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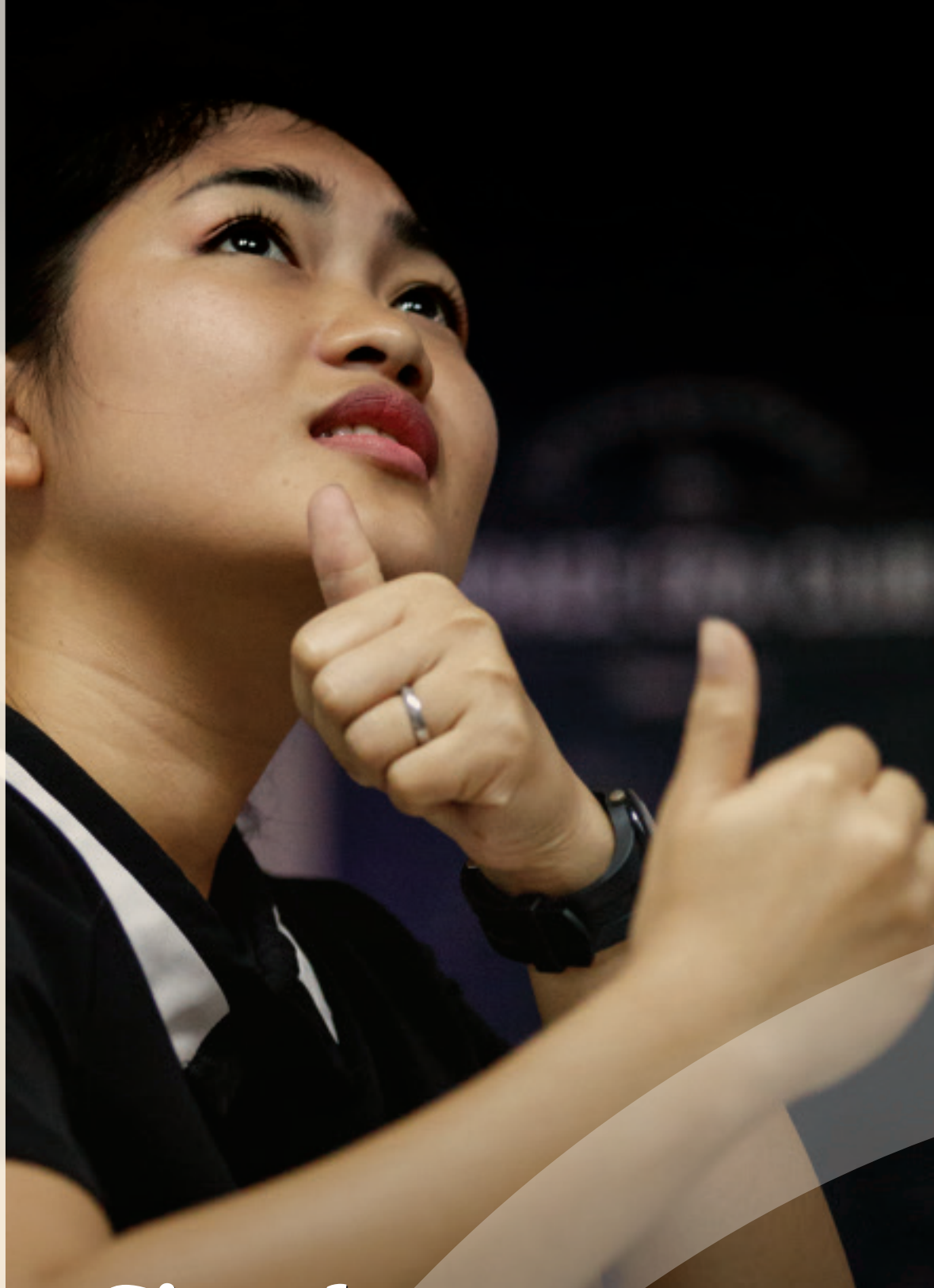

Sign language

WINTER
2025

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Missions Interlink
Member of Bible Agencies Australia

The gift of communication

Hello from the Editor! Max has kindly allowed me to share my experience for this special sign language edition of *Wycliffe Today*.

