

# Video Bible Gives Japanese Deaf New Understanding of Scripture

It's Sunday morning. Across the world Christians are gathered to hear the Word—to remember the gospel and grow in their faith. In Yamagata, four hours north of Tokyo, Japan, Kumiko Matsumoto begins leading worship.

“Shepherd of my soul, I give you full control.” A flashing light directs the congregation's attention to the front of the room. No one is singing aloud, but everyone is moving their hands. Music plays in the background for the benefit of those who are hearing or hard of hearing, but most of the music in this room isn't audible. It's visual. It's in Japanese Sign Language (JSL), the heart language of Japan's deaf community.

After the singing pastor Eiji Matsumoto comes forward to preach, also in JSL. He pauses often to point the congregation to a passage from the Gospel of Mark not written in a book but signed on a screen. After each passage, Pastor Matsumoto expounds on the meaning of what's just been signed. The congregation is using Scripture recorded by ViBi—Video Bible. ViBi is a ministry of Japan Deaf Evangel Mission.

## **The Need and the Work**

Most Deaf people in Japan have never heard Japanese. They learn written Japanese as a second language, so most have difficulty reading Bibles written in Japanese. Attempts to translate the Japanese Bible into a simplified version for the deaf have proven inadequate. Years of misunderstandings and frustrations have accumulated for deaf Christians as they have waited for the Bible in their own language.

In 1993 a broad coalition of Japanese deaf Christian organizations came together for the common goal of a JSL Bible

for the deaf, translated by the deaf. Ten years later, the Japan Bible Society joined the project. Today, ViBi is run completely by Japanese Deaf leadership. The work of translation and recording is well underway.

### **Across the Lands**

The signer in the video of Matthew's Gospel is pastor Masahiro Minamida. For 12 years, he has been pastor of Toyko Deaf Church. He's been involved in ViBi for seven years. Pastor Minamida and Pastor Matsumoto are also the leaders of the Asia Pacific Sign Language Development Association, a new group of leaders from 12 countries. Each member of the group is involved in a Sign Language translation project or is trying to get one started.

ViBi team members eagerly share their experience, expertise and encouragement with deaf translators and leaders across Asia. They host workshops to teach translation principles, signing skills and technological techniques. They participate in international conferences and connect with other organizations. Twenty years of experience in Japan are being multiplied across the Asia Pacific region.

### **New Understanding**

Pastor Matsumoto has been engaged in ViBi since the beginning of the project. Since then more than 10 books have been translated. They make a huge difference in his work as a pastor.

"Before, I had nothing but the written Japanese version of the Bible," he says, "and it gave me limited understanding of the message I had to share with the people in my church. Now I see ... Deaf people find Scripture more interesting. It's especially powerful when we work with this in a group, because we can look at the verses together and grow together."

With the Bible in a visual language, a language he understands, Pastor Matsumoto makes new discoveries in

Scripture every week.

“Some time ago I finally understood the meaning of reconciliation between Man and God,” he says. “In JSL the sign is to take one hand from above and bring it down to the other hand with palms facing upwards. God came DOWN to us, it’s not the other way around!” He demonstrates the sign that helped him understand.

### **‘We Really Need Those 66 Books Quickly!’**

Akira and Tomoko Sakamoto are a young couple in Pastor Minamida’s church who have been deeply impacted by the Scriptures in JSL. Akira is deaf. Tomoko, who is hearing but had deaf parents, learned to speak Japanese later in childhood.

“Sometimes I want to explain something in Japanese to a deaf person—and other times I want to sign something to a hearing person. It’s frustrating,” says Tomoko.

“And when she’s angry, she uses both!” Akira interrupts with a smile.

Akira has been deaf all his life. When he met Tomoko, he wasn’t a Christian. He started going to church with Tomoko, and there he met Pastor Minamida.

“Every time I went to church, I felt Minamida was preaching about my life. In the beginning I thought Tomoko had told him what to say! I started to think that God was watching all the time, and it scared me!” Akira says. “After a while Tomoko ... explained to me how Jesus died for all of our sins, and that there’s nothing to be afraid of. After that I stopped worrying and became a Christian.”

Akira and Tomoko use the video Bible regularly, often in conjunction with the written Scriptures. “If I just read, I can’t create the image in my head. When I see it on the DVD, I immediately get it,” Akira says.

He is eager for the ViBi project to be completed. “Now we don’t even have the book of John; I really want to learn about the love of Jesus, the meaning of love and how John describes it. I want to know deeper, and there are so many things I’m curious about. I know it’s hard, but we really need those 66 books quickly, so the Deaf can see it now.”

### **In This Generation**

Shunko Teragawa is a deaf believer in the city of Toyooka, six hours west of Tokyo. She leads songs in her church and serves the congregation by cleaning between services. She is 70 years old. Twenty years ago, seeing the gospel shared in JSL changed her life forever. Today, seeing it on the video Bible continues to illuminate her understanding.

“It is hard to understand Japanese words,” she says, “so I check things on the [JSL Bible] DVD to see what the Scripture really means. The JSL Bible is something I can understand.”

Shunko’s pastor, Miya Kori, has been involved in an advisory capacity on the JSL Bible translation project. Even though Pastor Kori has fluency in several spoken and sign languages, she agrees that the translation of the Bible into JSL is essential.

“[JSL] was the first language I learned,” she explains. “I can understand it clearly. When I was little, we didn’t have the JSL Bible. My father was such a good storyteller in JSL. He shared all the Bible stories with me. Now I want that for others through the JSL Bible.”

There is still no full translation of the Bible in any sign language. Pastor Matsumoto and Pastor Minamida both say that they wouldn’t mind if JSL was the first finished Sign Bible translation. At the current pace of work it will take more than 30 years to complete the JSL Bible. However, if adequate funding comes through, completion of the JSL translation could take as little as 10 years.

Mark Penner, an American hearing person born in Japan, was instrumental in helping to form ViBi. Today he is a translation consultant with the project. He eagerly anticipates the day when the Deaf church will have the Scriptures so necessary to their growth in Christ.

“My feeling,” he shares, “is that when a new generation of Deaf Christians rises up with a Bible in their own language to support them, many of the other issues we face will fall into place.”

God’s people need God’s word in a language that is clear and easy to understand.

“*Reading* the Bible is sometimes like a stream of water running through—it doesn’t stick to you,” shares Akira. “*Watching* it makes it easy to remember and it sticks! Years of reading is just not enough—a little video clip can do so much.”

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