



MINISTERING TO PEOPLE WHO ARE DEAF AND HARD OF HEARING

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Ministering to People who are Deaf and Hard of Hearing

Why do we need a ministry for people who are deaf and hard of hearing? In America, 93% of people who are deaf have no contact with a church.ⁱ One out of 300 people in America is deaf;ⁱⁱ one out of five Americans has a hearing loss.ⁱⁱⁱ Such statistics are probably true in your congregation and area too. These people have problems understanding the Sunday sermon and participating in congregational activities.

People who are deaf and hard of hearing are proud victims of an invisible handicap. Unless they wear a hearing aid, you may not know about their hearing loss. However, it continues to separate them from the rest of the congregation because communication is hindered.

Often pastors and church leaders deny and/or don't realize the difficulties experienced by people with a hearing loss. Sometimes pastors say there is no need for deaf or hard of hearing accommodations; they think there are no deaf or hard of hearing people in the congregation. Knowing the prevalence of hearing loss, even a small congregation will have several people who cannot understand without some assistance such as captioning or hearing aids. Some deaf and hard of hearing Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) members have gone to other churches and other religions, seeking accommodations and programs.

Minister to All

The congregation has a responsibility and commitment to *each* of its members. One WELS pastor said, "We did not set out to serve the deaf. The Lord simply confronted us with the work when a child in our congregation lost his hearing. A congregation calls a pastor to serve the members of the congregation; we needed to find a way to bring the Gospel to a child who could not hear." The soul of the deaf or hard of hearing person is as important and hungry for the Gospel as the soul of a person who is sick or elderly. One-on-one time is spent with the sick and elderly; why should the people who are deaf or hard of hearing be brushed aside?

Serving all people is the entire congregation's responsibility, not the job of only the pastor or a few members. In a truly successful program, the whole congregation, rather than a few individuals, will be committed to including and serving people who are deaf or hard of hearing.

Awareness

What is your congregation doing to minister to people who are deaf or hard of hearing? Information can be presented to the congregation during a Deaf Awareness Sunday or to the Bible class, Sunday school, and Lutheran elementary school. WELS Mission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (MDHH) has speakers, pamphlets, and informational conventions integrating deaf and hearing participants. Local Deafⁱ clubs can also be a great resource for information.

ⁱ There is a difference in meaning between the words "deaf" and "Deaf" with a capital "D." People who are deaf include all people whose hearing loss is severe. Among the deaf, however, a group of people who communicate using American Sign Language (ASL) have developed their own culture, distinct from the hearing "culture" around them. Just as we capitalize Native American or English, we use the capital "D" to identify members of the Deaf community. Such people often form Deaf clubs.

Hearing Loss Association of America (HLAA) teaches coping, assertive, and advocacy strategies. The local state Office for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (ODHH) gives talks and advocates for the rights of people who are deaf and hard of hearing. Your school district's deaf and hard of hearing program may also be a source of information. All of us have much to learn about the needs of people who are Deaf or have significant levels of hearing loss. An accessibility committee can study the needs of *your* congregation, but it is advisable to communicate these needs to the whole congregation for the sake of their awareness of this invisible barrier.

After people of your congregation are informed about the frequency and difficulties of hearing loss, you are ready to identify and help your members.

Which of your members use hearing aids? These people know they have a hearing loss, but probably still have difficulty understanding conversation and therefore don't participate in the congregation's activities.

Who in your congregation is a lipreader? Some people cannot understand what is being said if you are beside them or behind them. They need to be looking at you to carry on a conversation. Many hard of hearing people become lipreaders out of necessity but often don't realize they depend on it. They naturally look at the speaker to understand conversation. This frequently happens to people as they become older, but there are also young people who are hard of hearing for various reasons.

After you identify which members have hearing loss, ask yourself whether they are active or inactive members of your congregation? It is good if you have some who are active; they can help reach out to others with a hearing loss.

Increase Involvement of Deaf and Hard of Hearing Members

Ask deaf and hard of hearing people what would help them, rather than just deciding what to do for them. Deaf and hard of hearing people vary as much as hearing people. They may have various opinions on what is helpful for them and how they would like to participate as active members of the congregation. Some were born unable to hear. Others became deaf because of illness or an accident. Some have gradually lost their hearing through the years.

