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DEAF SEGREGATION - INTEGRATION IN THE CHURCH

Herbert W. Rohe

In the Lutheran church which I serve it has taken 80 years to arrive at the basic assumption that deaf people should have their own church rather than be integrated into a hearing congregation. There must be a reason. It is not as simple nor as "cut and dried" as it may seem. Yet, 80 years experience, pro and con, should mean something.

There is a wide range of programs for deaf people in our American churches. Following is a brief description of nine of these, going from one extreme to the other:

1.) There are deaf members of a congregation or church, worshipping with an interpreter, completely integrated with a hearing congregation, and having no pastor or minister to communicate in the sign language or provide direct and personal pastoral care.

2.) Deaf members are integrated with the hearing congregation but with their own part-time pastor on the staff of the church. The pastor knows sign language and can communicate.

3.) Deaf members are integrated with a hearing congregation having their own full-time pastor on the staff of the congregation. The hearing congregation employs the pastor.

4.) Deaf members are integrated with a hearing congregation and served by a full-time pastor who is not on the staff of the congregation but serves several churches and is employed by the national church body or one of its geographic jurisdictional units (district, diocese, convention).

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5.) Deaf members are integrated with a hearing congregation but for worship only. They have their own semi-separate organization and social functions. The deaf members employ (call) their own pastor. They have no separate name. The hearing church officers control all church activities.

6.) Deaf members are not integrated and have their own separate organization (name and officers), share the facilities of a hearing congregation, and may share their pastor with the hearing congregation for certain pastoral and social functions. The deaf members, however, have their own deaf officers who are in control.

7.) Deaf members have their own organization, renting the facilities from a hearing congregation, but having their own full-time pastor. The deaf congregation has its own separate church name and program, with no participation in hearing congregational activities.

8.) Deaf members have their own organization, officers, full-time pastor, church building, program, and facilities completely separate and independent of the hearing congregations.

9.) Deaf members have their own organization, exactly the same as number eight, except that they have a full-time deaf pastor. This may require the services of a hearing lay worker to interpret for their pastor and relate to local hearing professional and community organizations.

There may be variations within each of the alternatives listed, especially if there are additional workers serving the deaf congregation on a volunteer or part-time basis.

The ideal, to my way of thinking, is a deaf congregation having its own organization, officers, property, time and program. In such an organization, the hearing must integrate with the deaf members, but the deaf body leads its own organization and depends in no way upon a hearing membership. The entire decision making process rests with the deaf congregation.

My first reaction to someone asking the question, "Should the deaf have their own church or should they be integrated with a hearing church?" is usually, "Ask them." Then I refer to an article written some time ago by Boyce Williams, "Basic Needs of the Deaf." I have gone back to those "basic needs" so often that they have become my authority – and I have yet to find an honest deaf person who would disagree with those basic needs.

Let me explain what I mean. Among the several basic needs which are listed are four on which I hang my life-line. Williams says the deaf person needs (1) to be allowed time; (2) to be served by real professionals; (3) to attain opportunities commensurate with capacities and abilities; and (4) to be held to the same standards of performance as his hearing peers.

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The deaf person needs time. Williams also says they need to communicate. I put both together as “time to communicate.” That means to me that in communication and training, deaf persons may require more time than their hearing peers. If we want to work with deaf persons in a way that is satisfactory and successful, we must make allowances for more time. This applies in great measure to how we structure worship and religious life. We can’t expect our deaf worshippers to conduct a church service, business meeting, or bible class with the same speed with which hearing churches clip through these functions. Oh, we can time it and hurry through at a pace equal to the hearing, but does it satisfy the deaf members, meet their needs, and adequately provide for their spiritual growth? I contend it does not. Therefore, I would say that the deaf members need structured circumstances meeting facilities, and material provisions in church and worship which provide for their time need and make adequate allowances for their communication and education.

For example, a hearing church may assemble to discuss an agenda of perhaps ten items. They buzz through these in about two hours, after which they all go home to catch the 10:00 PM news. Take the same ten items on an agenda of a deaf voters meeting and you will find a weary chairman working toward an 11:30 PM deadline, two hours longer than his hearing peers. Even so, he can expect to postpone the last two items until the next meeting. But, he will go home happy knowing that eight items of business had ample time for full discussion and consideration by all interested and concerned parties. His secretary will have had time to get his/her minutes clear and in order. But it did take more time, and nobody went to sleep in the process. The members were interested and active because they had time to communicate.

