



IEWG Conference 2023

November 6-9 2023 in Stafford, England

*Nearly 80 people from
10 countries*

Bible Translation into Sign Languages



Happy faces smiling up at the camera at the Conference Centre

International presenters

The last time IEWG discussed the subject of Bible Translation into Sign Languages was in 2004 when very little was happening. Since then, many projects have started, around the world, to carry out this important work. We gathered together in Stafford, England, to hear about some of the projects from a wide range of international presenters and to discuss the issues relating to this important work.

Participants included translators, pastors, priests, lay church workers, teachers, and interested lay people.

We were sad that our President, Hendrik Korthaus was unable to join us because of ill-health. He sent this message:



*Dear friends and colleagues,
I like to wish you as pleasant and blessed conference
in my thought I'm with you!
Greetings to everyone.
Enjoy the time and stay blessed
Best wishes and blessings
Hendrik*

Steve Parkhurst (USA and Spain) from SIL

Steve gave us an excellent overview of the Sign Language Bible Translation Projects across the world but focusing mainly on Europe. He summarized the main methods generally used in Bible Translation: Book-by-book or Chronological Storying and the processes involved, including the methods of checking by Translation Consultants and by Deaf Community Checks.

He also introduced the other organizations involved in Bible Translation into Sign Languages. He emphasized that each country will know its own community and so will be able to make decisions about the best way to go about translating the Bible.

Steve himself is involved in a translation project in Spain so was able to share some of the experience of that work, including the possible use of avatars. This could be especially helpful in countries where it could be risky to show the presenter's face on-screen.

He also suggested that there needs to be more work done on recognizing the poetic language in much of the Bible, and consideration of how to portray that language into Sign Language.

One theme that came up often through the conference, was the need for any translation project to be rooted in the Deaf community with Deaf ownership. This included making sure that translations are checked by the Deaf people who would be using them.

Then Steve considered how the translations should be published – via YouTube or social media, on websites, on the Deaf Bible app but also that we should consider people without easy internet access so think about using SD cards or memory sticks that can be given away.

*Consider poetry
and song*



Steve Parkhurst presenting with interpreters.

Steve also explained about the Forum of Bible Agencies that publish best practice in Bible Translation. This helps to ensure that similar standards are maintained across all projects translating the Bible.

They have particular standards for Sign Language Bible Translation that are available here <https://forum-intl.org/resources/translation-standards/>

For more information on SIL's work with Sign Language translations: eurasia_gslt@sil.org

Madagascar: a beautiful country with huge gaps between rich and poor

Sigrid Hansen-Ekenes (Madagascar)

Sigrid, a Norwegian who grew up in Madagascar, introduced us to the beautiful country of Madagascar where she now works in the Deaf community. Madagascar is a country with a huge gap between rich and poor. There is not very much money for Bible Translation. Madagascar officially has one language: Malagassy but actually, there are over 20 different languages used – including Sign Language. They have been discussing Bible Translation and hope to start the translation work very soon but have had to discuss various questions to ensure they set up the work well.

One important question was how the work would be funded. This was a question that was important to everyone at the conference – whether it was best to rely on local funding, which tends to be small grants and may be short-term, or apply for large, foreign grants which may come with requirements from the funders. Sigrid also raised the question about how translators are recruited and whether they are paid. In a country with much poverty there are concerns about recruiting people with the right attitude to the important work of translating the Bible and not just recruiting people who need paid employment.

Some of the spoken languages of Madagascar have set up Bible translation projects already so it is possible to learn from other projects, whilst remembering that Deaf people have their own cultural ways of doing things. These need to be recognized so the translation is owned by Deaf people.



Sigrid Hansen-Ekenes

Pastor Henri Ratszimbazafy, also from Madagascar, was not able to attend due to his visa being delayed. We were so sad he was not with us. Sigrid read out a letter from him wishing us well and assuring us of his prayers. He hopes to join the conference in Norway in 2026.

Phil King (UK) SIL

Phil works for SIL and is involved in the British Sign Language Translation Project (BSLBTP). In his presentation, he used an interesting metaphor to speak about translation: that of hospitality – of two different languages and cultures and times meeting together and each respecting the other.

In the process of meeting between two cultures and languages, both will be changed, just like when you invite someone from another culture into your home. They adapt to your way of life, but at the same time, you respect and honour the visitor's culture.

Phil shared with us some of the times when BSL has had to adapt to ancient Hebrew culture and some examples of the ancient Hebrew text adapting to BSL



Phil (far left) with members of the BSL Translation Team

One big area of discussion was over the name of God as presented in the book of Genesis. This is often presented in English texts as LORD in capital letters, but how can that be represented in a signed translation? We need to add to this the fact that the people in the Genesis text address God as LORD or YHWH. BSL, in common with many signed languages does not use “vocatives”. In BSL if you are talking to someone, you don't sign their name.

Sometimes, there seem to be inconsistencies in the Hebrew text and it's tempting to try to solve them or change things so they are smooth, but we may have to learn to allow the inconsistencies to remain, so that we respect the Hebrew text.

