Weakness is a huge thread in my whole life,” said Mark Penner, a Bible translation consultant currently serving the Japanese Sign Language and Thai Sign Language projects.

“When I was 25 years old, I knew pretty much everything,” said Mark sarcastically. “And I came to Japan with goals, because my dad had started a Deaf church and it was growing 50 percent per year. ... I’d been to seminary, and I’d read the books, and so it was like, ‘Shoot, we can reach Japan in 10 years! Just find a way to keep this going!’ [But] when I was the leader of that church, it just kind of flat-lined. Fifty percent [growth] per year just flattened out.”

Mark’s initial enthusiasm and confidence were crushed by what he viewed as a gigantic failure on his part. He realized that while he had great passion for church planting among the Deaf, God hadn’t given him the gifts he needed to be a successful pastor or leader in that culture.

“I quickly moved to training Deaf leaders to lead Deaf churches, and then realized that without a Bible they could understand, it was very difficult to train people.”

Mark again headed back to the drawing board. Only this time he was joined by a number of Deaf church leaders. Together they concluded that while it would be a massive undertaking, the only real solution was a Scripture translation in their own language.

“So at that point we moved to translating the Bible. A group of Deaf people got together from various places throughout Japan and formed an organization that began translating the Bible into Japanese Sign Language.”

But once again Mark realized he wasn’t the right person to lead.

“There were Deaf people who could do a far better job than me. They knew how to take a project and move it forward. They had that leadership skill. ... So it was a huge relief to me to have them just take the project and run with it.” Although Mark had come to a place of accepting a non-leadership role among the Japanese Deaf community, he still wasn’t sure how he could best serve the team. But as they delved deeper into the translation, it became clear that his skills and personality were a perfect fit as a translation consultant.

Over time, as Mark gained experience as a consultant for the Japanese Sign Language team, God began to expand his impact. When the translators for Thai Sign Language needed help on their project, they invited Mark to be one of the consultants.

“Translating the Bible is a lot of work, but at the end of the day, it’s not what we’re really about. It’s not Bible translation — it’s Bible transformation in people’s lives. The Bible is just how the life of Christ gets to people. It’s the life of Christ in the community that turns everything upside down and makes everything new. That’s what we’re looking for.”

Learn more about Bible translation in Thai Sign Language and how you can help at wycliffe.org/thaisign.
Thailand is one of seven countries that compose mainland Southeast Asia, including Myanmar (Burma), Malaysia, Singapore, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. It’s also the only country in the region not to have been colonized by a European power. Thailand — known as Siam until it was officially changed in 1939 — means “land of the free.”

Approximately 75 percent of the population is ethnic Thai, another 14 percent is Chinese and the remaining 11 percent is a mix of other ethnicities. Over 94 percent of the population is Buddhist, with the second largest group (at approximately 4.6 percent) being Sunni Muslim. Less than 1 percent claim to be Christian.

Praise God that 27 of the 86 languages spoken across Thailand have the complete Bible translated into their language! But many are still waiting to hear the Good News for the very first time.

You can make a difference in countries like Thailand by joining our prayer team. Sign up at wycliffe.org/prayer to receive weekly emails on different countries, people groups and more to help you pray for what God is doing around the world.

Ways to Pray for the World

» Pray that God would call more people to help in Deaf translations around the world.

» Ask God to be with the Thai Sign Language team as they make his Word accessible to the Thai Deaf community.

» Praise God for the continued spread of the gospel as more people learn about his love in their own language.