

Principles for Understanding Deaf Ministry and Guidelines for Hiring Pastoral Ministers for the Deaf Community

“It happens that there are many different languages in the world, and none is meaningless; but if I do not know the meaning of a language, I shall be a foreigner to one who speaks it, and one who speaks it a foreigner to me.” 1Cor.14:10-11

Introduction

The National Catholic Office for the Deaf (NCOD) is dedicated to promoting pastoral ministry with persons who are deaf or hard of hearing through bishops, pastors, pastoral ministers, catechists, the deaf community, and families with deaf or hard of hearing children.

NCOD is publishing these Principles and Guidelines in response to numerous requests for such direction from many dioceses, parishes, and agencies serving deaf persons. This document was developed in consultation with deaf persons. It reflects the expertise and extensive experience of pastoral ministers' work in dioceses throughout the United States and Canada.

While no set of guidelines can address every question, or respond to all possible situations, this statement establishes basic principles for understanding ministry with the deaf community and hiring pastoral ministers with the Catholic deaf community.

Rationale for Ministry with Deaf or Hard of Hearing Persons

Faith is a personal act . . . the free response of the human person to the initiative of God who reveals Himself.¹ Yet, the Catechism of the Catholic Church is quick to warn us that faith is more than a personal act and cannot exist or occur in isolation. No one can believe alone, just as no one can live alone. You have not given yourself faith as you have not given yourself life. The believer has received faith from others and should hand it on to others.² It is this profound truth that impels the Church to have no limits regarding those it actively reaches out to, in love and respect, with the saving message of Christ. It is that truth which grounds the rationale for each local church to have an effective outreach and ministry to those who are deaf or hard of hearing. Without such a ministry to sustain those deaf or hard of hearing persons who are members in Christ's

body, and without a continuing effort of evangelizing the ninety-six percent of deaf persons who have no religious affiliation, the Church is not faithful to the One it proclaims. Each believer is a link in the great chain of believers. I cannot believe without being carried by the faith of others, and by my faith I support others in the faith.³

A Description of Ministry with the Deaf Community

Deaf Ministry is first and essentially pastoral ministry. In the United States Offices which serve deaf and hard of hearing persons are structurally organized under a variety of diocesan Offices and agencies: Pastoral Service, Office for Evangelization, Religious Education, Social Services, Catholic Charities, and other Offices. Yet, ministry is more than a coordinating agency or resource center. Deaf ministry is pastoral ministry and the closest model is that of a parish, i.e., a complete spectrum of pastoral and Sacramental care, evangelization, religious education and formation, preparation for the Sacraments, pastoral counseling, spiritual direction, community building, efforts on behalf of justice and peace, advocacy and support for the particular needs of the deaf community, and inclusion in the life of the Church. The ministry serves all ages, cradle to grave.

Deaf Ministry primarily serves members of the deaf community, their families, and those persons who are connected with the deaf community. Although the deaf community is described in various ways, there is common agreement about four elements:

- 1) the core of the deaf community consists of persons who are deaf or hard of hearing from birth or became such at an early age
- 2) the primary mode of communication of these individual is visual . predominantly American Sign Language
- 3) the community has its own distinct language and culture (demonstrated by respected academic study)
- 4) family members of deaf or hard of hearing individuals, and others who identify or are associated with deaf or hard of hearing persons, are considered members of the deaf community to varying degrees.

In general, deaf ministry does not focus pastoral care and support on those individuals with the hearing community and strive to continue to function as hearing persons.

At present, there are two basic models for diocesan ministry with deaf and hard of hearing persons. One is the parish model in which the deaf community is served at one or more sites. In this model deaf ministry functions as a non-territorial, cultural parish,

which serves persons who are deaf or hard of hearing, their families, and others connected with the deaf community. Some dioceses have canonically established parishes for the deaf community similar to an ethnic or national parish. In this model, parish ministers offer services to the deaf community as in any hearing parish.

