



SILENT BLESSINGS
Deaf Ministries

Building Deaf Ministries That Work

**Practical Advice from Experienced
Deaf Pastors and Church Planters**

Compiled and edited by

Rev. Marshall Lawrence
Executive Director
Silent Blessings Deaf Ministries
2511 E. 46th Street, Suite A-3
Indianapolis, IN 46205-2491

www.silentblessings.org

© 2003 Silent Blessings Deaf Ministries

Photocopies of this Guide are permitted so long as our
copyright and contact information is included on each copy

Building Deaf Ministries That Work

Practical Advice from Experienced Deaf Pastors and Church Planters

What's wrong with this picture?

There's an old joke about a man who lost his car keys one night and was searching for them under a street lamp.

"Lose something?" asked a passing policeman.

"Yep, my car keys. I dropped them somewhere over there," he replied, pointing to an area some distance from the street lamp.

"Over there?! Then why aren't you looking over there, where you dropped them?"

"Because the light's better here," the man explained.

Now there's logic for you! He likes the light. It's comfortable for him. It's more convenient for him. Looking for something where there is good light is certainly much easier than stumbling around in dark, unfamiliar territory. The only problem is that until he starts looking in the area where the keys ARE, rather than where he WANTS them to be, he will never find what is lost.

And so it is with evangelism. *People don't always want what we want them to want.* They don't always like what we want them to like or respond as we think they should. People are who they are. How they view the world is mostly based on the way they've experienced the world – not on the way you or I have experienced the world. That's why Paul said, "I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some." (I Cor. 9:22) This doesn't mean he preached some kind of wishy-washy gospel. But it did mean he took people as they were – he got to know them as they were – not as he wished they were. And he used whatever tools, languages, and cultural insights he could to make his case for Christ.

That's exactly what we have to do if we're ever going to get serious about ministry in the d/Deaf community. We're going to have to start thinking like d/Deaf people. We're going to have to listen to what they have to say and learn how they perceive the world and themselves. We're going to have to put aside our own prejudices and our own likes and dislikes. We have to move out from under that "street light" where things are clear and comfortable for us, and move into a world that, for most of us, is unfamiliar and fuzzy to our eyes.

The fact is that up until now, the North American church has done a rather inadequate job of ministering to d/Deaf families. It's been estimated that fewer than 6 % of American churches have any outreach to the d/Deaf at all. Most of those who do try something generally restrict their "ministry" to a volunteer signer who's had perhaps a few months of sign language classes, attempting to interpret one of the Sunday morning services. The ministry was started and is carried on by people who love the Lord and love their church. They want to see d/Deaf people come to love these things as well. Yet for all their efforts, week after week, few d/Deaf people attend, and those who do attend still seem disconnected from the fellowship. In most cases, the few d/Deaf people who do come ultimately just drift away.

And why is that? Because this kind of outreach, though no doubt well meaning and sincere, is not really grounded in a genuine understanding of the way d/Deaf people think or feel or live. *In order for us to build d/Deaf ministries that work, we have to change our entire way of thinking.* We have to learn their language, live with them, and think like them, and we must understand what they value and what they don't value. If we don't do this, the d/Deaf community will continue to be the largest unreached people group in North America.

Are you willing to do this? It might not be easy! You may find that some of your preconceptions are WAY off track. You'll probably find that there are no "quick fixes" or "magic wands" and that this will be a long journey, not just a quick trip around the block. And, unfortunately, you're likely not to get the support you expect, either from clergy or laity or even from the d/Deaf community.

So why do it? Because you feel as Paul did in 2 Corinthians 5 that "Christ's love compels" you. Because you sense His call to live among these people as "Christ's ambassador, as though He was making His appeal through" you. Because you want to be a "minister of reconciliation" in a silent world and to learn what it means to "see no one from a worldly point of view," but to love people who are so like you, yet so very different.

If this is what you feel, then these guidelines are for you.

What's in these pages, and what isn't.

This is not a tip sheet with a bunch of specific tips and "tricks of the trade." Nor is it a comprehensive "how-to" book. It's intended to be more of a starting place for your journey. *These are guidelines for constructing a workable philosophy and framework for ministry to try to get you off on the right foot.* Not every question is anticipated here. But what you WILL find here is sound, practical advice from d/Deaf pastors and church planters and some experienced missionaries in the d/Deaf community.

