

This is Katey Hearth with Mission Network News and today I've got Rob Myers on the line, of DOOR International. He's going to be telling us about a really exciting development that's happened just within the past few days.

Rob, I understand you guys have had a "Deaf Strategic Alliance" meeting. We were just talking off-air about who actually came to that. But, before we dive in, what were your goals going into this meeting and what were some of the key takeaways that you all left with?

MYERS

Great questions. Yeah, so for those who aren't aware, Deaf ministry is actually a very young area of ministry compared to a lot of other areas. Not a lot of ministry has been done outside of the last 30 years or so to reach Deaf for Christ.

A lot of people think of Deaf ministry as disability services whereas lately, people have come to realize that [while] it's true, Deaf people have disability, deafness is the only disability that leads someone to be part of a completely different language group. So, we're finding more and more that the only way to do effective Deaf ministry is treating Deaf communities as they are, as minority language groups rather than just a disability group.

In the same way that you would try to reach an unreached people group, say, in Papua New Guinea – by giving them Scripture translation, by training leaders within the community to do evangelism and church planting, by beginning youth programs – those same types of outreaches are needed in Deaf communities worldwide.

There's about 350 Deaf people groups with 350 different sign languages around the world. Many people don't realize that, and within the past four or five years there have been probably about five or six major international Deaf organizations that have risen to the surface who have been working in the area of (Bible) translation. They've been able to get together on an annual basis to collaborate, to plan, to try to build some coordinated strategies. We've seen, within the past five years or so, a lot more happening on the translation side within sign languages and among Deaf communities.

Out of those 350 sign languages around the world, only about 26 of them have any Scripture access right now. But, that's changing a lot; more and more communities are beginning to start sign language translation programs. So, we're going to see more and more translations happening. But, a lot of other areas where you would expect to have ministry, say, in a hearing community like evangelism, or church planting, or children's programs, or the development of technology, or business-as-mission – all of these areas that are really critical to seeing the Great Commission happen – those are lagging behind because there either aren't organizations working in these areas, or there may be only one or two organizations [with that expertise].

As an example, DOOR International, which is the organization I represent, has been working for a number of years in evangelism and church planting. But, there really aren't very many other organizations doing that on an international scale in a Deaf-led, sustainable format. We'd like to



see that change. We'd like to see more and more organizations become aware of this need, and begin to strategize and work together to see these various parts come together for these Deaf communities around the world.

So, we called about 12 different organizations to come for an initial meeting – this type of meeting has never happened before – to being to talk about what they do, where in the world they're working, so that we could identify who is working in similar areas and who may need to begin to network with one another. But also, [to identify] the holes where no one is working, areas of the world where there's no Deaf ministry present right now. Areas of the world where maybe one or two types of ministry are happening but that needs to be broadened out.

As an example, one of the topics that did come up where no Deaf organization we're aware of is working in right now is business-as-mission. So, being able to help local Deaf organizations to become self-supporting, to begin to introduce the Gospel into a community by first helping Deaf people with job training and other needs like that. Unemployment in the Deaf community is very, very high; I think in the U.S. it runs around 75% so in developing countries it's much, much higher. When you want to share the Gospel in a community and they don't even have money for food or basic shelter or other basic needs, it can really become a hindrance.

A lot of people don't realize that when you talk about the Great Commission, it's almost like a big puzzle and a number of different people are bringing pieces of that puzzle together. But, when you're within a Deaf context, there are so few organizations working [and] there are so few pieces represented. We would love to see more and more pieces begin to be built within that.

As we identified areas of need, we began to build a list that we can share with organizations who would love to begin to support Deaf ministry in a very practical way. [The list contains] areas that we could begin to suggest people get involved [in] where no one is involved right now and could really use the help and support.

The conclusion of the meeting was that we're probably going to meet again in another year. We're definitely opening up this meeting to anybody who is interested in Deaf ministry on an international scale and who wants to support that type of ministry by following certain values that we all agreed on in this initial meeting.

We talked about how it's critical that any ministry that's involved in an alliance like this [recognizes] that Deaf people have their own unique language and culture, that Deaf ministry really needs to be led by Deaf people – so there needs to be a push for fostering Deaf leadership, Deaf ownership of work – [and] there needs to be a desire for collaboration, to work with one another in grace and truth. Any organization that desires to be part of this and wants to initiate in Deaf communities using those types of principles, we would love to have them come on-board.



As you're describing this, it sounds a lot like the International Leadership Team meetings that I know DOOR held recently. Is that how you came up with the idea for this, or how did this get started? [Where] did this originate?

MYERS

That's a great question. Several of the leaders within DOOR were talking about doing some restructuring of our ministry and part of that was a recognition that there are some areas within our own ministry where we truly are lacking, where we need support but we don't have it. One of the questions that we asked ourselves was, do we build that support within our organization? Or, do we try to seek out another organization that can provide that support?

