

Invisible and Unseen...for How Much Longer?

Thoughts on Deaf Ministry

Picture this: You go to a new church for the first time. Maybe you are a believer; maybe you are not. Either way, the place feels unfamiliar. Where's the bathroom...the nursery...the free coffee? Once you get past the greeters at the front door and find your way into the sanctuary, the problem of where to sit presents itself.

You cast your eyes up and down the aisles until you find an empty spot not too close to the front. You maneuver your way through people and claim your seat. Your eyes rove the crowd.

A sea of faces—strangers, all of them—smiling and chatting and laughing, sharing the week's ups and downs. Shaking hands. Hugging. Sharing lives. But you are not a part of it: you blend into the sea, a solitary swimmer. Maybe one or two people smile at you briefly, but that's it.

The music starts. But you don't know when you're supposed to sit or stand. The routine is entirely unfamiliar. The music and liturgy are different—perhaps even startling—to you. You keep your eyes on everyone around you, following what they do, making sure you're not out of place. The sermon is good—uplifting and educational—so you decide to come back next week.

Week by week passes. Soon, a person notices and greets you.

Then you're introduced to someone else. All of a sudden, you have new friends. You belong.

Gradually, you meet more people, learn names, become rooted. The sea of faces slowly transforms into a mosaic of warm and familiar people. You belong. You're firmly rooted in a community of believers. You laugh together, cry together, pray together, rejoice together. You belong.

If you're a Christian of any kind, you've most likely experienced the anxiety of starting a new church, making new friends, and getting involved with the church. Some of you have probably gone through the process multiple times.

Now, suppose...just suppose that nobody ever greeted you. Suppose that nobody ever noticed you and asked, "Hey, are you new? What's your name?" Suppose that you faithfully attended that church week in and week out, and *nobody ever spoke to you*.

Now, suppose...just suppose that everyone around you was speaking a foreign language. You understand absolutely nothing of what's going on around you. Someone translates the sermons for you, but you understand nothing else. Everyone else is

laughing and chatting, but you are utterly left out because you understand nothing.

You never meet anyone. You never become rooted in the community. Nobody notices your loneliness, nor do they make any attempt to include you. You're just there—co-existing but detached...not belonging.

If nobody ever spoke to you in church or made any attempt to talk with you, how long would you keep attending that church?

I'm wagering that you'll only last a few weeks. Maybe a few months, tops, if you are an especially optimistic person. But at some point in the near future, I guarantee that you will be looking for a different church...or even worse, you will stop going to church altogether.

"Oh, that doesn't happen in my church," you're probably thinking. "We're all warm, welcoming Christians..."

Oh, I know you are—no doubt about it.

But I speak from long experience, and I am telling you now: this, this scene is exactly what happens nearly every time a deaf person walks through the doors of a church. *Any* church. It happens in Baptist churches, Lutheran churches, Catholic churches, Reformed churches, non-denominational churches—regardless of church type,

denomination, or religion. Deaf people are largely invisible, unseen, and ignored. Churches have always been—and continue to be—one of the loneliest places for Deaf attendees.

I am Deaf—I have been so for nearly my whole life. And I am a Christian—I have been so for nearly my whole life. In that space of time, I've attended my fair share of churches. Now, I will be brutally honest with you.

In several churches I attended, I often felt a sense of un-belonging and detachedness from everyone else because ordinary people like you rarely acknowledged my presence. Hardly anyone would talk to me or even acknowledge my presence. I was in a crowd of many Christians—my brothers and sisters in Christ—but more often than not, I would feel alone and, well, lost. In some situations, it was the sheer force of my faith and my commitment to Christ that kept me going to church every Sunday.

Then why didn't I simply switch churches? *Because it is the same in nearly all churches:* Hearing people like you—wonderful, loving Christians—unintentionally fail to reach out and make deaf people feel like they belong to the congregation.

I am not blaming you. I am simply being painfully honest. The fact is that: even if a church has a deaf ministry, even if a church has sign language interpreters

provided—even so, deaf people are often overlooked, ignored, or simply forgotten in churches. Yes, you notice the people signing. Yes, you notice the interpreters. Yes, you enjoy seeing the songs being signed. But the actual deaf persons, the reason for the signing ...well, they are usually left to their own. Hardly anyone makes the effort to talk directly with them. Except the interpreters.

Why?

It's hard to communicate. It's, quite frankly, a challenge. They speak a different language, and they cannot hear yours. So they are left alone. Most hearing people do not talk with them or interact with them. They co-exist with you in your church, but are not rooted in your community.

This is a huge reason why only about 2% of the 28 million deaf

people in America are Christians. Out of 28 million deaf people, only about 500,000 attend church—any church at all.

Only 500,000! That is an heartbreakingly low number!

Sadly, the numbers worldwide are even lower. *Deaf people are among the most under-reached populations for Christ in the world.*

Even worse is the fact that it does not have to be this way. If congregations filled with people like you and me simply take a moment—really, it only takes a moment—to be aware of a few very small things, then Christian churches can truly become God's kingdom on earth: places where all people are accepted and firmly rooted in Christ **and** in one another.

NEED-TO-KNOW: FOR PASTORS & CHURCH LEADERS

About Deaf Ministry...