Why is sign language special to me? My sisters and I were fortunate enough to attend a primary school with integrated learning between hearing and Deaf students. We made friends with the Deaf children in our classes and we were all taught conversational Auslan – the term for Australian sign language. Unfortunately, I've forgotten much of what I was taught in those early days but I've recently been re-learning basic Auslan after an illness rendered me basically mute for almost five months.

It was incredibly frustrating not being able to speak but it also gave me a chance to realise how much I have taken the gift of communication for granted. My inconvenience was nothing compared to how isolated many Deaf people in Australia often feel when they are not able to fully understand or participate in the conversation around them.

This edition of Wycliffe Today focuses on Auslan projects that are resourcing the Deaf Church in Australia and throughout the Pacific. Deaf Christians are being encouraged to grow in their knowledge of God and his Word and, in turn, be equipped to share their faith with others. The stories focus on a collaborative project with Alpha Australia and Bible Society Australia that has created an Auslan version of the Alpha video series. We hope that as you read these encouraging stories, you can learn more about the needs of the Deaf community and pray for the work being done to make Scripture accessible to them.

Deb Fox

Bethel Funerals

Bethel Funerals' story began in 1997 as a business that provides Christ-like care to grieving families–while also financially supporting Wycliffe Australia.

Visit bethelfunerals.com.au for more information.

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Transformed by the Word:

Whoever has ears to hear

by Lynda Wake

Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.
Revelation 2:7 (NIV)

Talking to God comes quite naturally for me as I ramble on about all manner of topics – both important and trivial. On the other hand, hearing God's voice is a daily challenge – mostly because I am easily distracted and I do not always take intentional time to tune in and really listen.

Thankfully, I am coming to understand how silence can be a gift. Perhaps the still, small voice of God can only truly be heard within the realm of silence – and maybe even more so in times of 'painful silence'.

Jesus challenged people around him about the importance of spiritual hearing. Through teachings and parables, he warned his audience to listen with 'ears to hear'. This admonishment continues to echo throughout history to all people, across all cultures and generations: Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear! Let them listen to me, understand and obey!'

While it is true that most people are born with the privilege of physical ears to hear, having the spiritual ears to hear is another matter. It is when we intentionally attune our ears to the voice of Jesus that we begin to hear him speak to us in ways that change us and positively affect the world around us.

Friends, it is vital in these challenging days to offer our obedient attention to Jesus' life-giving words, and to listen like our lives depend upon it – because they really do!

For reflection:
Is there a way you could make more space in your schedule to silently attune your spiritual ears to listen to the voice of Jesus?

Be transformed by the Word as you engage with:
John 10:1-18 and Psalm 85

Prayer:
Father, I confess I don't always look after my spiritual ears to hear your eternal words of life. Please help me make any necessary changes so I can understand more fully, and experience the joy of obeying your voice. Amen.

Everyone is welcome: *Susan's story*

Story told to Rebecca Thurrowgood

My family are all hearing people but I am Deaf. So it was really difficult when I was growing up. They were all talking but there was no signing. I didn't feel very supported. My mother would communicate with me through my sister as she couldn't communicate well with me. Schooling was also really difficult. I missed a lot because I was trying to follow orally. I was bullied at school, which got me feeling down and depressed.

When I was younger, I went to the synagogue (I came from a Jewish family). We'd learn to write in Hebrew but there were no other Deaf people there, and no interpreter. When I learnt stories in Auslan about famous characters from the Old Testament, it helped me understand the pictures I had been shown as a child. Then when I was about 15 or 16, I had thoughts about God. Who is God? Where is he?

When I was 19, I had a Deaf boyfriend who was an amazing signer. I fell in love with him. He introduced my family to simple finger spelling and basic communication. He was also the Christian who led me to Jesus. I learnt more about the Bible from him and I was struck by the words in Revelation 3:20 – that Jesus invites everyone to join him. Everyone. Including Deaf.

