

The Deaf of Jamaica

The Jamaican Sign Language Community



The members of the Jamaican deaf community are located on the Caribbean island of Jamaica. The highest population is found in the capital city of Kingston with other significant populations found in Mandeville, St. Elizabeth parish, and Montego Bay. Though the exact number of signing deaf people is uncertain, the national deaf association has estimated that there are 27,000 people with hearing loss.

There are twelve deaf schools and two vocational training programs. The national deaf association runs seven schools and one vocational program and religious entities operate the other five schools and vocational program. The association-run schools are pursuing a bilingual approach using both written English and Jamaican Sign Language (JSL), a natural signed language with a distinct grammar from English. Three of the religious schools, which are affiliated, use a Signed English/Total Communication approach (manual signs following English grammar and signing and speaking at the same time) while the other schools use Jamaican Sign Language. Few deaf students are mainstreamed into hearing classrooms.

Deaf Jamaicans often gather at deaf associations, deaf clubs, social gatherings, and religious services where they use Jamaican Sign Language. There is one national deaf association, headquartered in Kingston. There are several deaf clubs and regular gathering places where deaf people socialize during the weekends. There are eleven deaf religious services—three are evangelical and eight are Jehovah’s Witnesses Kingdom Halls. Some churches provide interpreted services. There are few, or no, resources available in JSL although there are English-language books with biographies of deaf Jamaicans.

Many deaf Jamaicans have difficulty securing employment, but the people who do have jobs are often employed in deaf education, association-related, or manual labor positions. The Jamaican deaf community is unified with a common identity and is very proud to have its own Jamaican deaf culture. Jamaican deaf people indicate that their primary community development needs are more skilled interpreters, a Jamaican Sign Language dictionary, and improved education.

Primary Religion:

Christianity

Disciples (Matt 28:19):

2%

Churches:

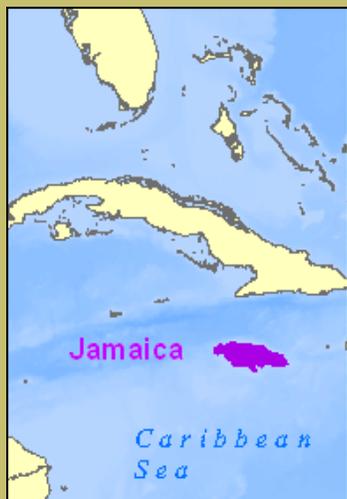
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Scripture Status (Matt 28:20):

None

Population (date):

Potentially 27,000 (2009)



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Have They Heard the Gospel?

Hindrances to Scripture Use

Currently, there are no translated Jamaican Sign Language stories or Bibles available, so the deaf community often uses simplified English Bibles from the Deaf Missions organization (Iowa, USA). Though the English literacy levels of deaf Jamaicans may be high enough so that they may understand these simplified English Bibles, the deaf community has expressed some desire for their own Jamaican Sign Language translation of the Bible so that they can more fully access it.

Response to the Gospel

The evangelical church for the deaf community in Jamaica is growing at a stable pace. There are currently three deaf churches on the island, all with established pastors—two of whom are deaf. However, there appears to be no other church plants and several major cities are without deaf churches or interpreted services. Middle-aged and older Jamaicans seem committed to attending church while the younger deaf people are less involved.

Bilingualism

Deaf adults primarily use Jamaican Sign Language as their first language and English and/or Jamaican Creole English to communicate with the hearing community. They exhibit moderate bilingual skills and many appear fairly confident or very confident in their written English skills—regardless of location, age, or social networks. Some deaf may be better able to lip read Jamaican Creole English than English. Many deaf people either attend deaf clubs or regular meeting places and use JSL with one another. Schools—particularly the association-run schools—are implementing the use of Jamaican Sign Language in the classrooms.

Are Cross-Cultural Missionaries Needed?

The Jamaican deaf community has already started some community development, AIDS awareness and health care outreaches, and educational and religious services so cross-cultural missionaries may not be needed in those areas. However, current ministry needs include pastoral and leadership training for deaf Christians, deaf church planting, and Jamaican Sign Language dictionary development. Though the deaf community in Jamaica is capable of doing the above, the community lacks available personnel who are trained and able to do these tasks.

