



DEAF CHURCH

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If you can't see, or walk, or talk, or move your arms, you can still go to church on Sunday morning and take part in the worship service. But if you are Deaf/hearing impaired, it is impossible to reap the benefits of hearing the liturgy, the sermon, and the singing unless someone interprets for you in sign language. Rarely will you find a church with that service in your community. Even if you do, interpreted services make the Deaf feel somewhat like spectators with a good number of Deaf in attendance.

A separate service affords deaf persons the opportunity of participating in the worship service itself, or in the business meeting or in other activities. To neglect any segment of the deaf church is to discourage the Deaf from continuing to participate in the church activities;

Deaf activity groups can be formed to parallel those of the hearing Church of the Brethren, regardless of age. The only necessity is that the church have enough experienced personnel to work with the Deaf. The church must be sensitive to meeting the needs of the Deaf at every age level.

The American Annuals of the 1970s identified 503 churches or synagogues for the Deaf of all denominations in the US and 15 in Canada. According to population statistics for the Deaf, this means there should be an average of 25,888 deaf persons for each church. However, the sad truth is that it is a rare church for the Deaf that averages 50 or more in attendance.

The Winchester Deaf Brethren, Calvary Church of the Brethren, Winchester, Va., and the Frederick, Md. Church of the Brethren are among the churches that have deaf people emerging from the hearing congregation into a sub-congregation. The credit for both of these goes to Rev. Merlin Garber who, in Winchester, ordained a deaf man, Rev. Warren C. Blackwell, to continue his work with the deaf church. Pastor Garber then started a deaf group in the Frederick Church of the Brethren. Because the Maryland School for the Deaf has a campus in Frederick, the Frederick church has a good resource of deaf people though it is in need of finding an appropriate deaf pastor for the deaf sub-congregation.

DEAF WAY

Deaf people believe that the deaf culture is as crucial as nature. Capacities for language, thought, communication, and culture develop automatically in deaf persons. They are not just biological in origin. They are a gift--the most wonderful of gifts from God, from one generation to another. Hearing and deaf people are equally articulate in their own language, whether it is heard or seen.

Sign language is a visual language whereas English is an auditory language. We may expect or think that American Sign Language (ASL) is "universal," but this is not true. Each country has its own sign system. There is Japanese Sign Language, Korean Sign Language, French Sign Language, and so forth. The beginning of ASL may go back to the 1700s. We credit ASL to Laurent Clerk who, when brought by Thomas Gallaudet to America, started the first American school for the Deaf in Hartford, Conn.

Rather than ascribing to deaf persons a "medical" status, we should consider deaf persons as having an "ethnic" status--persons with a distinctive language, sensibility, and culture of their own. We instantly give a black group a Black community, but not the Deaf their own identity. The attitude among the Deaf is that the factors of language, society, politics, and audiology create a true deaf community.