I learnt how to teach Auslan at Latrobe University. Then I taught it at my old church for 20 years and many people's skills improved. I've been at my current church for five years now and teaching some Auslan there too. There are plenty of Deaf people in the area but I don't know how to encourage them to come to church.

I used to lead a Bible study where we would watch some Auslan Bible translations together. I really like to have written text alongside the Auslan translation but written English is very different from Auslan. Having Auslan interpretations in church makes the message so much easier to understand.

– Susan Shannon

Equipping Deaf Christians *to share the good news*

An exciting project is about to be launched to provide Deaf Christians with tools to grow in their faith and reach other Deaf people with the gospel.

Wycliffe Australia, Bible Society of Australia and Alpha Australia have been close partners in creating a translation of the Alpha course into Auslan – Australian Sign Language.

Rebecca Thurrowgood is a Wycliffe Australia member who has been coordinating the Auslan translation. The collaboration with Alpha and Bible Society was especially meaningful to her as it enabled various skills, experience, connections and resources to come together to fulfil a growing need within the Deaf Church.

REBECCA THURROWGOOD (CENTRE, FIRST ROW) WITH THE TEAM DURING FILMING

Rebecca's parents are both committed followers of Christ, yet they have found that, as Deaf people, their ability to fully engage in the life of the Church has always been a struggle. Although work is underway for a translation of the Bible into Auslan, the translation of Scripture is only in its early stages and there is currently a lack of Scripture engagement and outreach tools to reach the Deaf in Australia. Rebecca shares:

> At the end of 2023, Bible Society was chatting to me about what things we could do for the Deaf community in regards to translation. I mentioned that my dad had said he'd really love a translation of the Alpha series. Wycliffe Bible Translators Australia, Bible Society Australia and Alpha Australia met to discuss how this could work and, after just 45 minutes, we were all keen to get started.

The first goal of the Auslan Alpha project was to provide resources to help Deaf Christians to grow in their faith and understanding of Scripture.

A second but just as important goal was to equip Deaf people to reach out to others. Rebecca explains:

> The Deaf Church hasn't really reached the next generation. Just like a lot of [hearing] churches in Australia, we have an ageing Church. We want to ensure that we're not starting from scratch in ten years' time. At the moment, the Deaf community in Australia is an unreached people group, essentially. We want to change that.

A professional studio has been set up at the Wycliffe Australia National Office in Kangaroo Ground and that space was used to film the Auslan Alpha videos in September 2024. One of the interpreters was on set filming when she mentioned that she had offered to run the Alpha course in her church. The Auslan Alpha resources had not yet been finished but she really wanted to test them out and see how much interest there was. Rebecca recalls:

> The translator messaged me, saying, 'There are five Deaf people who don't yet know Jesus coming to the Alpha course! I've got eight people turning up and a church has offered to host it for us.'

The Auslan Alpha team presented at the Australian Deaf Christian Network conference in January and Rebecca says they were given permission to start promoting the upcoming Alpha series:

> Around 60 Deaf people were in the audience. When they saw the preview of the Auslan Alpha videos, they were so excited. One of the ladies got up, and she cried, 'I have been praying for years that there would be Alpha for the Deaf. God just answered my prayers.'

PHOTOS SUPPLIED BY REBECCA THURROWGOOD

Why Alpha?

Alpha

That question is easy to answer for Skip Smith, Church Engagement Lead with Alpha Australia.

Skip explains that the Alpha translation into Auslan is a key evangelistic resource that is intended to help equip Deaf Christians to reach others with the good news of Christ. Skip has been working with Alpha for six years and has a heart for finding ways of providing support for Deaf Christians. He shares:

> We all long for connection. Deaf people are no different. My wife and I were leading a church in Brisbane when one Deaf couple started attending. Other Deaf Christians heard how they were welcomed into the church and that number started growing. Soon we ended up with 50 people in the congregation who were Deaf. We started realising how desperately ill-equipped the Church was for meeting the needs of Auslan speakers. I really felt the Lord put it on my heart to make space for the Deaf community. So we dedicated space for them in church and had interpretation services available every week. Then I started learning conversational Auslan. I would learn to sign just by being with the Deaf community. I became passionate about helping them to access the Word of God – access that so many of us take for granted.

