

How to Start a Deaf Ministry

By Don Cabbage, Ph.D.

World Mission Society

PO Box 371007

El Paso, TX 79937

Email: doncabbage@juno.com

The building of a deaf ministry is much more than simply learning how to talk on the hands and interpreting the Sunday morning service for the Deaf. It is quite an involved matter. For this article the process is broken down the building of a Deaf ministry into three major phases. First, there must be a burden for the deaf. Secondly, the worker must learn the technical aspects of the ministry. Third the worker must know methods of building the physical work.

A Burden for the Deaf

Before a successful ministry for the deaf can be built, the Deaf worker must have a burden for the Deaf. Educationally speaking, deafness is a very serious handicap. The problem of deafness centers on the learning of a language. A Deaf child does not naturally acquire the language of words around which our society is build. The deaf child cannot hear the sounds around him. He therefore must learn to live in a strange world of silence. He must attend a special education program in school. The type of life and the level of living that a deaf child can attain will be affected by his education, much more so than that of a hearing person.

The Scriptures remind us that we are fearfully and wonderfully made. Every aspect of our being is completely interwoven. Our physical make up affects our emotional make up. Educational background will affect our

social and economic life. Therefore, deafness affects a person physically, emotionally, educationally, economically, socially and spiritually.

The Christian Deaf worker is interested in a Deaf person's spiritual welfare. How will the Deaf person learn about the Bible? How will he hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ? He cannot sit in the average church and understand the pastor. Generally he does not read well enough to understand most Gospel tracts. How then, will he learn enough about the Bible to be saved?

One out of every ten persons in the United States has a serious hearing impairment. Some have a slight impairment. Millions, however, have a hearing impairment serious enough to require special education. In the ministry with the Deaf we are most concerned with those people whose hearing loss is serious enough that they cannot be taught the Gospel by ordinary means. This ministry includes hard of hearing people, those who lip-read, as well as those who use the language of the signs, people who were born deaf, as well as folks who became deaf after birth.

Stop and look around yourself. Observe the Deaf people that live in your own metropolitan area. I am sure you will find Deaf folks who you had no idea existed. There are well-educated and uneducated deaf all over the nation. There are Deaf children of brokenhearted parents. Many Deaf people are blue-collar workers, store owners and very intelligent people. Be sensitive to the presence of Deaf people in your own area, in the whole of the United States and around the world.

Deaf people are a very special segment of our society and therefore require a special evangelistic effort on our part if they are to learn of the Gospel. Stated simply, the hope of the deaf ministry is your dedicated

hands. We must be sensitive to that fact and concentrate our hands to God so that the Deaf may hear.

Learning the Technical

The second major aspect of building a ministry with the deaf is acquiring a knowledge of the technical. Education of the Deaf can be a very interesting and many sided subject. It centers primarily on the teaching of communication. Teaching of the Gospel and winning of Deaf people to Christ rests in its entirety upon good communication. A Christian worker should understand the different ideas in Deaf education. Learning to work with the Deaf he need to know of the problems of Deaf education and learn the answers.

Before starting to work with the deaf the worker must acquire a usable knowledge of the Sign Language. There are several methods by which one can do this. One can go to a college to study the language. There are many colleges in the United States that teach the language of signs.

Another method of becoming skilled in the Sign language is in special education classes such as the two week Sign Language School conducted by International Sign Language Schools (ISLS) at Apache Creek Deaf Ranch in Reserve, New Mexico each year. Each year ISLS conducts an intensive Sign Language School at the Ranch. During these two weeks a student can learn enough Sign Language to go back home and start a Deaf Sunday School class in the home church. The classes at camp are three hours in the morning and two in the evening. Each week is equal to about a college semester of study.

The worker may also attend special classes taught by various organizations in their local area. In many cities there are special education classes in the adult education program of the local school system, which

teach the Sign Language. In other cities Sign Language the Deaf and Hard of Haring counseling service or the service agency for the Deaf hold classes.