We tried to work along both of those lines. We looked at what it would take to build that type of thing within our own organization. For example, we need "member care" for our Deaf staff. Internationally, there are very few resources that Deaf staff can go to for counseling or support or mentoring, or other things like that. As we considered trying to build something like that within our own organization, we also realized – unless we were to make that available to other organizations – that same type of structure would also need to be built within every single one of our partner organizations as well. We thought, there has to be a better way to do this, there has to be a way that we could collaborate together as organizations. [We could] have one organization be responsible for one area and try to provide that support and help to other organizations that are also in need of that.

A great example of this would be Deaf Bible Society, a great partner of ours, does sign language Bible distribution. [They provide] videos through their website, through apps, through other types of media. DOOR International used to do that type of Bible distribution up until about three or four years ago when we formed this partnership with Deaf Bible Society. Deaf Bible Society also does that same type of distribution for a number of other organizations. So, rather than DOOR, Deaf Missions, Deaf Harbor, Pioneer Bible Translators – and a number of other organizations involved in sign language Bible translation – all having to, within their own organization, have structure to push out Bible content and do distribution, they can partner with one organization that has the expertise to do that.

We wanted to see that potentially happen on a much larger scale with a number of other areas outside of the translation world. From evangelism to church planting to children's outreach, those types of areas. We would love to see that type of partnership begin to happen. That was what spurred on calling some of these organizations to come to a meeting like this.

We didn't give the organizations a lot of notice; they probably had about a month or a month and a half. So, unfortunately, out of the 12 that we invited, only 7 were able to make it. But, we do plan another meeting to happen in about a year's time. We anticipate that will be plenty of time for these and other organizations to be able to participate.



How is this alliance different than the Deaf Development Group at FOBAI?

MYERS

That's also a great question, and that's a question that we spent some time answering and talking about and thinking through. We don't want to create more alliances that are just doing the same thing as other alliances that are already out there. We want to collaborate and have effective ministry happen, but we don't want to duplicate what's already happening.

From what we understand – and, we're also going to have further discussion with the Deaf Development Group – the Deaf Development Group within the Forum of Bible Agencies International is specifically focused on Bible translation and Scripture engagement. The production of Scripture and the distribution and the use of Scripture. But if, for instance, an organization like Silent Blessings – which is focused on reaching out to Deaf kids – they were represented at this recent Alliance meeting, but they don't have any connection specifically to Bible translation. So, the Deaf Development Group is a really critical group for specifically focusing on translation but they're not representative of all of the other areas of ministry that might be happening within Deaf communities.

So, we wanted to try and create a platform that was much more broad, but also included some of these platforms that are already there. In the next year when we have another meeting, we're actually inviting the Deaf Development Group to meet within that meeting so that they can talk about Scripture and then simply report back to the larger group about some of the coordination that's happening in the area of translation and Scripture engagement.

The Deaf Development Group isn't under this (alliance), they're simply a part of a slightly broader picture. They tend to meet in April so in order to have this happen every six months, we ended up offsetting that so next September would be our next meeting. So, they can get together, have some more consideration, and then report to us more broadly.

Wrapping it up for our listeners and as a takeaway, how can they pray for this strategic alliance as it's in its initial phases and you guys are feeling out where to go next – what should they pray for?

MYERS

Sure. Well, one of the things that we talked about that Jesus [also] prayed for, and we're also praying for in the midst of this alliance, is that- we're praying for unity, and praying that we would be one, just as Jesus and the Father are one. We were thinking through Jesus' prayer for the disciples in John 17, and we know that unity is something that's usually very difficult to achieve. It's definitely something that the Enemy doesn't want to see happen but when we work together, not only are we more effective, but Jesus said when He prayed, 'when My people work together, people will see that and they'll know that the Father sent Me.'



It's our desire that, through this collaboration and alliance and unity that's formed here, that also causes people to know Christ more. Through the things that we do, but also simply through the example of working together for His Kingdom and working beyond the needs of our own individual organizations to begin to truly have a broad Kingdom perspective in the midst of this.

Pray also for other organizations who should be a part of this alliance. We would love to get connected with those organizations and see even more effective ministry and collaboration happening.

One huge area for prayer [is] there are a number of Deaf people groups worldwide, some of them numbering in the millions of people, who have absolutely no ministry happening within their people groups. We would love to see that change, and that's a part of the hearts' desire for this alliance to begin happening. The areas that are largest, that are in most need of ministry, that we would begin to be able to make plans together to reach those areas for Christ.

Those are people groups who've been missing the Gospel for thousands of years. Certainly the Enemy doesn't want to see that happen, but God has been watching those people groups. We believe that this really is the time for Deaf people worldwide to have access to the Gospel, so pray to that end. Pray that God would raise up workers for the harvest, because the harvest is obviously plentiful when we're talking about millions of people in need.

The workers are few, but God is at work and He's raising up workers. We are so excited for that.