So how does Alpha come into the picture? Skip explains:

> Alpha is 'a series of interactive sessions that explore life, faith and meaning … a resource churches use to create a space and a culture where people are excited to invite their friends into a conversation about Jesus.' A few weeks into my role, I began speaking with my Deaf friends and going 'Hey, there's this thing called Alpha. Have you heard of it? How could Alpha and Auslan work together?' I have a friend who is the pastor of a Deaf church and she seemed interested, but the more I talked with her, I realised how many complexities there were in translating the content. I had a number of conversations but nothing got off the ground. So I said, 'God, I leave this in your hands'.

A few years later, God started opening doors when Bible Society Australia (BSA) and Wycliffe Australia approached Skip to see how they could support Deaf Christians. Skip says they selected the top eight subjects 'that would take someone on a journey of faith', such as 'Who is Jesus?' 'Why did Jesus die?'

There are still seven more Alpha videos to be translated into Auslan, yet Skip says that he sees the partnership between Alpha Australia, BSA and Wycliffe Australia continuing well into the future:

> To have these three different mission organisations come together in this way was just absolutely beautiful. We're working together with a generous, collaborative spirit. But the work isn't finished yet! I see this as an ongoing partnership. I would love to see Deaf ministries really use these resources for evangelism. My dream is that every single Deaf person in Australia at least be presented with the gospel.

The official launch of the Alpha in Auslan course is planned for July 2025. Please pray with us as trial courses are held and the team prepares for the July launch in Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane.

Feedback from an early trial of Alpha in Auslan:

'How can we get more Deaf people to see this?'

'I went to a Deaf church once and I couldn't understand anything they were signing. It was all jargon! I tried to read the Bible but it was in old language and I couldn't understand much. But this? The [Auslan translation of Alpha] is easy to follow. THIS IS CLEAR! I can understand it and it's so INTERESTING!'

SKIP SMITH, PHOTOS SUPPLIED BY ALPHA AUSTRALIA

Embraced by the *Deaf community*

Amy Cruickshanks is a linguistics consultant with Bible Society Australia who played an integral role in creating the Auslan Alpha translation videos.

Along with her desire to see Deaf communities equipped with resources to grow and share their faith, Amy has been part of the team translating the Bible into Auslan. Amy says that, prior to joining the project, she did not have connections with the Deaf community. Yet that all changed once she began learning the language and meeting the people with whom she would come to develop close relationships:

> Since I joined the team and started learning Auslan, I feel like my life has changed quite a bit. Now, some of my closest friends are Deaf people and others I have met through the Deaf community. It is also because of Auslan that I joined the church I am currently attending. The church has Auslan interpreting, so I thought I would visit to say hello and see what was happening there. I was really only intending to visit the church once, but the welcome I received that first Sunday was so warm and I was so readily embraced into the group of signers (made up of both Deaf and hearing) that I just kept going back. I've been there a year and a half now, and feel I have truly found my church family.

AMY CRUICKSHANKS (MIDDLE) DURING FILMING

Amy has been with the Auslan translation team for two years now, but notes that the Auslan Bible Project has been underway for almost 30 years. So what are some of the biggest challenges in a signed translation compared to a written or oral translation?

Amy shares:

> There are a few differences. I think the biggest one is that in Auslan, as in all signed languages, the visual details of objects and events are important and communicated, so these always need to be brought into consideration in translation work. For example, our team was recently translating Psalm 23, and we had a few discussions around the section 'you anoint my head with oil'. What did that anointing actually look like? Was it just a dab of oil on the forehead or was the oil liberally poured out and running down the face? These sorts of details aren't something you typically have to consider in spoken language translations.

