“There is a difference between Deaf and deaf,” says SBC of Virginia catalytic church planter John Wyble. “The Deaf community sees the deaf as people who have lost some or most of their hearing but still communicate from a hearing perspective.” The Deaf community, however, is a people group with its own language and culture. While interpretive ministries within the local church are critical to the deaf, interpretation is not sufficient to present a culturally accurate Gospel message to the culturally Deaf. American Sign Language (ASL) is not the English language interpreted; rather, it is a language in every respect just like Spanish, French, English, etc. There are cultural differences that make it difficult for the hearing community to accurately translate the message.

The culturally Deaf are a mission field and a mission force. Deaf church planters are being empowered as *indigenous planters by the SBC of Virginia to reach the culturally Deaf community. We now have five SBC of Virginia Deaf church plants and three *small groups in the Commonwealth. There are also several Deaf candidates in the application process to become church planters.

Surprisingly, the five SBCV Deaf church plants represent 10% of all of the Deaf churches in North America! According to the Southern Baptist Conference of the Deaf (SBCD), there are a total of 50 Deaf churches tasked with reaching the 3 million culturally Deaf in North America. SBCV’s five Deaf church plants have 100,000 to reach in the Commonwealth. This is a monumental task and can only be accomplished by calling, training, and empowering Deaf planters. Meeting locations are the greatest need for Deaf churches, so we must also have willing sponsor/host churches.

The SBC of Virginia supports two Deaf catalytic church planters: John Wyble in Waynesboro and John Folker in Richmond. These men have planted multiple churches and are proven leaders. Wyble is a “leader at large” with the SBCD, and Folker served two years with the International Mission Board (IMB) as the Deaf affinity liaison. These men are assisting with the Deaf work within the SBC of Virginia and have been critical in helping us understand church planting within the Deaf culture.

In April 2014, the first SBC of Virginia Deaf Network meeting took place in Lynchburg at the Innovative SBC of Virginia catalytic church planter, John Folker.
Faith Resources office. Nine Deaf leaders from around the Commonwealth met around the topic of evangelism and discipleship within the Deaf community. They have held several meetings since then and continue to encourage each other in this critical ministry.

Another way that the SBC of Virginia invests in church planters is through statewide Church Planter Network (CPN) meetings twice a year. At the March 2015 CPN, we offered our first breakout specifically for Deaf leaders. The track focused on discipleship and personal growth, and 16 grateful Deaf planters and wives attended. Stephen Newell is the church planter of Overmountain Deaf Church in Abingdon, VA. His wife, Tricia, said about the Deaf breakout, “That was the first time in a long time I could eat a meal and be fed spiritually without waiting on children.” At our August 2015 CPN, IMB missionary Mark Sauter led the Deaf breakout.

*indigenous planters—those who plant among their own people group or in the area where they were raised
**small groups—in the process of becoming church plants (have not yet had a public launch service)

A FEW IDEAS TO CONSIDER:

As you can see, Deaf church planting is growing in the SBC of Virginia, and you can be a part of this exciting ministry.

1. **PRAY** for God to call Deaf planters to reach the 100,000 Deaf people in the Commonwealth.
2. **EDUCATE** your church about the need for Deaf ministry and specifically for Deaf churches—and help people understand the difference between the two.
3. **ASK** God to reveal to you the Deaf in your community.
4. **A MISSION FORCE**—if you have Deaf families in your church, see them as a mission force and empower them to reach their peers.
5. **OPEN YOUR CHURCH** to be a host for a Deaf fellowship.
6. Do a people **SEARCH THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA** to identify Deaf organizations or locations where the Deaf fellowship.
7. Begin to **BUILD RELATIONSHIPS** with the Deaf. Trust must first be earned before you can engage the Deaf culture.
8. **CONTACT YOUR AREA CHURCH PLANTING STRATEGIST** for assistance. He will be able to direct you to the resources you need. If you’re unsure who the strategist is in your area, email churchplanting@sbcv.org.

SBC of Virginia catalytic church planter, John Wyble