Phil also addressed some of the metaphors in the Biblical text and warned that if we didn't understand the metaphor, we may translate the text wrongly. Metaphors are

Translation as hospitality

A “wild donkey” of a man?

especially difficult since they may have been well-known to people of the time, but unknown in our culture today.

What exactly does Genesis 16:12 mean: “He [Ishmael] shall be a wild donkey of a man.” Can BSL deal with the Hebrew metaphor as it is, or do we need to do a little work to discover what this particular metaphor means?

Phil’s was an interesting and challenging presentation!

Hege Lønning

Deaf academic, Hege Lønning gave a thoughtful and challenging presentation on what translation teams should think about *before* starting the work of translation and some of the issues that occur *during* the process of translation. She pointed out the need to recognize the nature of Sign Language as a minority language. This means that few Deaf people are native Sign Language users and may have experienced language deprivation. Deaf people’s language may be oppressed by the majority culture. This also raised questions about power dynamics and who makes the decisions about translation.

Hege also pointed out that exegetical tools for translation are not available in Sign Language so resources are limited. Translation projects need to be considering ways to train Deaf people in leadership skills, along with the other skills needed for successful translation: presentation skills, knowledge of the faith communities, artistic skills, and the ability to use translation software available. She also warned about being aware of any “sub-text”. Because sign language is a performed language, the sub-text may become apparent in the way the translated text is performed (rather like the meaning of a spoken text can change with a change of tone of voice.)



Hege Lønning presenting (centre)

It is not enough to have Deaf involvement in a translation project. Deaf people need to take the lead. Certainly, all discussions by a translation group should be in Sign Language, regardless of whether hearing people are present. Translation should be done by native signers who are bilingual but she recognized that Deaf native signers may not be bilingual and so children of Deaf adults (CODAs) could play an important part in translation teams since they are more likely to be true bilinguals. However, when selecting teams for translation care needs to be taken to have a range of skills and avoid anyone becoming a “gate-keeper” or an inappropriate spokesperson for the translation team.

Native signers for Bible translation

Workshops, discussions, and worship

We spent time in discussion groups on Monday afternoon thinking about translation processes, Bible engagement, and cultural issues. In the evening, we heard about the Bible Translation projects in Estonia and in Norway.



On Tuesday, we spent time in groups thinking about how to really get to know a Bible story through drama, pictures, and storytelling. This was fun and there was lots of laughter.

Not a medical emergency (left)! Just a dramatic retelling of the story of Jairus’ daughter!

Worship was led by a different country group each day with beautifully visual readings, hymns, and prayers as each group tried to make the worship accessible to everyone without the use of interpreters. Thank you to everyone who took part.



On Tuesday evening we gathered again for even more information. We heard from **Mark Penner** from the United Bible Societies about the work they do. Mark emphasized that most of the organizations involved in Bible Translation are hearing but Sign Language Bible Translations must be done by Deaf for Deaf! UBS also offer training for people involved in Bible Translation.



Next we heard from **Michael Ropp** from Wycliffe Associates, involved in Sign Language Bible Translations since 2017. Michael emphasized the need for "Deaf Owned Translations" firmly based in the local church and their aim is to get the translations out to the local communities as quickly as possible and revise as needed so that the process of translation can be speeded up.



Our final presentation was given by **Brent Allen** who had attended the European Deaf Christian Bible Translation Conference the week before IEWG. Brent, along with EDCBT President Riho Kurg, explained that EDCBT (a ministry of the European Deaf Christian Alliance) gave support and advice to Deaf people involved in Bible Translation Projects throughout Europe. They also helped projects find funding and gave advice about how to manage funds. Their conference runs every two years and so the next will be in 2025 in Romania.

To the Future...

Gill Behenna, Acting President of IEWG, led a session to talk a little about the history of IEWG and to ask people what they wanted for the future. She told some stories about her own involvement and how IEWG had influenced her ministry for over 30 years. The IEWG conference in 2004 had also led to the setting up of the BSL Bible Translation Project.

But the organisation is fragile, depending on voluntary time of Board members. Sometimes in the past it has nearly disappeared, but we feel there is a need for the rich interaction between Christians in different countries, working in the same ministries.

The Conference usually takes place every two years but had been prevented from gathering because of the Covid-19 Pandemic. During Covid, the Board members had created short acts of worship in international sign, national sign languages, and visual material such as drawings and photos. These can still be seen on the following YouTube links:

Christmas 2021: <https://youtu.be/Q1STrA39rp8?si=Bx0t4wJ1T8fq1SMx>

Pentecost 2021: https://youtu.be/8hkmwMzSFlc?si=WgWyt7yIeCj_kAuu

Easter 2022: <https://youtu.be/SuBxveSlkbA>

It was very good to be back to meeting in person this year. We spent some time thinking about what our next conference should be like and this information will help the Board to plan for 2026.



Norway 2026!

Our next Conference will be in Norway in 2026 and we will send out information as soon as an exact date and place are fixed.

The Lord Bless you...

To end our conference and send us out with God's blessing, we watched the **BSL UK Blessing** featuring Deaf people from across the UK, which was recorded during the Covid-19 Pandemic.

You can watch it here: <https://youtu.be/vnEhIz2eHow?si=O5UnBEq42dxPdJAT>