It is possible to have a special Sign Language training school at your church. There are several evangelists who specialize in the establishing of ministries with the Deaf at local Churches. A pastor finding he has deaf in his community, may want to invite one of these evangelists to come set up a department for the Deaf in his church. Our ISLS representatives normally teach Sign Language in a church situation two hours per night during the weeknights for a period of two weeks to set up a new deaf ministry. During the day the evangelist can visit within the Deaf community to invite Deaf people to come to the church. In these classes students study the Sign Language vocabulary, interpreting, teaching a Sunday School class for the deaf and how to win deaf to Jesus Christ. During the two-week period students are introduced to the Sign Language. At the end of this course they will not be experts but they will be good novices. With proper application and usage of the knowledge they have acquired in those classes they can begin to build an effective ministry with the deaf and ultimately become good workers with the Deaf.

Understanding the Deaf

Acquiring the Sign Language does not complete the technical aspect of working with the deaf. The Deaf worker must gain an understanding of the Deaf. The worker must become identified with the deaf people. The worker must understand their minds, their manner of thinking and the way they react and develop.

There are several ways in which a worker can become basically familiar with the nature of Deaf people. The worker can attend special education classes such as a course in Psychology of the Deaf. Some of this

process in understanding the Deaf is considered and discussed during the Sign Language courses of our International Sign Language School. (Taught each May at the Apache Creek Deaf Ranch in Reserve, NM.) The classes taught by International Sign Language school cover material on “Understanding the Deaf Mind”. Perhaps the best way to get to know and understand the Deaf is by association. Work with them. Befriend them. The worker cannot learn to completely understand the deaf in a matter of days or weeks. It is a continual process while working with them.

Choosing the Workers

A major consideration in building a deaf ministry is the choice of workers. Who in a given church will lead the Deaf ministry? Leaders must build it. The building of an effective deaf ministry is much like that of building a sound church. The principles are the same. Because the work of God is vitally important, mature Christians should do it. When a person accepts the responsibility for a class or a work for the Deaf that person is no longer an ordinary member of the church. That person is a special person who has been set aside to do the work of God. There is no time or place for childish, immature Christians in this ministry.

Ask any effective Deaf worker what that worker would consider to be the basic requirements for a successful ministry with the Deaf. The answer probably will be that a worker must be one to whom deafness is a ministry. Regardless of a leader's ability, it is impossible for the leader to successfully work with a people whom the worker does not love.

For a worker to be effective with the Deaf that worker's signs must be clear and distinct so that Deaf folks can understand them. The worker's methods must be effective. A worker whose ministry is not growing and

whose goals are not being realized must be re-evaluated and determine what changes are needed in the work.

A Deaf Ministry Takes Time

Another matter to consider in choosing workers with the Deaf is the time those workers will spend doing the work. Choose those who do have and will take time to get the job done. It is important for workers to visit the Deaf community. They should have, or be able to take time to work with problems, promotion, and outside interpreting. They should have the time to attend planning sessions and social activities for the Deaf.

How Many Workers?

As to the number of workers, I have heard some ministries complain that they are plagued with too many workers. There is so much to be done with the Deaf that a work needs all the help it can get.

Workers are needed for many and various duties. Many workers can be used simply to interpret. Use one to interpret the song service on Sunday morning, another the message. Others can be used to interpret the song service on Sunday night, and yet another to interpret the Wednesday night service. Others can teach Deaf Sunday School classes. There should be at the very least an oral Sunday School Class as well as a manual Sunday School Class. This requires two teachers.

The work needs folks to visit. Even those who do not know Sign Language well can visit with people who do. On special occasions some one will be needed to preach to your Deaf. Deaf workers can plan and prepare social events such as parties and other get-togethers. Others can have the job of greeting Deaf people in the church.

Also, a growing ministry will need help with advertising. The work should send out letters to the Deaf weekly, monthly or perhaps bimonthly.

Perhaps the church should publish a newspaper for the Deaf in the area. A newspaper is very effective.

Workers put up posters at the Deaf club or perhaps a bowling alley where Deaf folks congregate. There are many things that interested, though untrained; workers can do in helping with the Deaf. A work, which is built upon only one or two workers, is on shaky ground and will die if those workers should leave the church.