First, a few words of explanation. Often you will see the terms "deaf," "Deaf," and "d/Deaf" used in this piece and you may be wondering what the difference is. Well, "deaf" refers to the condition of deafness or, in a general sense, all people who do not hear. This would include people who rely on lip-reading or on other manual communication modes, such as Signed Exact English (SEE), which is a manual representation of the English language.

The uppercase "Deaf" refers to those people who see themselves as belonging to a specific sociolinguistic culture and who use American Sign Language (ASL) as their primary language. Just as we would capitalize "French, German, and African-American," we do the same with "Deaf." By using the capital "D" we show respect to a people who have a sense of accomplishment and cultural pride – people who do not feel handicapped but fully capable of doing anything they set their minds to do.

When we use the term "d/Deaf" we are usually referring to efforts which are inclusive of both these groups.

And now a warning. You might not like everything you read here. It may not fit in at all with what you've imagined. It may go against what you think is "the way it ought to be." It may even seem discouraging to you. Sorry. We're not trying to discourage you – we're trying to keep you from being discouraged! And one of the best ways to do that is to give you a good healthy dose of truth and reality up front. So, let's get started!

#1 – Seriously consider your place in d/Deaf ministry.

It's just amazing how many people give too little consideration to this first and most basic step. They already have a preconceived notion of what d/Deaf ministry looks like, as though there is only one way to do it or only one role to play – interpreting the services for their church on Sunday morning. But actually, any ministry is a microcosm of the model God laid out for the entire church. It is a body, and all kinds of people with all kinds of skills and all kinds of spiritual gifts are needed to do the work. Re-read Romans 12: 3-8. You have certain gifts and temperaments. You have specific tools and talents, and identifiable weaknesses and strengths. Acknowledge them and don't ignore them as you seek your place in d/Deaf ministry.

It's clear that if you're reading these guidelines God is working in your heart to get involved in d/Deaf ministry. Perhaps God is calling you to become an interpreter or a missionary in the d/Deaf community. Or perhaps He's calling you to be a member of a support team of a missionary. Maybe He doesn't want you leading a Bible study – perhaps He wants you to write study materials or to design brochures or to devote a portion of your income every month to support a d/Deaf missions organization. You will only be able to determine your specific place in this ministry through prayer and study. But as you do that – as you pray for d/Deaf people and their spiritual needs, as you learn more about their lives and their world, and as you discover the various ways you can be involved – God will reveal His perfect place for you.

So as you go through this material, keep that in mind. Read, study, think, and pray. *There is no doubt God wants you involved in ministry with His d/Deaf children!* Just be sure you are open to go wherever He leads you in that journey, and be faithful with what He asks.

These guidelines are a good starting place, but not the only place. Read some of the materials we've listed on the back page of this document. They'll be a big help to you.

#2 – Examine your motives.

What is leading you to want to do this in the first place? Do you pity d/Deaf people and want to help them? Be careful, because d/Deaf people don't want to be pitied. No one wants to live in an atmosphere of pity.

Perhaps you love your church and you want to make it accessible to d/Deaf people so they can love it too. But realistically, most d/Deaf people will never love your hearing church as much as you do, no matter what you do. Nearly everything in your church is very hearing oriented, from the casual conversations in the narthex before the service, to the music which is an integral part of almost every hearing worship service, to the preaching which is 30 to 50 minutes of pure talking, to. . . well you get the idea.

Honestly, d/Deaf people are not driving past your church every day thinking, "I sure wish they would interpret their services. Then I would attend." No, in fact, most d/Deaf people are not even looking for a church. Many have had bad experiences with church in the past and they think of them as "prisons" where everyone has to be quiet and d/Deaf people don't know what's going on half the time. So if you put a sign out on the church lawn announcing you are now sign interpreting your services, don't expect a flood of d/Deaf folks to show up. It won't happen because *d/Deaf people will never love your hearing church as much as you do because they will never be able to experience it the same way you do.*

So, once again, what is your motivation? If it is because you love the Lord and you want to see d/Deaf people and their families have the best possible opportunity to love Him too and to experience the radical change in their lives that He has enabled in your own, then that is certainly valid. But sensing a burden is not the same thing as sensing His call to the ministry. Be sure you seek the inward witness of the Spirit. Once you are confident of your calling, you have the burden and/or vision, and you have mastered ASL, then the door will open. And seek to serve as Christ served. Do not seek control but seek to motivate and to encourage. Strive to elevate, to inspire, to support, and to empower. Christ washed his disciples dirty feet (John 13: 2-17). THAT is the spirit of the true missionary.