Now let’s go on to the second of the four listed needs: Deaf persons need and deserve adequately trained professionals.

I’m glad to see the standards and training for interpreters being raised. I do not want to speak disparagingly of that host of volunteers of the past decades who have sacrificed their energies and time interpreting for deaf people. They were great in spite of their lack of training. The church could not and cannot get along without them. Witness a deaf group coming out for church worship on a Sunday morning only to turn away when the interpreter could not make it.

The ideal, however, to meet the needs of deaf people to the fullest is a full-time pastor, not only trained in manual communication, but adequately equipped in theology, psychology, sociology, audiology, and special education. That’s asking quite a bit of one individual, but that’s what it takes. I’m speaking in terms of the ideal. We are constantly struggling to

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provide better training for the ministers for deaf people. The ideal is credit courses within seminaries in “Ministry To Deaf People”.

Deaf people deserve a first-rate pastor, fully trained in his profession. In fact, it requires more specialized training and expertise to be a pastor of the deaf than of the hearing. Just ask any pastor who has served a hearing congregation several years and then undertakes to serve a deaf congregation. He suddenly feels his great inadequacies, not merely in language, but especially in leading his flock in the myriad of life's problems and frustrations which are an integral part of the deaf life.

My argument here is not only regarding training, but also, again, as regards time. Deaf people deserve full-time, 24 hours-a-day service, 7 days a week. It is indeed a full-time task if the pastor is to do an adequate and satisfactory job. I have yet to meet a pastor who attempts to serve in a dual ministry (hearing and deaf combined) who will admit he is doing an adequate job of serving the deaf community. Anyone who claims he is doing so is either deceiving himself or deceiving the deaf parishioner. Either he is neglecting the deaf or he is neglecting the hearing. What usually happens is that the hearing parishioners demand and receive the attention, and the deaf parishioners do not know they are being short-changed, or they accept the second-rate service with long-suffering patience because they feel this is all they can expect under the circumstances. More than likely, they will be only too happy to have a half-time pastor because they have been led to feel this is all they can expect as a minority group and because that is all they can afford. In reality, their church owes them much more than token service, and they should not be content with sub-par service. They are deserving of equal rights in the church; the right to serve and to be served adequately and professionally.

It is the way the ministry is organized and conducted that makes the difference. A geographically larger field of several missions will be better able to support a full-time pastor. Usually this grows to be more work than one man can handle, and more often than not he needs assistants. May I also point out that almost every denomination I know employs full-time institutional pastors who serve in hospitals, homes for the aged, and other charitable institutions where they serve only to bring ministry without dollar return, and they do so without complaint. Why shouldn't the deaf population receive the same? The pastor to the deaf, after all, not only serves the deaf people in a local parish or at Sunday services, but he also serves them in all the institutions. Such a diverse and comprehensive ministry requires a minister with training and expertise in several specialized fields. Every pastor to the deaf should be recognized by his particular denomination and jurisdiction as a specialist, meriting its special support and training.

This brings me to the third basic need of deaf persons; to have opportunities commensurate with capacities. In this regard, I'd like to mention

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church organization - or more precisely, parish and congregation administration. Hearing churches depend on a host of men and women serving in administrative positions as church officers and leaders in community affairs. Rarely do you find a deaf member in hearing churches serving as President, Chairman, Secretary, Treasurer, or any other office. But deaf persons have the ability and talent to do so if given the chance. The chief obstacle and hindrance is that of communication. Deaf persons do not hold office in a hearing congregation unless they can communicate, which means an ability for public speaking, use of phone, etc. In order to provide opportunity for full development and use of abilities in the church, the deaf members need their own church organization. Deaf church leaders will make use of every talent they can recruit within the organization. This includes cultural and artistic talent as well as business and industrial.