Education of the Deaf

There are three major methods applied in teaching the Deaf. The first is that of oral training. The child is taught to speak as well as possible, communicating with speech and reading the lips of those with whom the child is speaking. Lip-reading and speech are very important for the Deaf person. Hearing people about him generally do not understand the language of signs. However, many Deaf do not read lips well enough to communicate with the hearing, and attempting to read the lips of a speaker standing before an audience is impractical, if not impossible.

The second method of education the deaf is that of manual communication, i.e., Sign Language. It is easier to project a thought to a Deaf person in the Sign Language than by other methods such as speech or lip-reading. However, the manually trained Deaf person who has not learned speech and Lip-reading is much at a loss in the hearing world.

The third general school of thought is the combined method. This suggests the use of lip-reading, speech, fingerspelling, Sign Language, reading and writing. It is often labeled Total Communication. The Deaf child must learn to read, speak, spell and understand the meaning of words. All too often more attention is given to the speaking of words than to the comprehension of meaning.

The ministry of a Christian worker with the Deaf is to win should to Jesus Christ. The church worker should not be dominated by one philosophy of education when teaching Deaf in the church. It is completely impractical to build a Sunday School department around the use of Sign Language and leave out the orally trained children or adults of our society. On the other hand, it is equally impractical to build a Sunday School program, which is orally oriented, and then leave out the manually trained Deaf. The Deaf worker should not argue communication used by the Deaf in the church. The Sunday School department should have a class for the oral Deaf, a class for manual Deaf, and perhaps even a class for uneducated Deaf. In I Corinthians the Apostle Paul said, "...Am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some."

Organizing a Deaf Department

There are many other considerations to the physical building of a Deaf ministry. The worker should decide to build as large a work as possible, reaching out to all potential Deaf members. As the work grows, enlarge the class into classes. Reach more Deaf people by reaching more types of Deaf people. Too often, we leave out the oral Deaf. If there is a Deaf school nearby, check into the possibility of bringing deaf young people from the school to the church on Sundays. Reach out into the metropolitan area, and hopefully into your whole state. Perhaps an annual get together could be developed, plan a large weekend gathering and invite the Deaf people from all over the state to church for a special picnic, supper, or something of the kind.

Find the Deaf

How can workers find the names of Deaf people? There are many possibilities. Sometimes names can be obtained of Deaf people from Deaf

organizations. Social organizations such as Deaf clubs, alumni associations and schools will often give names to workers. To obtain names from these organizations the worker must meet the right people. Make a friend and impress him that the names will be properly used. In one particular state I happened to talk with the man who was secretary for the State Alumni Association from the State School for the Deaf. I visited with his family and invited them to attend the church where I was speaking. During the course of the conversation I asked him how to find the names and addresses of most of the Deaf that lived in his state. I told him that I wanted to invite them to hear me preach and to invite them to our summer camp for the Deaf. This man let me borrow his master list (active and inactive) for the Alumni Association of his state. This list involved several hundred names of Deaf people. At times I have been given names of membership listings from Deaf clubs in both large and small cities. I often make an effort to meet members, officers and leaders in Deaf clubs across the country to obtain names of other Deaf.

Another source from which Deaf names may come is professional organizations. Occasionally special education programs in the local school systems (these are generally oral systems) will give me the names of their deaf and hard of hearing students, after I have assured them that we will build a program in our church that will supplement the program which they are building in the school.

Always, Deaf people know other Deaf people. Because of the nature of deafness, Deaf people tend to group together. Their society, their community is other Deaf people. Countless times I have had Deaf people copy for me their whole address book, listings other Deaf people.

The hearing people in your church usually will know some Deaf. It may take a while for them to recollect, but they can show the houses where Deaf people live if they do not the address. Often they know parents who have Deaf children. Many hearing people work in factories or on jobs that employ Deaf people.

Check with employers such as factories, printers, newspapers and shoe shops. Many employers appreciate folks who are interested in their Deaf employees. Often, if they know a worker with the Deaf, they may contact him for help with their Deaf employees in the future.

A good place to check for Deaf people is nursing homes.