Examine your motivation. Be candid and honest with yourself. Then take that candor and honesty and examine your church and the community.

#3 – Examine your church and your community.

Not every church should even try to have a d/Deaf ministry. What a radical thing to say! But it's true. That's not to say that they should not be somehow *involved* in d/Deaf ministry, though. The specific role God is asking your congregation to play in reaching the "d/Deaf nation" can probably best be determined by an honest review of the dynamics of your congregation and your community.

There is far too much possessiveness about ministry in many of our churches today, and far too little spirit of cooperation. The result: Deaf people are dying without knowing Christ! *Our goal must not be to get d/Deaf people to join our particular church or denomination! Our goal must be to bring spiritual healing to d/Deaf people and their families!* Christians have to find a way to work together to bring this about in the spirit of Romans 8: 28. If there is a d/Deaf leader doing good work in your community, join with him/her and grow together.

But if there is no other effective d/Deaf ministry you can join with, examine your congregation. What does the leadership know about the d/Deaf world, and how open would they be to this journey? How open are your people to new ways of doing things? How protective and territorial is your church? Will they be willing to invest time and resources in things like research, publicity, some communications equipment, training, and specialized supplies and curriculum? Are they in it "for the long haul"? Do they understand that d/Deaf churches may need the financial support of the hearing congregation for some time? Are they able to understand this work as a cross-cultural mission into a "foreign" culture? Will their goal be to encourage and empower d/Deaf leadership – to identify and to welcome qualified d/Deaf leadership into the decision-making structure?

Then you need to find out what's going on in your community. How many d/Deaf people are there here? Your state Board of Health and Human Services should be able to give you that information – or direct you to where you should be able to find it. Then look around and find out which churches in your community are offering ministries in the d/Deaf community. Are there any d/Deaf churches? Are there any congregations with either full or part time d/Deaf pastors? Which churches offer sign interpreting and how many d/Deaf people attend regularly? What is the skill level of the sign interpreting? Are there any small-group Bible studies or Sunday School programs exclusively for d/Deaf in your area? How effective are those programs?

You can do a lot of this research as you get to know more d/Deaf people. They will tell you not only what they know about the programs but also what they think about them. This is invaluable to you as you consider what shape your ministry should take. Let's examine some models of d/Deaf ministry.

#4 – Five Models of d/Deaf Ministry

There are many different models of d/Deaf ministry — some more effective than others.

Model #1 – The Interpreted Service This is the most common model. While we’ve seen places where this model seems to be working and thriving, those examples are rare. Generally this is one of the least effective models. Of those d/Deaf people who attend church (less than 8% of the d/Deaf population), it’s true about 90% of them attend an interpreted service – mostly because this is the only option open to them. However, very few d/Deaf people report that they accepted Christ as Lord through this kind of an outreach effort.

Why are these kinds of outreach efforts generally so ineffective? Well, we’ve already mentioned many reasons why d/Deaf people may find interpreted services difficult to relate to. They are usually on the outside looking in. Plus, most of the people who serve as sign interpreters are volunteers with limited training and experience. Qualified and certified interpreters must complete many years of training and pass a series of competency tests. They are highly skilled professionals who serve the d/Deaf community. They are also nearly always paid for their services. This is only right because interpreting is their livelihood. It requires as much effort to become an ASL interpreter as it does to become, for example, a French interpreter or a Chinese interpreter. However, most churches are either unable or unwilling to hire certified interpreters, so they rely on less skilled volunteers who struggle to communicate with precision. This is unfortunate. The most important message in the world is God’s holy Word! Isn’t it vital that we communicate this Word as clearly and as precisely as possible?

If this is the model your congregation chooses to use, it’s important to find two or more qualified interpreters for each interpreted service. These interpreters can then share the duties to be sure that all elements of the service (songs, announcements, prayers, special songs, testimonies, etc.) as well as the sermon are clearly and completely communicated. Multiple interpreters or back ups are critical as well for those times when lead interpreters are on vacation or are ill. Otherwise no services would be provided for d/Deaf people that week.