Number of Christian Congregations Serving Group

3 Deaf churches (with 3-4 churches with interpreted services)

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**Number of Congregation Using
Primarily Local Language**

3 (1 church uses both Jamaican Sign Language and Country Sign Language)

**Language of Outside
Communication or Trade**

English (eng) and Jamaican Creole English (jam)

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Group Description

Geographical/Environmental

Climate Tropical, hot and humid temperatures with a more temperate climate inland

Language/Linguistics

Attitude towards mother tongue Very receptive

Second Languages English and Jamaican Creole English

Other mother tongues of this group English, Jamaican Creole English, and Country Sign Language (jcs)

Others speaking this language as MT Country Sign Language (jcs) linguistically related American Sign Language (sgn) and some influence from British Sign Language (bfi)

Neighbor Languages Country Sign Language (jcs)

Corrections to Ethnologue entry New entry for Jamaican Sign Language; Deaf institutions: 12; Deaf population 27,000

Comments One linguist in Jamaica indicates that other sign languages in the Caribbean islands may be similar to Jamaican Sign Language.

Literacy

Adult Literacy 87.9% based on the general Jamaican population

Literacy Attitude Very receptive

Active Program Deaf schools are required to teach English literacy in the classrooms but there are no forms of JSL literacy available for use among the deaf community.

Publications in MT Very few. But some Jamaican Sign Language texts may exist and one copy of a Jamaican Sign Language book is available—the publishing company apparently lost the other copies.

Economics

Avg. Annual Income \$7,400 USD

Unemployment Rate 10.1%

Occupation Deaf people have had various types of employment, including positions related to manual labor, agriculture, retail, clerical tasks, tourism and hospitality, art, churches, and education.

Modernization/Utilities Many modern conveniences such as running water and electricity available to the hearing population are also accessed by the Jamaican deaf community. Many deaf people have DVD players but few own personal computers or vehicles.

Comments The above statistics were taken from the CIA Factbook (2009) as there are no available statistics for specific literacy rates of the Jamaican deaf community.

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Community Development

Clothing	Typical Western clothing
Transportation	Walking, buses, route taxis, private taxis, private vehicles, airplanes
Infant Mortality Rate	1.5% (15.22 out of 1000 births)
Life Expectancy	73.53 years
Comments	The above statistics were taken from the CIA Factbook (2009) and reflect the Jamaican population as a whole.

Society

Family Structures	Patrilineal nuclear family
Social Habits/Groupings	Deaf social networks form around deaf churches, clubs, activities, and geographical regions
Identification with Nat'l Culture	Integrated, but there is a distinctive deaf community nationwide
Self Image	Prestigious
Attitude to Outsiders	Somewhat receptive
Attitude to Change	Very receptive
Cultural Change Pace	Medium to rapid
Local Lang Broadcasting	None
Comments	The Jamaican deaf community has experienced oppression from the hearing community but feels that if the hearing community wants to be involved, they are welcome. The deaf community, proud of their distinctive culture, desires for change and improvement for societal access and rights to improve.

Education/Youth

Primary Schools	10
Primary School Enrollment	500
Secondary Schools	6 to 8
Secondary School Enrollment	450
% Eligible Enrolled	A total of 600 students out of about 2,500 deaf children in Jamaica (figure provided by Caribbean Christian Centre for the Deaf) leading to 24% eligible enrolled.
Teacher to Student Ratio	Unknown
Language of Instruction	English, Jamaican Sign Language, American Sign Language, Signed English
Language of Textbooks	English

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Unmixed Schools All but one (a deaf school that includes students with other disabilities). A few deaf students may attend school in mainstreamed hearing classrooms.

Problems/Needs Problems gaining employment, lack of self-sufficiency and vocational skills.

Comments The enrollment figures are approximate—some schools include both primary and secondary students and these figures were not separated according to primary/secondary school enrollments.

Religion

Protestant Christians 0.4%

Jehovah's Witnesses 0.7%

Other/Nonreligious 98.9%

Primary Religion Christianity (Protestant Evangelical)

Comments The figures are approximate—many deaf Jamaicans profess to be Christians but most do not attend church regularly.