Along with the challenges, Amy says she finds the Auslan translation work incredibly rewarding:

> Being involved in this project has been the biggest gift from God to me. Not only is working with my teammates a joy, but together we have the opportunity to make the Bible more accessible to people who use Auslan as their first language – what could be better than that?

There are currently two full books of the Bible translated into Auslan (John and Acts) and portions of a number of other New and Old Testament books. While there is still a long way to go, Bible Society Australia recently launched a new, updated website for the Auslan Bible so that the Deaf community in Australia can better access what has already been translated. To see the Auslan Bible, visit auslan.bible/

Please pray:

- that God would continue to guide the Auslan Bible Project committee and the translation team
- for those who engage with the Auslan Bible and Alpha in Auslan – that they would grow in their understanding of how great God's love for them is.

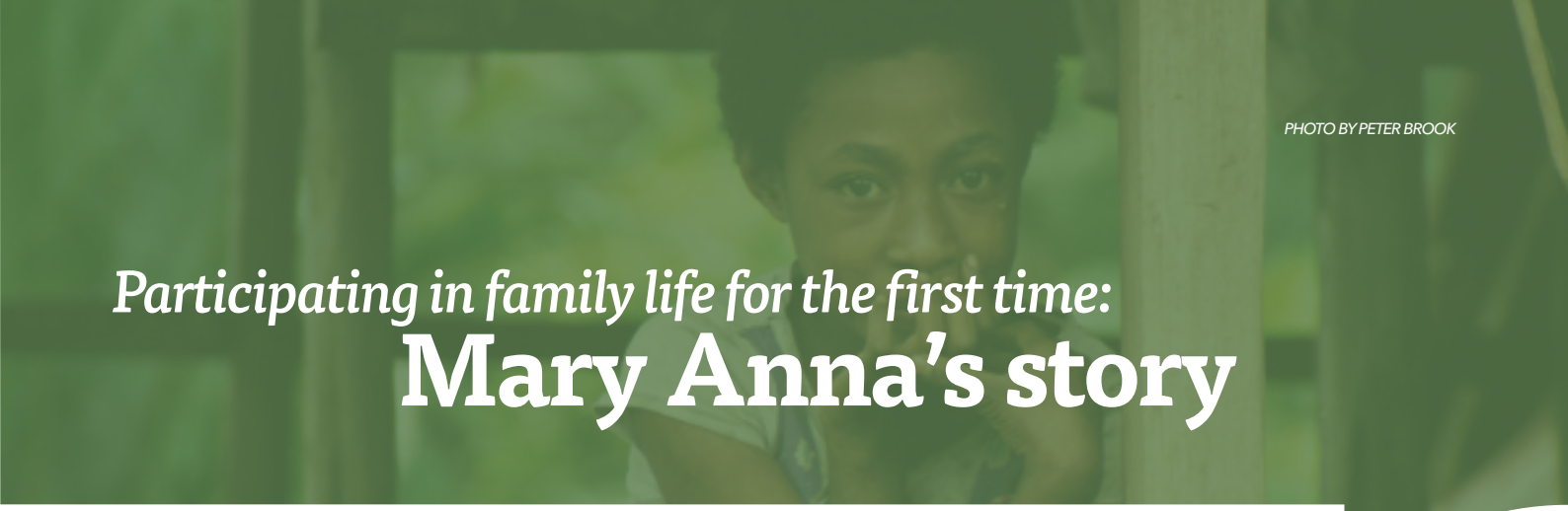

PHOTO BY PETER BROOK

Participating in family life for the first time:

Mary Anna's story

Mary Anna is a happy 11-year-old girl living with her family in Papua New Guinea. She loves talking and playing with her parents, but she has not always been able to communicate with them so easily.

Growing up Deaf, Mary Anna experienced isolation from her family. Unable to fully communicate beyond basic gestures, her parents felt desperate about how to talk with their daughter.