Another question that needs to be asked is how much “equipping” is really going on in this kind of a setting? Are interpreters actually equipping d/Deaf people? Do we see d/Deaf Christians doing ministry as a result? Unfortunately the answer is generally no! In John 3:28-30, John the Baptist emphasized that Christ must increase and he (John) must decrease. Workers in d/Deaf ministry, as with any other cross-cultural missionary effort, must constantly seek to equip and to empower so that they, the missionary, may “decrease” and d/Deaf people may “increase.” There are other ministry models where this can best take place far more effectively.

Model #2 — A Separate d/Deaf Worship Service sponsored as an outreach of a specific hearing congregation. A hearing service is designed for people who depend primarily on their hearing for most of what they learn. Instead of trying to interpret everything that’s going on, what needs to happen in the d/Deaf church is to construct worship in a way that communicates visually or tactilely. For people who’ve only known church as a place where they were on the outside looking in through the window of an interpreter, this can feel like a breath of fresh air! Suddenly they are in the middle of the action. Fellowship is easier, the worship time has congregational “songs” where worshipers all sign their praise to God. The message, the announcements, the dramas, special poetic elements are all delivered in sign language. Even the set up of the worship room is designed to enhance this visual worship experience. No more

struggle to try to understand a sermon through an interpreter! No more trying to figure out what a flowery English phrase in a song means. No more trying to relate to sermon illustrations that grow out of situations that are foreign to a d/Deaf person (or that they would have experienced in a very different way.) In this setting the congregants use their native language to praise, to celebrate, to worship and to learn. Yet, many, perhaps most, d/Deaf people have never attended such a service. This is not even an option in their community.

However, this model also has its drawbacks in that it is focused on only one aspect of the Christian experience – namely corporate worship. There is so much more that is needed. Small groups to build a sense of community. Bible studies and specific prayer times in which the participants can grow even more deeply in the faith. In short, if the only thing happening for d/Deaf people is an hour on Sunday mornings, little is being done to equip and to empower these people.

Model# 3 — A d/Deaf Church Sponsored by a Hearing Congregation. This is sort of a parent/child model in which the parenting church is the hearing church. In this model the d/Deaf church can form its own leadership team and can develop other programs and small group times – all of which lead to the kind of equipping and empowering of the d/Deaf congregation. It may be that the hearing church “plants” the new congregation similarly to the way Hispanic churches are sponsored and planted by English speaking congregations today – by finding and supporting the efforts of a qualified d/Deaf pastor or church planter. It’s far better if this person is d/Deaf or at least a “native signer,” such as a hearing person who was a child of d/Deaf adults (CODA) and learned to sign before they could speak. But some effective d/Deaf churches *have* been planted by skilled and qualified hearing people with strong ASL skills, strong Biblical training, and a true heart for missions in the d/Deaf world. The hearing church provides financial support and facilities to the new congregation and makes a long-term commitment to it. Plus, the hearing family members of the d/Deaf can find ministry opportunities in the hearing church. Since over 95% of families with d/Deaf members also have hearing members, this is a big plus.

But, just as with any parent/child relationship, there comes a time when the child is ready to be independent and then there is often great tension between the hearing church and the d/Deaf church. Often the hearing leadership doesn’t inform the d/Deaf group what’s going on. The leadership of the d/Deaf church may feel they want to make more decisions on their own without needing to get approval from the hearing church. Or they try to make plans, such as reserving a room for a meeting, and they don’t receive adequate responses. They may come to feel that the hearing leadership is too paternalistic and that even though they (the d/Deaf) have made great strides in discipleship and in developing leaders, they almost never have any input into the leadership structure of the parent congregation. The members of the d/Deaf church may feel that they are just a fully owned subsidiary of the hearing congregation. That’s obviously not good. One of the goals of any ministry in a foreign culture is the equipping and the empowering of the “nationals” – members of the indigenous population group.

Model #4 – An Independent d/Deaf Church where there are no strings of any kind to a hearing congregation. While this model certainly fosters a sense of responsibility and “ownership” in the life and the work of the body, even this model has its downsides. An independent d/Deaf church that meets in a separate location from any hearing church has a serious struggle to provide ministry opportunities for the hearing family members among them. Hearing parents who don’t know sign language well are not inclined to bring their d/Deaf children, and hearing children of d/Deaf parents are often bored as they long for a hearing experience. Though they live in a d/Deaf world and understand the d/Deaf world, they still enjoy the aural stimulation of music and talking just as any other hearing child might. Plus, the d/Deaf population as a whole is an economically challenged group. While there are many professionals and people with well paying jobs in the d/Deaf community, most d/Deaf people work in lower paying positions. Or they are on Social Security supplemental disability income. Therefore finances are a real struggle for most independent d/Deaf churches.

