

STRATEGY FOR EVANGELIZING THE DEAF AND HARD OF HEARING

IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA AND CANADA

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**PROFILE OF THE DEAF AND HARD OF HEARING IN THE
UNITED STATES AND CANADA**

General Background

One of the most difficult statistics to nail down is a precise number of those in the United States that are hearing-impaired. Unlike the other categories identified as ethnic or language groupings, there are distinct gradations between those who are “hard of hearing,” with perhaps hearing loss in one or both ears, those who are able to hear with the commonly used “hearing aid” and the much smaller percentage who are clinically “deaf.” Unfortunately, the census data do not identify clearly these categories made more complicated because some “deaf” people may actually be hard of hearing and some “hard of hearing” people may actually be deaf.

The National Center for Health Statistics has reported that between half a million and 5 million people declare themselves either as “deaf in both ears” or “at best, can hear words shouted across a quiet room.” When referring to people who classify themselves as simply “hard of hearing,” the total balloons to nearly 25 million.

As a general figure, somewhere around 10% of the population is “hard of hearing” and about 10% of these, or 1% of the total is “deaf.”

These figures are very much skewed by the factor of aging, where almost 30% of the population over 65 years of age has experienced “hearing loss” compared to less than 2% of children between ages 3-17.

One out of every thousand infants is born deaf. Also, one out of every thousand infants has a hearing loss significant enough to make speaking difficult. Approximately 90% of infants who are born deaf are born to hearing parents, although more than half of all hearing loss is believed to have genetic causes.

Hearing loss is usually the result of diseases such as rubella, meningitis, and prolonged bouts of high fever, trauma, or long-term exposure to damaging noise or toxic medications.

Given these statistics, one can estimate that there are several times the U.S. population of Nazarenes that are seriously hard of hearing or deaf, a major challenge for our denomination that requires an understanding of the special needs and considerations required by this population in order to access the Gospel. In some ways, their “silent” world has obligated the emergence of a distinct culture based upon alternate communication methods such as the American Sign Language. In the cities, critical masses of the deaf, and organizations that service them, have pooled resources and gatherings that specifically address their needs.

In the past, most deaf people attended special private schools for the deaf, with the first being opened in 1817. Since then there have been many heated battles debating the superior methods of instruction for the deaf, most of them centering on the question of “sign language” versus “oral-based education.” By the mid 1970’s, laws were passed that gave children with special needs “equal and appropriate” education within the public school system. Today, many deaf children attend public schools where they are offered a combination of special instruction and general studies with their hearing peers.

One of the greatest challenges facing deaf people is the acquisition of language skills. Children born with hearing problems or who develop them very early do not learn spoken language the way hearing people do. Because written English is based on spoken language, deaf children have difficulty learning English and its vocabulary over time. Ironically, children who first learn to communicate using sign language, will have a harder time learning English, since American Sign Language is not based on spoken or written English. Deaf children who start with sign language must learn English as a second language. For these reasons, many deaf children are taught using oral education methods that concentrate on English. Nonetheless, not being able to hear language makes it harder to improve language skills. For all these reasons, deaf and hard of hearing people often have lower literacy levels than their hearing peers.

The proportions and issues in Canada parallel those in the United States. Around 310,000 are estimated as “deaf” in a population of 31 million with another 2.8 million “hard of hearing” Canadians.

The Missional Task of Evangelizing the Deaf and the Hard of Hearing

THE MISSIONAL TASK FOR DISTRICTS IS TO:

- Provide resources tailored to the hearing needs of the Deaf. These should be researched, compiled, and presented in a way that each congregation can utilize.
- Encourage Nazarene institutions of higher learning to sensitize themselves to provide both hospitality and accessibility to the services that they provide. At least one school ought to offer specialty programs in training students for ministry among the deaf and hearing impaired.
- Encouraging all levels of church administration, from the General Assembly, to District jurisdictions, to local church boards, Sunday School, NMI, etc. to constantly examine the demographics and incidence of “deafness” to see if there are legitimate ways of ministering both to a population and to individuals who are so described.
- Find competent ASL interpreters

THE MISSIONAL TASK FOR THE LOCAL CHURCH IS TO:

- Make friends with your Deaf and Hard of Hearing neighbors
- Educate the hearing community about the needs, capabilities, and opportunities for ministry among the deaf and the hard of hearing.
- Address the specific needs within the “hearing-impaired” community while recognizing that with the clinical need comes often other needs, i.e. those common to the elderly, to the isolated.
- Learn American Sign Language or find key individuals within each congregation willing to learn and serve as advocates for reaching the hearing impaired within the community.
- Provide space and facility in the church, along with technological aids and apparatuses that can facilitate those who are hearing impaired.
- Be sensitive about sound as produced in the worship and social gatherings, recognizing that jarring sounds, poorly modulated sounds, communication modes that reduce audible receptivity may discourage participation and foil clean communication.

- Identify “mission programs” of the Church where ministry to the hearing impaired is being practiced both in the United States and abroad. Learning the skills of ministry among the deaf and hearing impaired may open up new “mission” opportunities in countries where the incidence of deafness is far more prevalent.
- Recognize that the “culture” of deafness offers a meaningful support system for many deaf individuals that should not be ignored, but appreciated. For instance, Gallaudet University in Washington, DC is the only university of its kind for hearing-impaired students, and is an excellent resource, network, and research center that pulls together this “culture.”
- Develop a “theology” of ministry to the deaf, recognizing that Jesus himself, “unstopped the ears of the deaf” as one of the principle miracles that he performed. What does this mean in a context where we, as Christians, are called to heal those so affected, not just with hearing loss, but sometimes with resultant speaking impairment, and with, perhaps, inhibited literate facility, social limitations and stigmatizations?