At the age of four, they sent Mary Anna to the Red Cross Inclusive Education Resource Centre (RCIERC) where she started to learn Papua New Guinea Sign Language (PNGSL) from her Deaf teacher, Noah. Mary Anna picked up PNGSL easily, yet her family struggled to learn it, despite years of Noah's dedicated home visits.

A tangible shift in the family's ability to communicate with Mary Anna occurred earlier this year when 26 new PNGSL Bloom books, and the related Luksave app, were launched. These were developed by the PNG Deaf Association, supported by SIL, and funded by the Wycliffe Relief and Development Foundation. These resources have been a huge blessing to Mary Anna and her family to learn PNGSL in a user-friendly way and at their own pace. The Bloom books and Luksave app, with their clear illustrations, definitions, and signs, made vocabulary acquisition more intuitive and accessible for the whole family.

Mary Anna's parents have actively embraced the opportunity to learn alongside their daughter. Their newfound shared language is fostering greater understanding, strengthening family bonds, and enhancing Mary Anna's inclusion and sense of belonging in her family. Mary Anna is so excited about the change in her family that she is sharing the app and promoting it to her Deaf friends, other family members, teachers and neighbours.

Mary Anna's dad, Nime, is thrilled that he can enjoy communicating with his daughter. He shares:

> Thank you! We are happy with the Bloom books and Luksave app. We will be very happy if short Bible stories can also be created. That will really help us as a family to broaden [Mary Anna's] faith.

The silence and isolation that once separated Mary Anna from her family has now been replaced by a beautiful sign language. Mary Anna's story is a powerful reminder that when communication barriers are broken, lives can be transformed and families can be brought together.

MORE *For more information about the PNGSL resources that are making a difference for people like Mary Anna, visit* ***wrdf.org.au/pacific/png/png-deaf-literacy/***

The Jesus Film

Wycliffe Australia also assisted Deaf Missions and Power to Change with the filming of the Auslan interpretation for The Jesus Film, due to be released in 2026.

MORE *For more information visit jesusdeaffilm.com*

What is sign language?

Sign language: *a formal language using a system of hand movements for communication (as by the Deaf)* - Merriam Webster Dictionary

It is estimated that there are around 70 million Deaf people in the world today who rely on sign language as their primary means of communication.[1] A common misconception is that cochlear implants and hearing aids are sufficient for enabling Deaf people to understand conversations, yet these devices only help to improve the perception of some sounds. Most Deaf individuals still need sign language to fully engage with and understand conversations. Aside from gaining a clearer understanding of the information being shared, sign language forms a key part of identity, culture and belonging for many Deaf communities.

Unlike spoken languages, sign languages are unique to their geographical locations. There are 280 documented sign languages in the world and anywhere from 138 and 300 different sign languages are being used today.[2] Despite the prevalence of sign language usage, there is still only one complete translation of the Bible in sign language: American Sign Language (ASL).

Australian Sign Language (Auslan)

Australian sign language, or Auslan, has been in use since the 1800s, yet the Australian Government only recognised it as an official, distinct language in 1991. The first time it has ever been included as a language option in Australia-wide research was in the latest Census (2021).[3] Information from that Census revealed that over 16,000 people use Auslan in the home[4], but calculations from the Australian Disability Network estimate that the total number of people who speak Auslan is closer to 30,000.[5]

Auslan translation and Deaf needs in Australia

- There are two completed books of the Bible that have Auslan translations: John and Acts
- 4% of the Old Testament and 37% of the New Testament has been translated into Auslan[6]
- The statistics for deafness increase significantly among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. 2019 figures show an alarming 43% occurrence of hearing loss among people aged seven years and older from Indigenous communities.[7]

The International Day of Sign Languages is celebrated on 23 September every year to raise awareness and support for Deaf people throughout the world. What can you do to show your support?