A second model for diocesan ministry with the deaf community can be described as a mainstreaming model. In this model there is not a separate parish or center for the deaf or hard of hearing person; rather individuals are mainstreamed in local parishes. Designated pastoral ministers with the deaf serve as coordinators and resources persons with to local parishes assisting the parish in direct service to their deaf or hard of hearing members. It should be noted that deaf ministry requires specialized knowledge and skills which most hearing parish and staff do not possess. Such knowledge and skill is greater than merely knowing sign language or having taken a survey course or program on ministry with the disability community. Thus, in the mainstreaming model, the designated pastoral minister with the deaf provides direct pastoral service to deaf and hard of hearing individuals and their families.

In actuality deaf ministry in most dioceses has elements of both models. Dioceses with established parishes for the deaf usually have some deaf or hard of hearing persons who participate in their local parishes. This can occur either out of personal preference or because of the distance of the deaf parish. In most dioceses the deaf community is dispersed throughout the diocese. The challenge of ministering to a community so dispersed must be recognized. Dioceses, which have emphasized mainstreaming often, find it necessary or beneficial to centralize some programs or activities. Such gatherings are essential in respecting deaf culture. In following the U.S. Bishops' statement on people with Disabilities (1978), and the exhortation of Canon Law (1983), adequate provision for access to the Sacraments must be made whichever model of ministry with the deaf, parish or mainstreaming, a diocese chooses to establish. If a priest cannot be assigned to full time ministry with the deaf and hard of hearing communities, each diocese should have at least one priest who can minister the Sacraments in American Sign Language and is knowledgeable about the deaf community and culture.

What is a Pastoral Minister for the Deaf Catholic Community?

A pastoral minister for the deaf community is an individual who serves the religious needs of deaf and hard of hearing persons and their families. Ordinarily, a pastoral minister engages in a variety of pastoral activities rather than focusing on a single pastoral service such as religious education, promotion of deaf religious vocations, lecturing, pastoral visitation, Eucharistic ministry, or interpreting. An interpreter is not a

pastoral minister but a pastoral minister, if qualifies, may have some interpreting responsibilities.

A pastoral minister with the deaf community is designated such by the diocesan bishop. The pastoral minister strives to see that deaf and hard of hearing people are incorporated into the full life of the Church. This is to be done in a manner consistent with the teachings of the Church, diocesan policies and statutes, and in a way respectful of deaf culture. Pastoral ministers may be ordained, lay, full-time or part-time, deaf, hard of hearing, or hearing. In the past 25 years, there has been a significant increase in the number of deaf and hard of hearing pastoral ministers. This is seen as a positive sign, analogous to the development of native+clergy, religious, and lay pastoral ministers in mission territories.

Pastoral Minister Skills Required

- Practicing Catholic
- Fluent sign language skills (expressive/signing and receptive/understanding)
- Knowledge of the deaf community/deaf culture
- Knowledge of Roman Catholic doctrine and practices
- Understanding of Church structures, diocesan organization
- Catechetical training (or willingness to obtain training)
- Able to promote vocations to the priesthood and religious life among the deaf
- Appropriate written and communication skills
- Professional Ethic

Pastoral Minister Skills Preferred

- Managerial ability
- Networking/outreach
- Fund raising/budgeting
- Basic pastoral counseling
- Leadership ability
- Pastoral training/certification (or willingness to obtain certification)
- College degree
- Facilitate the teaching of American Sign Language in the local seminary
- Other skills particular to the diocese or ministerial situation

Experience indicates that it is the rare candidate who will possess all the skills listed above. In either deaf, hard of hearing, or hearing candidates it is a matter of selecting the individual with the best combination of skills available for the particular needs of a diocese.

Pastoral Minister Goals and Objectives

Goals

- To promote the spiritual welfare of the members of the deaf Catholic community (deaf and hard of hearing individuals, their families, and others connected with the deaf community), including evangelization, Sacramental care, religious education.
- To establish and maintain effective and productive working relationships between the diocesan community and its programs and the deaf and hard of hearing communities.
- To plan and implement programs that encourage persons, who are deaf or hard of hearing, to live a life fully included in the life of the Church.
- To respond to issues of social justice concerning the deaf community on a local and national level.