When properly motivated and educated, the deaf members can hold their own with hearing peers in the arena of stewardship. I'm not speaking only of money and the collection plate, but stewardship of life - time, talent, and treasure. I think the church can take its cue from what has been increasingly recognized and proven in recent years by our state and federal agencies, namely, that they are improving the process whereby they are educating the deaf person to higher levels in the professional and industrial world. They can do it if given the tools. Gallaudet College, NTID, and our community college programs are proving that deaf individuals have the talent and ability to hold their own in the professional and industrial milieu if they are properly trained and provided with the "know how." The church can do the same in the religious and spiritual realm of life. One of the saddest tragedies of our time is the hesitancy on the part of the church to entrust the deaf member with responsibility in church life and work. The result has been thousands of able, gifted people "standing idle in the market place". The refusal of the church to recognize the fact that deaf persons can be deeply spiritual and able church workers has resulted in a great lack of progress and loss of potential. However, when we fully utilize the God-given talents of every member, there is indeed great performance and progress. Deaf people can and do perform on a level equal to their hearing peers. Consider, if you will, that in every denomination there are small congregations which face the same problems of lack of manpower and leadership. Many small rural parishes have these problems. Yet, they succeed with the talents they have.

There exists a paucity of deaf men in the active ministry. This has largely to do with point four; the need to be held to the same standards of performance as their hearing peers. When it comes to the depth of theological training and expertise required by the ministry, the church can make no distinctions, but must require that all who serve be held to the same standards of performance. Only recently have the traditional denominations been

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educating lay men and women to other lesser professional positions in the church. I'm referring to the variety of ministries which are extant today. This includes what are termed "lay ministries". I feel that, even though the standards of the ministry are extremely high, there are a great variety of ministries for which the layman, both hearing and deaf, can qualify.

Another factor that is sadly lacking in programs for the ministry is that which meets the need for time. Yet, even though our theological schools were to extend the period of time for training deaf men to the ministry, very few deaf young men might be willing to give the time. And that would be the chief problem.

I'm not in favor of a minimal requirement and a reduction in course to a "quickie" theological training for deaf students in order to provide them with an entrance into the ministry. This just does not meet the standards required by the profession and will always result in a "second-rate" professional.

I think we can see the same problem in other professions such as the medical and legal, which require an inordinate amount of time for anyone to train for these professions. The one great exception is that of the teaching profession. Even here, if it were not for Gallaudet College, I doubt that many deaf people would enter that profession, because the time would be lacking to meet their needs. Gallaudet College does provide the time. A theological course of studies provided exclusively for deaf students in an accredited school of theology needs to be developed. Such a program could meet their needs for time and language and, at the same time, equip them according to the same standards of performance as their hearing peers.

There has recently been founded an international organization, the International Lutheran Deaf Association (ILDA), for purposes of uniting our far-flung operations and to give the deaf membership a voice in mission planning and administration. The ILDA also provides for training of lay-leadership and for leadership activities and responsibilities in the church's mission. The association has its monthly paper, *The Deaf Lutheran*, a mission publication whose editor and business manager are deaf men. It reaches around the globe into many overseas areas and is read by both deaf and hearing subscribers. We estimate 10,000 to 15,000 readers.

The ILDA has seven regions in the U.S. and Canada. It is anticipated that other regions will form in the future, both at home and overseas. Each region has its local leadership, both laymen and clergy (i.e., volunteer and professional). There are between 85 and 100 lay leaders who are actively assuming greater responsibility and putting talents to greater use within the international association. Where do these leaders come from? Well, for one, not counting their local civic and social organizations, they are being recruited and trained in their local churches and parishes, where they are volunteer officers, Sunday school and bible class teachers, and, for want of

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a better term, just plain “laborers in the Lord’s vineyard”. There are over 400 leaders active in these local organizations, both men and women.

Now, how many deaf people do you find actively engaged as leaders in a hearing church? They number very few by comparison with the number who are active in their own separate all-deaf congregations. To me it is a simple matter of language. One would not expect a Spanish-speaking person to participate in leadership in an all-English language church, especially when that person could best use his talents in a Spanish-speaking church. Why should we expect anything different in deaf circles? We must recognize that the deaf community may have a language of its own and let it be.

It would also be interesting to know how many men and women have made job advancements or increased their earning power as a result of training they receive in church leadership and church-related activities. I would like to suggest that through the utilization of time and talent of the deaf person in church related activities, the church is providing a training arena which is very closely involved in the rehabilitation process.

Well, I’ve had my say. Thanks for the opportunity to say a few words in your splendid journal. (I thank Glenn for asking the question.) I hope there will be many more articles from the church.