What is necessary for worshipers with hearing loss to participate? Printed sermons are a great place to start but might not be very helpful for the Deaf person who uses ASL. Furthermore, the hard of hearing are missing anything that is not printed. Think for a moment, how much of our service and activities in the church revolve around the spoken or sung word. We want every member to experience every aspect of the congregation as much as possible.

An assistive listening system, such as the Williams Sound System with personal receivers, may help the hard of hearing and some (not all) deaf people. The personal receivers help a worshiper receive the sound from the pastor's mic. While they can be helpful to people with hearing aids or without, the person who needs the receiver must ask for one, which can be more of a barrier than you might expect.

A better choice for your congregation most likely will be a Hearing Loop/Audio Induction Loop. This is a special type of sound system that functions as a personal loud speaker for members with hearing loss who have a Telecoil (T-coil) setting on their hearing aids, cochlear implants, or a special receiver with head phones provided by the congregation. These systems may be used with a sound system or independently. The beauty of a hearing loop is it brings the pastor's voice to the user without background noise, while most hearing aids amplify all sounds, including the crying baby in the back of church. Worshipers can pick up the signal anywhere inside the loop that has been installed in the church.

Sitting near the front of the church also enables the user to lipread the pastor when he's facing the congregation. Freestanding altars are also beneficial for the same reason. Check the MDHH Resource Center (csm.welsrc.net/mdhh-resources-for-congregations/) for more information on assistive listening devices and other useful suggestions to help worshipers with hearing loss.

Ask deaf people if they use oral or sign communication. An oral person depends mostly on lipreading, facial expression, and body language, and may not use or even understand sign language. This person may benefit from an oral interpreter who sits close to the deaf person and mouths the words that are spoken. Oral deaf worshipers will also appreciate printed materials.

Some people lose their hearing later in life. They can read English but can't hear it. Much time and effort is taken to adjust to the hearing loss and learn a new mode of communication. Some late deafened adults find technological communication on cell phones, tablets, and computers beneficial. In these situations, another person types the spoken word for the deaf person to read.

Many deaf people use a combination of sign language and lipreading. Others don't read lips but rely on sign language only. Both groups may benefit from a sign language interpreter. Be aware, there are different kinds of sign language. Signed English is often used to instruct children, especially children who have hearing parents. It uses English word order and a sign for every word. American Sign Language (ASL) is used by many Deaf adults and people who have been Deaf all their life. Fewer signs are used, representing ideas and concepts. ASL, however, does not use English word order. Sometimes the methods are combined into Pidgin Sign Language, using concepts of both ASL and Signed English. It is important to find out which mode of communication your members with hearing loss prefer.

Pastoring Deaf Members

There are many ways the pastor can minister to people who are deaf or hard of hearing. Anything that enhances communication will be beneficial. If they use sign language, the pastor can learn some basic signs or use a sign language interpreter. If the deaf people are good lipreaders and have good speaking skills, one-on-one oral communication may be successful. Maybe writing back and forth suits you best. Be aware that English is sometimes a second language for Deaf people. Poor English does not reflect the intelligence of the Deaf person. American Sign Language has a sentence structure different than English. Some Deaf people who use American Sign Language (ASL) are not familiar with English grammar and idioms.

Therefore, printed materials, printed sermons, and computer communication may be difficult for them to use.

Sometimes a sign language/Deaf education class has been established at the church, taught by an interpreter, deaf person, or someone well-versed in sign language. The pastor and members will also learn about barriers that tend to separate deaf members from other church members. A person gains confidence in dealing with a situation by being knowledgeable and asking for feedback. If the pastor and members don't feel comfortable when working with deaf people, the program will be less successful.

Even if you don't know sign language, you can help deaf and hard of hearing people feel welcome rather than a bother, ignored, or neglected. Reach out to your members who are deaf and to the deaf people in your community. Acquaint yourself with their ways and needs.