Model #5 – A Duel Congregational Approach In this model two congregations exist in a single structure with neither one being dominant over the other. The bylaws are written to insure that major boards and committees contain both hearing and d/Deaf members. Plus they work under a unified budget. But each congregation has its own pastor and planning and leadership teams. The hearing pastor works to understand the language and culture of the d/Deaf so that the two pastors can work together as colleagues. Communication is the key to partnership or teamwork. Often interpreters are needed in board or committee meetings to keep the communication clear. Though this kind of an arrangement is rare, we've seen it work to great effect. For example; the English-speaking pastor teaches a hearing child of deaf adults about baptism or how to accept Christ while the Deaf pastor shares the same topic with d/Deaf children of hearing parents. It is certainly not without its challenges, but the synergy offered by the two congregations working in tandem with mutual respect and cooperation across the board can be wonderful.

#5 – Ask, seek, and knock.

When Jesus is sharing his Sermon on the Mount he says, “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you” (Matt. 7: 7). But in the original Greek, the verbs he uses for “ask,” “seek,” and “knock” all indicate that the action needs to be repeated continuously. The Amplified Bible says it this way:

“Keep on asking and it will be given to you; keep on seeking and you will find; keep on knocking [reverently] and the door will be opened to you.”

In other words, don't give up. Persevere. Be patient. That's good advice but hard to follow.

However, this is exactly the way you need to approach preparation for ministry. It's going to take some time. Sorry, but you're not going to be welcomed into the d/Deaf culture with eager, open arms. Not all d/Deaf people will be rude or suspicious of you, but some might. Some will wonder why you're trying to learn their language and what kind of ulterior motive you might have. Usually they will look for some connection into the d/Deaf community, such as a d/Deaf family member. If you have none, you'll probably be looked on with some skepticism. You'll have to earn trust – it won't automatically be given to you.

These words from Jesus also encourage us to probe, to learn, and to do so respectfully. You must be a student of the language and the culture of the d/Deaf. You must get to know what they value and what they think. You must build relationships with d/Deaf people. Otherwise your “love” for them will be only a warm fuzzy feeling based on ignorance and emotion. Real love and respect for people comes through living in close proximity with them – listening to what they have to say and trying to understand with more than your mind but also with your heart. How can you be God's representative to serve these people if you don't really know who they are? This will take time and effort. But the journey will be wonderful!

On the back page of this guide you'll find a list of books and tapes that every hearing person who wants to learn about the d/Deaf world should study. It's a great place to start. But there is no substitute for just being with d/Deaf people. Drink in their world. Learn from them.

But. . . never forget that you, as a hearing person, are a “stranger” in the d/Deaf culture. If you

want to seriously establish relationships with d/Deaf people, if you want to someday have the opportunity to speak freely to them about Christ, you must always remember that you are a “foreigner.” You must never put yourself in a position of cultural superiority. You need to learn THEIR language and THEIR customs, not argue with them about the pros or cons of various signing systems or try to convince them that their customs are odd or silly. It’s an all too common complaint that hearing workers engaged in d/Deaf ministry don’t have a real heart for d/Deaf. They think “hearing.” They act superior. Always guard against this!

Gary Barrett, the Deaf founder and director of Deaf Ministries Worldwide, gave us permission to reprint this from his website. Frame it and hang it over your desk:

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS OF DEAF CULTURE

For the non-Deaf (missionary, pastor, evangelist, interpreter, etc.) while in the presence of a Deaf person.