- Educate yourself about the needs surrounding the Deaf community
- Advocate for greater accessibility and resources in Auslan
- Visit Signbank at auslan.org.au to learn some basic signs in Auslan

MORE

If you are looking for help and resources in Auslan, visit deafconnect.org.au

Discover more about the technology assisting in sign language translations at: chameleondeaf.com

[1] handtalk.me/en/blog/nteresting-facts-about-sign-languages/
[2] handtalk.me/en/blog/nteresting-facts-about-sign-languages/
[3] deafvictoria.org.au/resources/what-is-auslan/
[4] deafconnect.org.au/our-news/auslan-user-statistics-2021-census
[5] lawreform.vic.gov.au/publication/inclusive-juries-report/3-people-who-are-deaf-hard-of-hearing-blind-or-have-low-vision-in-our-community/
[6] biblesociety.org.au/projects/australia-auslan/
[7] abs.gov.au/articles/test-suggests-43-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-people-have-hearing-loss#:~:text=%2C%20December%2011

ARTWORK BY LEIA THURROWGOOD

Ministry Resourcing

WINTER 2025 / ISSN 2202-9818

Wycliffe Bible Translators

PHOTO BY ELYSE PATTEN

What is Wycliffe Ministry Resourcing?

Wycliffe Australia's Ministry Resourcing department seeks to support the work of our members and organisational partners on the field. We are committed to building strong relationships, with an emphasis on mutual respect, trust, collaboration and prayer.

Our three main objectives are to:

- work closely with national Bible translation organisations
- support strategic partnerships with SIL International
- support Australian members on the field with their project needs.

Sustainable projects for communities in need

It is always humbling for me to see the myriad ways that God's people respond to the needs around them. In this edition, and generally at this time of year, most of the projects we share come under the Wycliffe Relief and Development Foundation banner. They relate to various social and economic barriers faced by minority and disadvantaged communities. The challenges are great and the needs seem overwhelming, yet our modest contributions can help these people to thrive. Please pray for these communities and, of course, assist financially as you are led and able.

By WRDF CEO Greg Conwell

Translation Consultant Training

Project 8807

WYCLIFFE FIELD SUPPORT PROJECT

Bible translation is being conducted more and more by local translators, in all parts of the world. Wycliffe Australia is very keen to support this, as it gives ownership of the translation process to the people groups who desire the Scriptures in their own languages. Trained translation consultants are critical to the translation process as they support mother-tongue translators to produce quality, accurate and culturally-appropriate Bible translations.

Unfortunately, there is a growing worldwide shortage of trained Bible translation consultants to assist local mother-tongue translators. The need for an effective pathway to develop more trainers, advisors and consultants to support these translation projects has never been more urgent. Wycliffe Australia is committed to supporting organisations training new translation consultants, both at home with our members, and across the globe. Donations to this project will support training costs for 2025, and any additional funds raised will be rolled over into next year's budget.

Target: A$34,000

MORE *Visit wycliffe.org.au/projects/consultant-development/*

Wycliffe Relief and Development Foundation Projects

Wycliffe Relief and Development Foundation is a separate company owned by Wycliffe Australia, which works through local partners to improve the practical aspects of life in marginalised communities. We aim to demonstrate Christian compassion and provide practical assistance in literacy and education, disaster relief, medical and basic health support. Donations to the Foundation are tax-deductible.

For WRDF projects, visit the WRDF website wycliffefoundation.org.au

Wycliffe Field Support Projects

Wycliffe Australia is committed to helping our field teams and the organisations they work with to thrive and serve effectively in their communities. Ministry Resourcing can help with providing funding for computers, village housing, travel costs, delivery of training, consultants and other services.

See more projects at wycliffe.org.au/projects/

PNG Medical Equipment for Locals

Project 8884

The SIL Medical Clinic in Ukarumpa provides services to local communities in Papua New Guinea (PNG). Wycliffe Relief and Development Foundation (WRDF) has been supporting the clinic with a number of projects to assist PNG citizens in the nearby Ayura region.