The Congregation—Interpreted Services

It is the congregation's responsibility to find an interpreter, though the deaf people may offer suggestions. You need to consider what kind of sign language the deaf people use—American Sign Language, Signed English, or Pidgin (a combination of both).

Because some religious signs differ in accordance with doctrinal beliefs, it is important that the interpreter uses signs that reflect WELS doctrine. *Sign to the Lord a New Song*^{iv} is a WELS religious sign language dictionary that interpreters use to find the appropriate signs to convey sound doctrine. The MDHH website (csm.welsrc.net/mdhh-resources-for-congregations/) has an article about using non-WELS interpreters.

The congregation should pay the interpreter an acceptable, agreed upon amount. The interpreter should not be expected to work gratis, even if he/she is a member of the congregation. Consider the church budget when planning signed services and activities.

Arrange a meeting of the people who are deaf and hard of hearing, the interpreter, pastor, and a member of the church council or your special accessibility committee. Discuss what activities the people who are deaf and hard of hearing would like to attend—church services, Bible class, confirmation class, Sunday school, social activities or organizations, etc. Decide how you will start and how often these will be interpreted. Choose a schedule that will accommodate everyone involved. Be consistent with the schedule, e.g. always the third Sunday of the month. Occasionally, a new person may come and be disappointed if the service is not signed on the usual Sunday. Look ahead and avoid conflicts. If conflicts do arise, find a substitute well in advance. Cancelling an interpreted service should be a last resort.

The interpreter, people who are deaf and hard of hearing, and the congregation need to understand and agree what activities and services will be interpreted. Anything outside the church's activities become the deaf person's responsibility. Perhaps the interpreter can refer the deaf people to available interpreters or an agency for other interpreting needs, or the interpreter may want to sign the activity.

The amount of the time the interpreter must commit will need to be taken into consideration. If the work load is too much, try teaming with another interpreter, so more services and activities can be offered.

The pastor, interpreter, and deaf members can work together to decide the placement of the interpreter (i.e. front, back, side, middle of the church, lectern or pulpit side). Keep in mind that it is difficult for the interpreter to hear from the balcony or the back of the church. A loud organ, noisy children, and constant movement distract deaf people and the interpreter and hinder communication. The interpreter should sit where the lighting is good and there are no shadows on the face to make lipreading easier for the deaf and hard of hearing people. Placing the interpreter near the chancel area in front of church is best, so the deaf and hard of hearing members can see both the pastor and interpreter at the same time. The interpreter should not sit with window light behind him/her, because then the face/body becomes a dark silhouette. Keep the lights bright during the sermon. When lights are dimmed, it is difficult for the deaf and hard of hearing people to lipread the interpreter and pastor.

The pastor needs to work closely with the interpreter. Give him/her hymn numbers, Bible readings, and the order of service early in the week to allow ample time for practice. The interpreter may appreciate a rough draft or outline of the sermon as well.

The pastor should encourage the interpreter to ask the meaning of Scripture readings and hymns if he/she is unsure. Be supportive. Work together. A joint effort will probably be a successful one.

Sometimes pastors feel that an interpreter at the front of the church is distracting to him and the parishioners. This may be true the first 5-10 minutes, but the perceived threat usually disappears. Often the service is enhanced by the flowing, beautiful, and picturesque sign language—especially during songs.

Don't be discouraged if 100% of the deaf membership is not present for every signed service or activity. Many of the other members aren't present 100% of the time either.

Deaf and Hard of Hearing Role

Deaf and hard of hearing people need to accept some responsibility, too. Even if they cannot attend every signed event, they should try to come as often as possible. It is difficult for the church to offer special support for deaf (as well as hearing) people if attendance is poor or sporadic.

Deaf and hard of hearing people need to work with the interpreter and pastor to decide which activities should be signed. If there is no interest in Ladies Aid, but someone really wants an interpreter for congregational meetings, communicate that desire.

Deaf and hard of hearing people can help in another very important way. Jesus tells all of us, "Go and make disciples of *all* nations." Everyone can help spread the Gospel by bringing friends to church. Deaf members can bring their Deaf friends to join them at church and other congregational activities. They can encourage Deaf and hearing relatives to learn of Jesus and his abundant love.