I. YOU SHALL NOT PUT “HEARING CULTURE” ABOVE DEAF CULTURE.

“Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave

II. YOU SHALL NOT LOSE EYE CONTACT WHEN COMMUNICATING.

to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became

III. YOU SHALL COMMUNICATE IN SIGN LANGUAGE AT ALL TIMES.

like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became

IV. YOU SHALL NOT BE THE DEAF PERSON’S SIGN LANGUAGE TEACHER.

like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law),

V. YOU SHALL NOT BE THE DEAF PERSON’S ENGLISH GRAMMAR TEACHER.

so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law

VI. YOU SHALL NOT BE THE DEAF PERSON’S SPEECH THERAPIST.

I became like one not having the law (though I am not free

VII. YOU SHALL NOT TELL NON-DEAF JOKES AND PUNS.

from God’s law but under Christ’s law), so as to win those

VIII. YOU SHALL NOT BE THE DEAF PERSON’S “MOTHER.”

not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the

IX. YOU SHALL VIEW DEAF AS AN ETHNIC GROUP NOT AS HANDICAPPED.

weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all

X. YOU SHALL BELIEVE DEAF CAN DO ALL THINGS THROUGH CHRIST.

possible means I might save some.” I Corinthians 9:19-22 (NIV)

#6 – About language and culture and trust.

If you want to be able to have relationships with d/Deaf people and you want to have a ministry of any kind in the d/Deaf community, you will want to learn sign language. The better you sign, the better your communication, and the greater your opportunities for ministry. There are all kinds of ways to begin to learn sign language – everything from interactive computer programs to classroom experiences. Of course, the best way is to be taught face-to-face by a d/Deaf person, but don't be intimidated even if you feel your signing is weak. If you have a good heart and if you are "teachable," most d/Deaf people will be patient and will help you learn.

Some people think there is only one sign language and that it is universal. Actually, most countries have their own sign language. And even here in North America there are many different signing systems. So which one should you learn?

You should always use the dominant language of the people you're trying to reach. There may be rare situations where the dominant "language" of d/Deaf people in that area is Signed Exact English (SEE), but for the vast majority of d/Deaf people in this country the primary language is American Sign Language (ASL). Some educators debate over which signing system is "the best" but that's not the issue for the missionary to decide. The issue for the hearing missionary in the d/Deaf world is: "What will enable me to be most accepted and most easily understood in the d/Deaf community?" The answer is almost always ASL. It doesn't matter if you like SEE better or that it makes more sense to you or that it may be easier for you to learn. You want to be a missionary in Kenya? Learn Swahili. You want to minister in Rome? Learn Italian. You want to minister in the North American d/Deaf community? Learn ASL.

So what is Signed Exact English, anyway? Well, without going into great detail, it is a method of putting English on the fingertips. *It's not a unique language of its own, but rather a manual representation of English*, complete with prefixes and suffixes, verb tenses, and articles (such as "the," "a," "an," etc.), none of which are generally used in ASL. In addition, SEE uses English grammar rules that are also quite different from ASL grammatical structure. SEE was originally developed in the hopes that, by putting English on the fingertips of d/Deaf children, they should be able to think in English better and this would improve comprehension and reading levels. Does it work the way it was intended? It depends on who you ask. Results have been mixed. But it is not particularly popular in the d/Deaf community and a great many people who were taught SEE in their classrooms abandon it in favor of ASL once they get out of school.

One reason SEE is not very popular with most d/Deaf people is that it's far less intuitive to use than ASL. All those word endings and parts of speech make it clumsy. ASL is also a much more conceptual language. People who use ASL as their primary language have to really shift gears in a major way to understand SEE. Plus there is some significant resentment among many culturally Deaf people who think SEE is another example of hearing people "coming in, thinking they know what's best for us, taking our precious ASL, and twisting it all around to make it fit THEIR agenda." As one of our Deaf pastors put it, "ASL is used by d/Deaf people themselves while SEE is invented by the hearing person trying to fit into d/Deaf culture, just like trying to put a square into a circle." If you use the dominant language of the people you're trying to reach, it's hard to go wrong. That means, with very few exceptions, ASL is the way to go.

And while we're on the subject of language, remember that ASL is a living language and different people in different parts of the country use different signs or "colloquialisms." Don't let that throw you and don't argue with a d/Deaf person who prefers you use a different sign to the one you learned in ASL

#7 – Start small and build community.

One of the best methods to use when starting to build an effective d/Deaf ministry is to start with a small group in a d/Deaf person's home – say a Bible study. This is usually a tremendous way to build community and to bring people together.