1. **Deaf ministry needs to be all-or-nothing.** You can't just have interpreters available for the main Sunday service and "call it good." That is insufficient. As you know, church is much more than the Sunday morning service. If your church has a ministry for the Deaf, you need to make sure it extends into *all* parts of your church. Discipleship classes, Bible studies, social events, and so forth—all of these church-related functions need to be made accessible to Deaf people. Talk with the interpreters you have, and make sure you have some type of arrangement for if a Deaf person wants to join the Wednesday night Bible Study.
2. **Be intentional about approaching and interacting with deaf people.** Take the time to learn a couple basic greeting signs, and don't be afraid to try and communicate/interact with Deaf members of your congregation. Even if you can't communicate clearly, God's love will shine through you, and *that* will be sufficient. You already know how important it is for people to feel connected to their church; nowhere is this truer than when you're dealing with Deaf people. Due to communication barriers, Deaf people are widely ignored by hearing people during their daily lives. Church should be the one place where they are *seen* and *embraced* by everyone else. Your interaction with Deaf people—even if it is only a quick hug or a short "how-are-you"—not only sets an example for the rest of the congregation to follow, but it also makes Deaf people feel welcome.
3. **Ask Deaf people what they need.** Make a point of occasionally talking to deaf people and see what they want/need from you and from the church. ASK them how you can best serve them.
4. **Make sure all church functions—classes, studies, training, social events, and so forth—are accessible to the Deaf and communicate that to them.** Openly advertise that you will have sign language interpreters provided. Make it known that deaf people are wanted and welcome at these events.

About Interpreters and Sign Language...

5. **Be aware of the interpreters' needs.** At all times, Deaf people need to be able to see the interpreters' hands during the service. Talk to your interpreters and see what they recommend. Here are some common requests interpreters will ask for:
 - a. Reserved seating for the Deaf near the front of the church to maximize their ability to see the interpreter clearly
 - b. A chair in the front for the interpreter, or at least, a place on the stage or below stage for him/her to stand.

- c. Good lighting on the interpreter throughout the service to ensure visibility.
 - d. Whenever possible, provide your interpreters with the service's songs and the sermon outline before church.
 - e. Make sure you don't burn out your interpreters. It is physically and mentally exhausting to interpret every week. If possible, have two (or more) interpreters available to take turns each week.
6. **Make sure your interpreters know their stuff.** Make sure they are actually fluent signers. Many people learn a few signs and think they can "interpret," but that is not so, and when it happens, it is deeply offensive to deaf people. Check your interpreters' credentials. It can be as easy as asking your Deaf members for feedback about the interpreter.
7. **Try to have resources available that are designed especially for Deaf people.** (Your interpreters can help you with this). Or at least know where to refer Deaf people to find these resources.

FOR LAY PEOPLE (regular people like you and me)

1. **Be intentional about talking to deaf people**—not just to the interpreters. Too often, hearing people will talk with the interpreters, but then walk right past the deaf people and not say anything.
2. **Make a point to welcome deaf people and learn their names.** Learn a couple basic signs and interact with them regularly. Communication will be a creative challenge, yes, but even if you feel awkward and a bit foolish, Deaf people *will* appreciate your efforts to welcome them. So... get out of your comfort zone and just try!
3. **Ask deaf people to teach you about themselves.** Show that you genuinely want to get to know them.
4. **Invite deaf people to church activities and events.** Make sure they know you want to see them there, and when they show up at various events, make a point of saying “hi.” It sounds like a small, trivial thing, but small, thoughtful acts like these are extremely powerful for Deaf people because it makes them feel welcome and wanted in your congregation.

GENERAL KNOWLEDGE ABOUT DEAF CULTURE (for everyone!)

- 1. All deaf people are different**—many sign, but some prefer lip-reading and speaking for themselves. When you approach a deaf person in church:
 - a. Start with either grabbing an interpreter and bringing that person with you to interpret OR writing a note (on that church bulletin you doodle in during the sermon), then let the deaf person react. Based on that reaction, you'll figure out how that person prefers to communicate.
 - b. **Be deliberate** about learning a couple of greeting signs. It's easier than you think, and you can use them every week.
 - c. NEVER walk up to a deaf person and start talking loudly or over-enunciating your words. Most deaf people do not lip-read, so your efforts will be embarrassing for you both. Start with paper & pen or with an interpreter.
 - d. Avoid the mistake of talking only to the interpreter. Make sure you talk with the people who are the reason that the interpreter is there.
 - e. *Remember: Even if your words are not fully communicated to the deaf person, deaf people understand and appreciate genuineness; they will understand that you are happy to see them.*
- 2. Deaf people are largely invisible in normal society, even though they are everywhere.** Due to the communication barrier, hearing people usually ignore Deaf people or simply don't notice them. Deaf people are usually the ones who have to work hard to make their presence known and overcome the communication barrier. For the most part, they are ignored. *Make sure this is not so in church.* Communication will always be a barrier for deaf people, so make the first move to interact with them. Make sure the deaf people know you see them, notice them, and are happy they're there. *Do not allow them to remain unseen.*
- 3. Don't feel sorry for deaf people.** Accept the fact that God made them that way for a reason. Most deaf people do not want their hearing to be restored. They feel like complete human beings who just happen to not be able to hear. For them, deafness is a trait like being blue-eyed or blonde-haired. They don't want your sympathy; they don't want to be fixed; they don't want to be looked down upon. Many of them will tell you that God made them this way, and that they don't want to change. Accept them the way they are: as a unique creation of God's...just as you are.

4. **Invite deaf people to teach you their language** (don't just ask about the songs—everyone loves seeing songs signed, but deaf people, due to the nature of their hearing loss, often do not share the same level of music appreciation as you do, so it is better to ask them to teach you conversational signs first). Invite them to Sunday school to teach the kids basic signs. Some Deaf people will be eager to take you up on this offer; others will not be comfortable with it. But ask. Learn from them.

5. **Don't be afraid to look stupid when trying to talk with a deaf person.** Using gestures and pantomime is perfectly acceptable in Deaf culture. Be creative in how you try to communicate. *The key here is to try.* Just by trying, you will be doing much more than 99% of the hearing people that Deaf individuals encounter everyday.