The Interpreter

Religious interpreting requires a special commitment from the interpreter. Remember that serving the Lord is your primary goal; do everything to his glory. Prepare and do your best. Try to understand the feelings, preferences, and needs of the people you are serving, using their style of communication. Interpreters who are not familiar with church interpreting may feel that they can't keep up. Signing while watching TV at home is good practice, because you can't slow down the conversation. Don't give up. It will get easier! Work on the hymns and scripture readings ahead of time. Use your hymnal to pencil in notes if there is unusual wording. Some interpreters like to write or type the words of hymns or enlarge the page, to provide more space for their interpreting notes and word changes. The MDHH portion of the WELS online Resource Center has a wealth of information for interpreters where you can find glossed hymns and other interpreter resources.^v Practice the readings and try to understand the whole context. Check with the pastor on unusual meanings. The "Deaf Bible" app is also a great resource you can download on your phone from the app store. It can be a great help with difficult portions of scripture.

Parts of the liturgy that the congregation knows well tend to be spoken faster. The creeds and Lord's prayer can be written out exactly as signed. Always sign it the same way. In time, your speed will improve.

Responsive readings can be a challenge. Help the people know when they should respond by positioning. The interpreter may turn slightly towards the pastor when he speaks, and back again when the congregation speaks.

Sit and stand with the congregation. Deaf people cannot hear the congregation rise behind them; they watch the interpreter for cues.

The interpreter may wish to leave some lag time when interpreting the sermon. This will allow time to understand the entire thought. If the pastor uses difficult phrases or idioms, they can sometimes be rephrased to ideas more easily understood by the Deaf.

Try not to cause any unnecessary distractions. While signs should be large enough to be seen and understood, avoid being flamboyant and drawing attention to oneself. As long as the deaf and hard of hearing people can see the interpreter, there is no need to be taller or higher than the congregation or to move around in the front of the church. Ask to use a sturdy choir stand and chair or bar stool that is comfortable and the right height. Do not obstruct anyone's view. Respect the rest of the congregation.

Carefully choose what clothes to wear when interpreting. The color of the interpreter's clothing should be solid colors that contrast with the skin color so the hands can be easily seen. Wear a minimum of makeup and simple jewelry. Modesty is the key word. Hair should be away from the face so facial expressions can be seen and lips read more easily.

Encourage deaf and hard of hearing involvement, leadership, and assertiveness. The interpreter can socialize with them and help them become a real part of the congregation. Hearing people enjoy the fellowship of other Christians after church services and at social events. Deaf and hard of hearing people are no different. Stay a few minutes to visit. Help the

deaf people visit with others. If the interpreter is involved in a social group or church committee, perhaps inviting deaf friends will help them become comfortable, active members of the congregation.

An interpreter needs to give oneself to the Lord and do the best possible to prepare for the service. Encourage people in your group. Remember that the Holy Spirit does the work; we are his tools.

Conclusion

Ministering to people of your congregation who are deaf or hard of hearing is not always easy. It takes extra effort. We need to seek them out. Maybe your congregation only has one or two members who are deaf or only a few who are hard of hearing. That's okay; we need to minister to them, too. Maybe more are "hiding" in your membership. Seek them out and draw them into your activities. For every person in your congregation who is deaf, there are probably ten deaf people in your community. These are people whom your church could serve if obstacles were removed. Remember, *one sheep found* is worth rejoicing!

Steps to Starting Interpreted Church Services

1. Establish a committee
2. Survey congregation
3. Obtain an interpreter
4. Establish style of sign language to be used
5. Establish time and activities
6. Start
7. Interact
8. Enjoy

End Notes

ⁱ <http://www.gatecommunications.org/statistics>

ⁱⁱ Gallaudet University

<https://research.gallaudet.edu/Demographics/Deaf-US.php> February 2005

ⁱⁱⁱ Johns Hopkins Medicine,

https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/news/media/releases/one_in_five_americans_has_hearing_loss

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^{iv} *Sign to the Lord a New Song* can be purchased from Northwestern Publishing House.

^v csm.welsrc.net/mdhh-interpreter-resources/