deaf and how this affects the way the Deaf learn and process information, the Deaf will always be the best people to reach other Deaf people with the gospel in order to achieve a growing disciple-making movement among the Deaf. Remember our ultimate goal in every people is the development of disciple-making and Church-Planting Movements that will provide access to the gospel to every person. This is also what we must work towards in reaching the Deaf.

AFRICA COMMITS ITSELF TO MAKING DISCIPLE-MAKERS—SO SHOULD WE!

Once in a while I run across something that gives me real hope for the future of world evangelization. Ghana 2013 and its “Challenge” is one such thing. The report on Ghana 2013 starts on page 33 and the Ghana 2013 Challenge follows it. It is clear to me from their Challenge that they “get it” when it comes to world evangelization. Let’s take a close look at the section of the Ghana 2013 Challenge on Disciple Making that states:

“We acknowledge our mandate as the church of Jesus Christ to disciple all nations, teaching them to obey everything Christ commanded. We recognize that *the primary purpose of the church is to be a forum for discipleship* (emphasis mine)

and the exercise of spiritual gifts to build up the body of Christ. We confess that we have left the church woefully undisciplined and unequipped for the work of the ministry. We further acknowledge that many of our leaders have not received the discipleship they needed or still need. We call upon the Church to equip the next generation of leaders by providing a solid discipleship foundation through mentorship. We acknowledge that the biblical model of discipleship is based on living life together, not just preaching and teaching, but authentic living through coaching, mentoring and demonstrating. *We covenant before God to make discipleship a priority within the Church, to equip believers with godly mentors, and to see every believer empowered to disciple others in the same way.*” (emphasis mine)

These African leaders have stated in succinct fashion the mandate that Jesus has given to every church and every believer and which I work to communicate in every issue of *Mission Frontiers*. The job of the Church is to train and equip disciple-makers who will then disciple others and to do so in every people! As it says above, *preaching and teaching are not enough*. Much more is required than passive listening. Equipping disciple-makers involves *“authentic living through coaching, mentoring and demonstrating”* where the required skills are mastered through repeated practice and active involvement in making disciples. Discipleship is an intentional life of relationships in which all of us are called to be involved. We must not continue to leave the work of

ministry to the professional pastor or missionary alone.

These African leaders have covenanted together before God to accomplish this mission of making disciples and *“to see every believer empowered to disciple others.”* This is a commitment

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that every biblical church and believer *should* be willing to make and I encourage all of us to do so. *Our churches must become “training centers” to send out a new wave of disciple-makers and church planters to every people.* This is what the leaders of Africa have committed their churches to become in the Ghana 2013 Challenge and I applaud them for it. These African leaders also acknowledge that, *“we have left the church woefully*

undisciplined and unequipped for the work of the ministry.” They are not alone in their failure. This is a common condition in many churches all around the world. But we do not have to continue in this failure. We can change and there are successful biblical models of discipleship that are fostering movements to Jesus all over the world that we can adopt and adapt as needed. But we must ask ourselves: Are we willing to be as honest as these African leaders have been and admit our ongoing failure to equip all of God’s people for the work of ministry? Are we willing to repent and move in a new direction? Are we willing to face the fact that we must do more than just preach and teach? Your answer and mine in response to these questions will go a long way in determining whether every person on earth gains access to the gospel or not.

There are not enough professional pastors or missionaries to bring access to the gospel to every person. The only way that access can be provided to every person is for most believers to be trained and equipped as disciple makers who go on to train and equip other disciple makers and plant reproducing churches. We have to unleash the enormous potential of the Body of Christ that we have left undisciplined and unequipped. Only when the millions of potential disciple-makers who are sitting on the sidelines are trained and released into every people will every person have access to the gospel. 