Frequently, state mental institutions have Deaf patients whose only reason for being there is the fact that they are Deaf. Being a friend to everybody possible is the best key to getting names. Before people will give you such privileged information as the names and addresses of their friends, members or associates, they must have faith in the worker, his purposes and his ultimate use of the names.

Get the Deaf to Church

Once the worker has decided how to build a work and has found names with which to build the work, he must endeavor to influence all the Deaf to attend the church once. It is important to get Deaf folks to see the work before they will join it. The worker should invite all the Deaf people possible; including the “wild “ lost Deaf people. Many Deaf clubs are little more than nightclubs. These, however, are the gathering places of the Deaf people who need Christ, and the Christian Deaf worker has the answer to their problems. Locate the leaders of the Deaf community. Make friends with them and invite them to come to church. Certainly, I would not feel guilty about folks leaving a modernistic church or a church that does not

teach them the way of salvation to visit my church. Invite all the Deaf that live in the general area to visit the church. In fact, invite all the Deaf people from the state or the surrounding states. It may be surprising how far Deaf people will travel for a special occasion or meeting.

Advertise

A Deaf ministry needs to be advertised widely. Effective advertising must be done with proper thought and care. Advertising should saturate the Deaf community. The church should print a special advertising folder, bulletin or paper for its particular Deaf ministry. Use it as a calling card for the Deaf work. By it people can identify the Deaf department. Place posters in appropriate places such as deaf clubs and localities that Deaf folks as a group frequent. Word of mouth is perhaps one of the most effective advertising methods. Strive to get the Deaf community talking about the work.

Visit

Undoubtedly the most effective single way to get Deaf people to church is by visitation. Visit extensively. Two or three hours a week are not sufficient visiting to build a work. Use all the workers to visit and get to know the Deaf community.

A Bus Ministry

Bring Deaf people to church. The Deaf department should start one or more bus routes for the Deaf. Provide all the Deaf who want or need a ride, a way to come to church. Invite and bring whole groups or clubs to the services. In one of my meetings we called and invited an entire state school for the Deaf to come to church. In this particular revival the school was located seventy miles from the church. The church supplied a bus ride and agreed to feed the young people. I cost the school no money. The church

supplied counselors to ride the buses with the deaf young people. That same church for many years took the students annually once a year seventy miles to attend church with them. They provided a chicken dinner at their youth camp and entertained the young people before returning them back to school. As a result, scores of deaf young people from this particular school have been saved.

Socials

Make use of fellowship suppers, socials and parties. Invite the leaders of the Deaf community to the parties. Invite special groups or have banquets to reach special groups, segments, clubs or schools of Deaf people. Invite churches, both fundamental and otherwise, to come to parties. In some areas it would be practical to start a monthly fellowship of churches which have a Deaf ministry.

Reach the Whole Community

With the Deaf ministry, endeavor to reach all the Deaf of all ages. Make a special effort to reach the Deaf young people just out of school. Develop a program for the older Deaf people to minister to their needs. Start a program for oral Deaf. Have a class for the children two and three years old who are Deaf. The Deaf church program can be a great help to their home, their education and their development. Have a program for non-oral Deaf and for the hard of hearing who do not consider themselves part of the Deaf community. Do not exclude the very educated and elite Deaf. Many areas have Deaf people who are social workers, business owners and schoolteachers. Reach uneducated Deaf who have never been to school. Teach them the sign Language so that they can communicate and learn the Gospel.

In the building of a Deaf ministry develop a wide program. Start a Christian Deaf club. It can show the Deaf people who attend to live like Christians.

We invite workers to make use of our programs at Apache Creek Deaf Ranch in Reserve, New Mexico as part of their Deaf program. Attend summer camp for adult Deaf. Deaf families enjoy vacationing, as do hearing families. Encourage them to take a Christian vacation at Apache Creek Deaf Ranch.

It would be well for the Deaf classes to have a special missionary project to support a Deaf mission ministry.

Subsequent to establishing a Deaf work, revival meetings or special weekend meetings should be scheduled with the Deaf.

When a Christian gets into the ministry with the Deaf, he should get into it all the way. The work should include the spiritual, personal, domestic, and vocational needs of the Deaf community.