WRDF has opened a generic fund for the clinic that we hope can 'house' future needs as they arise, but always with a focus on supporting the needs of locals. There is currently an urgent need to replace the primary ultrasound machine at the clinic as the existing unit has crashed. A representative from the clinic says:

> The ultrasound unit is an integral part of our 'Bel Mama' (Pregnant Mother) program that we run at our clinic. The ultrasound serves several purposes. It allows us to check the health of the mother and baby. We have caught life-threatening conditions and been able to make the appropriate referral to a specialist so that we can ensure a safe pregnancy and delivery. It also serves to show the mother their baby and increases the bond a PNG mother feels toward their unborn baby, thus confirming the sanctity of life for the baby.

A donor from the United States has already made a significant contribution towards the total cost of the ultrasound unit, so the project cost listed is the net amount needed for the ultrasound unit and some additional related equipment. Any surplus raised will go towards future clinic needs.

Target: A$32,000

MORE *Visit wrdf.org.au/most-needed/png-medical-equipment/*

Southeast Asia 3 Literacy

Project 8862

This is only our second project in this country, and the first in literacy. The project will be run by a new local organisation that has experienced literacy experts. These partners share:

> The main goals [of the project] are to enable the M* people to be able to read and write in their own language for language preservation, to access digital communication… and to improve their access to education. These are the community's own goals.

The circumstances of this community are all too familiar: a minority language farming community with limited recognition and prospects, particularly if they do not have support to preserve their culture and increase education levels and language awareness. The fact that it is a common story does not make it any less important or urgent.

This will be at least a three-year or longer project, but at this stage funding is being sought for the first two years. We are the primary funding partner but another organisation that is part of our international family is also making a significant contribution.

**Full names have been redacted for security purposes.*

Target: A$36,000 for the first two years

MORE *Visit wrdf.org.au/asia/southeast-asia/se-asia-3-literacy/*

PHOTO BY MARC EWELL

Solomon Islands Deaf Community Assistance

Project 8855

We have helped establish small projects in the Solomon Islands supporting literacy-related themes in the past, but this is the first one specifically supporting the Deaf community. WRDF is very happy to announce an agreement to provide funding for recording studio equipment for the Solomon Islands Sign Languages Deaf Association (SISLDA).

This is a small part of a larger project that has involved multiple donors to provide appropriate, professional facilities so that the Deaf Association can start to provide resources to empower the local Deaf community. Members of our team have witnessed first-hand the difficulty Deaf communities in the Solomons experience when trying to receive the support and resources they need to achieve their full potential.

Our current contribution is small, but we hope it will lead to bigger opportunities as the local organisation gets more experience and confidence. This is our second project supporting Deaf communities, after our recent project in PNG to assist with the production of new reading materials. We are praying there are more opportunities to help these communities so near to our own doorstep.

Target: A$4,000

MORE *For more information, visit wrdf.org.au/pacific/solomons-deaf-community-assistance/*

*Full names have been redacted to protect the privacy of the students and workers in the region.

South Asia 1 Education and Community Empowerment

Project 8880

This project supports partner organisations working in three marginalised communities within a region of South Asia and responding to local needs as they arise. This usually involves literacy training, healthcare, and initiatives to generate a sustainable income. A worker involved in setting up a tailoring class last year shared with us the encouraging story of Mrs P*.:

> The residents of the entire village had never seen a sewing machine before. So when the manual sewing machines provided through funding from WRDF arrived in October 2024, everyone was very excited!
>
> Mrs P. excelled in learning the art of cutting and stitching. She began stitching her own blouses and, after four months of training, she was able to invest in her own machine.
>
> Mrs P. is now stitching clothes for her neighbours. As she is very new to this skill, she charges very low prices, hoping that one day she will bring significant improvement to the economic wellbeing of her family of six.

After seeing the difference that learning a trade can make in their community, there are now 10-12 young men who have also expressed an interest in mastering the art of tailoring.

Funds raised for this project will go towards the annual costs of hosting the training, purchase of machines, and the ongoing purchase of materials.

Target: A$60,000

MORE *For more information, visit wrdf.org.au/asia/south-asia-education-basic-health-care-clean-water-technical-training/*

Wycliffe Bible Translators

If you would like to discuss any of the Ministry Resourcing projects, please contact:

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