Improved ministry for the deaf

There is another world out there that even pastors know little about. It is the world of the deaf. This world has its own unique culture and its own visual language: Sign Language. The deaf often have their own clubs and advocacy groups, and occasionally, their own churches.

It is difficult to touch this world with the gospel. In North America, only an estimated 6-7% percent of the two million deaf attend church. Around the world there are an estimated 50-75 million who are deaf. In many countries the deaf receive very little education, and in some world cultures, the deaf are kept largely out of sight.

Work for the deaf in churches

Many denominations have an organized ministry with deaf people. In the 1800s the Lutheran Church chose to make deaf ministry a part of their mission field. Thus, traditionally, Lutherans have not required deaf churches to be fully self-sustaining. Other churches with a notable work include: the Catholic Church, Pentecostal and Baptist Churches, the Church of Christ, Mormons, United Methodists, and Jehovah’s Witnesses. Most denominations have some work, but because it is so challenging, many have little organized work except for an occasional interpreter.

A number of groups have worked aggressively to take the gospel to the deaf outside North America. The Bob Rumball Evangelical Deaf Center in Toronto, Canada, is one of numerous groups that have established work in many foreign countries.

The Independent Baptists are developing work in Inter-America. Seventh-day Adventists have two full-time pioneer workers in India, including a small school for children. They also have some work in Russia, Ukraine, Romania, Japan, Mexico, and Brazil.

Why is the percentage of actively Christian deaf so low? If a church does not have any deaf naturally coming through their doors, they are unlikely to organize for deaf ministry. And if a church doesn’t meet their special needs, few, if any deaf will come.

Some churches have laypeople who have learned sign language well, and are a bridge from the deaf group to the church. Where there is only an outside paid interpreter, the work will seldom flourish, and the church may find it difficult to keep on funding the $50-$100 per morning.

Why is deaf ministry so difficult? Deaf ministry requires the church to bridge into another culture where there is often distrust of the hearing. For centuries the deaf have been controlled and even manipulated by those who can hear.

There is often a degree of fear in the hearing who don’t know how to bridge the communication and cultural gap to the world of the deaf. Because their first language is sign language, the average North American deaf person reads at a fourth- or fifth-grade level. This means that the church’s printed materials usually present barriers for the deaf.

Communicating with the deaf

Do all deaf people sign? No. Deaf people fit into one of three basic groups. First are those we have already described—the deaf who are part of the deaf culture and use some form of sign language in their communication (there are about 70 different sign languages around the world). Second, there are a group of oral deaf who speak and read lips well enough to get by in a hearing world. A large third group are those who may have spent most of their lives in the hearing world but then, either through sickness or aging, have become profoundly deaf. These people usually fail to acquire the key to the deaf world: signing. These tend to slip into a lonely and isolated world of their own.
To communicate effectively with deaf people, the following guidelines may be helpful:

+ Look straight at the deaf person, speak clearly, but don't needlessly shout and embarrass them.
+ Learn the deaf person's name, and/or the "sign" for their name.
+ Maintain eye contact with the deaf person while talking, or signing.
+ If needed, don't be afraid to write back and forth. Many deaf people must do this all the time.
+ Be sure to include deaf people in group conversation. They don't like being left out any more than anyone else.
+ Don't cover your mouth when speaking, or turn another way and keep talking. The deaf need to watch your mouth.
+ Don't refer to the deaf as "Deaf and Dumb," "Deafies," or as disabled. The best way is just to refer to them as "Deaf." Some terms are highly offensive to the deaf.

+ Don't treat the deaf as if they are on a lower level—like children, incapable of thinking or acting normally. They can't hear, but their minds work very well. Treat them as equals.
+ Don’t stare at the deaf, or ridicule them. They are sensitive to social graces.
+ Don’t try to be overhelpful. Be natural, and watch for unoffensive ways to help.

**Improving our ministry for the deaf**

How can pastors work for deaf people? The most important help is an attitude of true love that treats a deaf person as an equal. We must help the deaf to help themselves without simply feeling sorry for them or doing everything for them.

It can be helpful to do some reading on deaf ministry and to visit a deaf club with someone who is deaf. One may also go to another church where there is a strong ministry to the deaf. See what they are doing that might work in your church.

Find out what your own denomination is doing and what tools for deaf ministry are available. One of the fastest ways to see what resources are available worldwide is to go to your favorite Internet search engine and just type in "deaf ministry."

Setting up a new work can be challenging. Not every church will be successful, but when God presents a need, He will supply those who can meet that need. Find out if anyone in the congregation already has some inclination for the work. Many relatives of the deaf have taken one or more signing classes. Others may work with deaf children in schools and elsewhere. Those who already have a head start, and who have a special love for the deaf, will usually be the ones who will start and stick with the long-term effort required.

The deaf resent ministries that are

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M I N I S T R Y
here today and gone tomorrow. Deaf ministry is definitely one of the most difficult ministries because it must be adapted to every part of the church's ministry, and that among a hard-to-reach people group.

Because this ministry is so challenging, when key individuals are found for it, we must support them. Train them to become fully qualified in sign language. Some will become signing helpers who can befriend the deaf one-to-one. A few may reach the level where they can interpret.

Interpreting for the deaf is challenging work. Not only must church interpreters simultaneously put your sermon (and everything else) into a visual language, but they must simplify the wording. Occasionally, concepts need to be explained to people who, because of their handicap, may find it challenging to think in the abstract. At times, interpreters may have to stop and explain a word, then quickly listen to catch up. It is helpful for interpreters to have an outline of the pastor's sermon (plus other elements from the service) before the service starts.

**Unique challenges for pastors of the deaf**

Because most denominations have very few full-time pastors for the deaf, it is often difficult for these few to find places to transfer as a full-time pastor to another deaf congregation. This is even more problematic if the pastor is deaf. Such a minister cannot ever change to a hearing church, or even pastor both deaf and hearing people. Because they are constant advocates for deaf people in a church world that seldom understands the real needs of the deaf, it is easy for pastors of the deaf to slowly develop a sour or critical attitude. Hearing church leaders need to understand this, and give special help and support to these pastors.

All denominations have the responsibility to provide an organized special ministry to the deaf. The United States and other governments
are making ever more stringent requirements for closed captioning TV programs. Denominations need to caption their video and television productions. *Focus on the Family* has chosen to caption all their video productions, and the *It Is Written* telecast is closed captioned in the U.S.A.

In North America the deaf in the Adventist Church are partly served through Adventist Deaf Ministries, working in close connection with the Multi-Lingual Department of the North American Division. A new broadcast quality 26-program Bible Study series in sign language has been produced on video. The presenter, Pastor David Tredler, is deaf. Also, a new 12-tract color doctrinal series was just written for the deaf (see sidebar for details). There are three full-time pastors (two deaf), and several part-time and lay pastors.

One of my favorite writers once said, "I saw that it is in the providence of God that widows and orphans, the blind, the deaf, the lame, and persons afflicted in a variety of ways, have been placed in close Christian relationship to His church; it is to prove His people and develop their true character. Angels of God are watching to see how we treat these persons who need our sympathy, love, and disinterested benevolence. This is God's test of our character."  

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