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Status of Christianity

Church Growth

Reached Status	Adopted
Total Believers	0.4%
Pastors	3 (one hearing, two deaf)
Lay Leaders	5-10+ (one church has a board of elders, another has five lay leaders)
Churches	3 (3 or more churches have interpreters)
Bible Schools	None

History of Christianity in Group

Year Begin	1958
By Whom	Reverend Willis Ethridge, his wife Mildred and missionary Paula Montgomery who founded the Caribbean Christian Centre for the Deaf which is the first school
Significant Events	Founding of five Christian schools, one Christian residential vocational program, annual revivals, church events, and Christian deaf camps, many missionaries and Christian work teams visiting the Christian schools

Scripture/Literature/Media

Translation Status	Possible need
Available Scripture	None
Use of Translation/Scripture Use	English-language Bibles and/or simplified English Bibles such as from the Deaf Missions organization (Iowa, USA)
Hindrances to Scripture Distribution	Currently, there are no translated Jamaican Sign Language stories or Bibles available, so the deaf community often uses simplified English Bibles from Deaf Missions in their churches. Though the literacy levels of deaf Jamaicans are fairly high and English comprehension is at a level that they may understand these Bibles, the deaf community has expressed some desire for their own Jamaican Sign Language translation of the Bible.
Uncertain Need Explained	Some members of the community see a Jamaican Sign Language Bible as a valuable need while others are less interested. Some are satisfied with using English or American Sign Language Bibles.
Other Literature/Video Materials	There may be some Jamaican Sign Language narrative texts and one copy of a Jamaican Sign Language book, but no religious materials are available in Jamaican Sign Language.

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Comments

The Jamaican deaf community has indicated some interest in using American Sign Language Bibles.

Missions/Churches Working Among People Group

Organization #1

Caribbean Christian Centre for the Deaf/New Life Deaf Church

Main Ministry

Evangelism/church planting/education/residential vocational program

Adherents

265 students in the schools, 15 to 20 regular church attendees, and 10 to 15 residents in the vocational program

Number of Congregations

1

Use of Local Language

Half to the majority (mixture of Jamaican Sign Language, English and Signed English)

Total expatriate missionaries

5+

Total national missionaries

2 (the organization's directors)

Total local workers

2 (but there are some deaf staff at the schools)

Comments

The CCCD is a large entity managed mostly by hearing people with a few deaf workers in the schools and at the vocational program

Organization #2

Calabar Baptist Deaf Church

Main Ministry

Evangelism/Church Planting

Adherents

40 to 50 attendees

Number of Congregations

1

Use of Local Language

Majority

Total expatriate missionaries

0

Total national missionaries

1 (pastor)

Total local workers

5 lay leaders

Organization #3

American Ministries to the Deaf/Deaf Bible Church/Jamaica Christian School for the Deaf

Main Ministry

Evangelism/Church Planting/Education

Adherents

20-50 attend the church, 33 attend the school

Number of Congregations

1

Use of Local Language

Majority (although some may only use Country Sign Language)

Total expatriate missionaries

None known (but foreign visitors from the American Ministries to the Deaf often come)

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Total national missionaries 0
Total local workers 1+ (pastor and elders) and 4 deaf staff at the school

Responsiveness

Attitude to Christianity Somewhat receptive

Attitude to Religious Change Indifferent

Spiritual Climate and Openness Somewhat receptive

Comments on Responsiveness The deaf people already involved in the church are open to further Christian work but those who do not attend church (mostly younger people) are not very interested in spiritual needs and Bible resources in JSL.

Ways to Approach the Group The Caribbean Christian Centre for the Deaf and the American Ministries to the Deaf and their deaf pastors are key contacts and are very influential in reaching a large part of the deaf community in Jamaica.

Current Needs The deaf community in Jamaica has expressed the following needs:

1. Jamaican Sign Language literature, dictionaries, and other language development
2. Books and workshops to teach sign language and deaf culture to hearing people
3. Jamaican Sign Language Bible and Christian themed books
4. Deaf churches and pastors
5. Stronger deaf led organizations and an increase of deaf socializing opportunities
6. Government support for social equality and legal aid
7. Better interpreter training, professionalism, and educational materials
8. A Deaf Studies curriculum and other educational materials for the deaf community
9. Deaf education and multilingual education training for teachers
10. Better and more advanced deaf educational opportunities, vocational training, and adult education (such as HIV awareness and parenting skills)
11. Higher English literacy

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12. Driver licenses/opportunity to become taxi drivers

13. Counseling services

14. Better technological access, such as video and technical services, acquisition of TTYs, computers, and relay/video relay/videophone services

Items for Prayers

The deaf community in Jamaica is passionate about advancing the access and rights of the deaf community and the above needs are some of the things they desire and need. Prayer could especially focus on a Jamaican Sign Language dictionary project to be completed and accessible, further training of more deaf leaders (both Christian and association-related), and Jamaican Sign Language resources for and growth in deaf churches