Objectives

- Provide for the Sacramental care of deaf persons in the diocese through making available signed/interpreted Masses and other Sacramental/liturgical services
- Organize religious education, including Bible study, for deaf individuals throughout the diocese
- Provide Sacramental preparation for each Sacrament
- Recruit and train catechists to work with deaf individuals
- Recruit and train volunteers, especially deaf persons, to assist in pastoral ministry
- Train deaf persons as Eucharistic ministers and for pastoral visitation in health care, home, and prison settings
- Train deaf persons to lead Communion services
- Be an active member of the International Catholic Deaf Association (ICDA) and the National Catholic Office for the Deaf (NCOD)
- Provide spiritual/pastoral counseling, spiritual direction, and retreat experiences
- Schedule interpreters for Sunday liturgies and special liturgical celebrations (especially at the diocesan Cathedral)

- Schedule interpreters for diocesan programs and activities and strive to ensure deaf participation in such activities or programs
- Assess needs of individuals, the deaf and hard of hearing communities, parish, and develop pastoral plans to address the needs identified
- Participate in the events in the local deaf community
- Maintain communication with the deaf community through a newsletter, e-mail, or other means
- Participate annually in continuing pastoral education programs and, at least bi-annually, in programs specifically related to American Sign Language or the deaf community
- Serve as a diocesan resource and referral agent pertaining to matters relating to the deaf and hard of hearing communities
- Provide for Sign Language/deaf culture classes . especially in seminaries
- Serve as an advocate/liaison between the deaf, hard of hearing, and hearing communities
- Work with local deaf Catholic organizations and other local deaf groups
- Maintain a resource library with appropriate and up-to-date materials
- Cooperate in ecumenical activities and pastoral care efforts following diocesan policy
- Work with other diocesan agencies and parishes to encourage participation by deaf and hard of hearing persons in all levels of Church life
- Maintain ministry budget . including grant writing and fund raising activities
- Develop and enhance the ability of the deaf community to share their gifts with the entire Church community

Participation of the Deaf Community in the Hiring Process

The National Catholic Office for the Deaf strongly recommends that members of the deaf Catholic community participate, in a substantive and integral way, in the hiring process of a pastoral minister to serve their needs. Such participation may take a variety of forms: inclusion of deaf and hard of hearing persons on the search/hiring committee, working with a Deaf Advisory Board or Deaf Pastoral Council, consultation with recognized leaders in the local deaf community, or interviews with deaf and hard of hearing persons in order to learn of the community's hopes and concerns.

The participation of deaf Catholic community members will be invaluable to the Church personnel offices in assessing an applicant's sign language/communication skills, knowledge of deaf culture, previous experience of the deaf community, and ability to relate to the local deaf community. Additionally deaf Catholic community members will

be able to advise those responsible for hiring in matters relating to the applicant's leadership potential, status/acceptance within the local deaf community, and any particular merits or community concerns regarding an applicant who is deaf or hard of hearing.

It should be noted that the deaf community is not so homogenous or monolithic; each deaf community is composed of various sub-groups. Therefore, it is recommended that care be taken to insure that the deaf or hard of hearing persons who participate in the hiring process are truly representative of the entire local deaf community. Similarly, since ninety percent of deaf children have hearing parents, it is recommended that hearing parents of deaf children be included in the process of hiring a pastoral minister with the deaf community.

Conclusion

The membership of the National Catholic Office for the Deaf is grateful to the Church universal, and particularly to the bishops of the United States for offering such a solid foundation of Church teaching upon which we have grounded the *Principles and Guidelines*. Such teaching inspires us to heed our Lord's challenge to "put out into the deep . . . duc in altum" (Luke 5:4) and overcome any obstacle to proclaim Christ to our deaf brothers and sisters. The words of our Holy Father, Pope John Paul II encourage us. "And is it not the Church's task to reflect the light of Christ in every historical period, to make His face shine also before the generation of the new millennium?"⁴

The Church in the United States is enriched by its deaf and hard of hearing brothers and sisters. "The men and women of our own day . . . often perhaps unconsciously . . . ask believers not only to *speak* of Christ, but in a certain sense to *show* Him to them."⁵ That is the human heart's deepest longing. That is the yearning of the deaf and hard of hearing people in America. That is the impetus and goal of the Church's ministry with the deaf and hard of hearing. "Together we are the Church."⁶

¹ The Catechism of the Catholic Church

² *ibid.*

³ *ibid.*

⁴ *Nova Millennio Ineunte*

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ Pastoral Letter on the Celebration of the Liturgy, Bernard Cardinal Law, 1988