So who should conduct this Bible study? If you can find a Christian d/Deaf person who is qualified, this is almost always the best choice. You'll find d/Deaf people respond best to d/Deaf leadership. How do you find such a person? Ask those people you know in the d/Deaf community. Perhaps there is a person who is already involved in another church someplace in the city who would be willing to lead this on a weeknight. Work with them and support them however you can. If you can't find a good d/Deaf Christian leader, you or another hearing person with strong ASL skills and credibility in the d/Deaf community could do it. It is much easier to communicate clearly in a small group setting than it is to interpret for a Sunday morning worship service because of the intimacy and the informality of the gathering.

Once you can establish a small group through a Bible study, this group can begin to grow together. Over time you can encourage them to participate in worship, perhaps once a month or maybe even every Sunday. This sense of community is vital to establishing an effective d/Deaf ministry. Times of fellowship, as well as times of study, are very important and these efforts need to be ongoing. Never ever forget that as a missionary, part of your goal is to identify and to equip d/Deaf people to assume the leadership of the church. A missionary should always be trying to work himself/herself out of a job. Or, at least, into a support role.

Conclusion

Most ministry leaders in the d/Deaf community agree that only 2% to 4% of d/Deaf people in North America have accepted Christ as Savior. Clearly a new approach to d/Deaf ministry is needed. The best way to reach this community with the gospel of Christ is through the ministry of committed and skilled d/Deaf leaders; however, with so few d/Deaf Christians to begin with, such leaders are in short supply. Therefore, we also need hearing men and women who will answer His call and will prepare themselves to serve cross-culturally as missionaries in the d/Deaf community.

In these guidelines we've sought to present a framework for this new vision of ministry. We hope this document, and the additional recommended materials listed below, will be a good start for those who are sensing God's call on their lives to become involved in this exciting but often overlooked and misunderstood missions outreach.

So we end where we began. There are many ways to serve in this field. Perhaps God is calling you to become a "front line" missionary – to train and to study and to immerse yourself into the d/Deaf culture as a church planter or as a facilitator and co-worker with a d/Deaf leader. Or perhaps He is asking you to be a member of the support team – encouraging, helping to finance needed efforts, and/or giving your talents and energies as a volunteer in the myriad of activities needed to create ministry materials and resources for front line missionaries. Whatever your place in this effort, God has ordained it, and you have sought to answer that call. Whether you are legs or feet or hands, you are an important part of the body and you have a role to play in this "ministry of reconciliation."

Special thanks

The ideas expressed in this document are not the ideas of only one person. They were contributed by several d/Deaf ministers and experienced missionaries in the d/Deaf community. Special thanks to the following very special d/Deaf leaders.

Dr. Francis Casale, Pastor, Deaf Congregation, Inter-Community Church of God,
Covina, CA

Prof. Elizabeth Beldon, Sr. Pastor, Deaf Michiana Missionary Church, Mishawaka, IN
and Director of Interpreter Training Program, Bethel College, Mishawaka, IN

Gary Barrett, Executive Director, Deaf Ministries Worldwide, Suphur, OK

Carol Brabo, Deaf Church Planting Consultant with Cross Ministries, Yorkville, IL

Recommended reading/viewing

The Mask of Benevolence

(Disabling the Deaf Community)

by Harlan Lane

Random House, 1992

Shattering the Silence:

(Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing People

Speak Out About the Church)

Edited by Joe Allison

Silent Blessings Deaf Ministries, 2001

American Deaf Culture (An Anthology)

Edited by Sherman Wilcox

Linstok Press, 1989

The Other Side of Silence

(Sign Language and the Deaf in America)

by Arden Neisser

Gallaudet University Press, 1990

Deaf Culture Our Way

(Anecdotes from the Deaf Community)

by Samuel Roy & Thomas Holcom

Dawn Sign Press, 1996

Deaf In America

(Voices From A Culture)

by Carol Padden & Tom Humphries

Harvard University Press, 1988

For Hearing People Only

(Answering your questions about the Deaf culture)

by Matthew S. Moore & Linda Levitan

MSM Productions, 1993

Video: *Deafology 101*

(Deaf Culture as Seen Through

the Eyes of a Deaf Humorist)

by Ken Glickman, 1993

Many of these resources may be available through your local public library. Most can be purchased from **Harris Communications** (www.harriscomm.com).

Some may be available through the lending library at **Deaf Missions** (www.deafmissions.com).

Shattering the Silence is available directly from **Silent Blessings** (www.silentblessings.org).