

**Principles for Understanding Deaf Ministry and
Guidelines for Hiring Pastoral Ministers for the Deaf
Catholic 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.” 1 Cor.14:10-11

Introduction

The National Catholic Office for the Deaf (NCOD) is dedicated to promoting pastoral ministry with Catholic 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 Catholic Deaf ministry and hiring pastoral ministers.

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 (CCC) 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

¹ (USCCB, Catechism of the Catholic Church 2016), 166

² Ibid, 166

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 over 90 percent of deaf persons who have no religious affiliation, the Church is not faithful to the One it proclaims. "Each believer is thus a link in the great chain of believers. I cannot believe without being carried by the faith of others, and by my faith I help support others in the faith."³

A Description of Ministry with the Deaf Catholic 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 analogous to 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, womb to grave.

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

- 1) The core of the Deaf Catholic community consists of persons who are deaf or hard of hearing from birth or became such at an early age
- 2) The primary language of these individuals in the United States is American Sign Language, which is a visual language
- 3) The community has its own distinct language and culture
- 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 Catholic Community to varying degrees.

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

At present, there are two basic models for diocesan ministry with deaf and hard of hearing persons. The first model is the parish model in which the Deaf Catholic Community is served at one or more sites. In this model, deaf ministry functions similar to a non-

³ Ibid, 166

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

A second model for diocesan ministry with the Deaf Catholic 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 within the diocesan structures as coordinators and resource persons who assist the parish in direct service to deaf or hard of hearing Catholics. It should be noted that deaf ministry requires specialized knowledge and skills which most hearing parishes and staff do not possess. This knowledge and skill set is more than merely knowing sign language or having taken a survey course or program on ministry with the deaf 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.

Deaf ministry in most dioceses has elements of both models. In such cases, a Local Ordinary will assign a qualified priest to serve as a canonical Chaplain for the Deaf according to the norms of law (cc. 564-572) which envisions such a community need. It is recommended that when a local ordinary chooses a priest to serve as a Chaplain for the local church’s deaf Catholics, that the priest himself is Deaf, Hard of Hearing, or a hearing priest that has some skill in American Sign Language so that his ministry will be effective, allowing the priest to communicate directly with those whom he has been assigned to serve, and not through an interpreter. There are training courses available that can help a hearing priest develop skills he will need to serve as a Chaplain for the Deaf community. Identifying vocations from among the Deaf community itself, or children who were raised in a deaf family, commonly referred to as CODA’s (Child Of Deaf Adults), or a hearing priest that shows not only an interest but a “heart” for Deaf Ministry is essential for a truly effective diocesan Deaf Ministry program. This last point regarding a hearing priest with the “heart” for Deaf ministry is vital in assuring not only the quality of service provided but the longevity needed since the priest who is ultimately selected will need to devote extra time and energy into Deaf Ministry since many priests today are asked to take on more than one responsibility.

Finally, it is important to note that 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 because of personal preference or because of the distance of the deaf parish from where the deaf individual lives. In most dioceses, the Deaf community is widely 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' *Guidelines for the Celebration of Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities* (revised 2020), 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 establish⁴. 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 serves as a chaplain and can administer the Sacraments in American Sign Language and is knowledgeable about the Deaf Community and culture.

What is a Pastoral Minister for the Catholic Deaf Community?

A pastoral minister for the Deaf Catholic Community is an individual who assists the Church in meeting 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, by their role, is not a pastoral minister; but a pastoral minister, if qualified, may have some interpreting responsibilities. This is a challenge within the Deaf community and there should be clear delineations between the different roles.

A pastoral minister with the Deaf Catholic community is designated such by the diocesan bishop, pastor, or any assigned supervisor. 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, part-time or volunteer, deaf, hard of hearing, or hearing. In recent history, 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.

What are the required job skills?

Minimal requirements would be not only those required for general pastoral ministry, but also knowledge of Deaf community/Deaf culture and fluent sign language skills. The ideal candidate would possess more than these minimal requirements. NCOD is willing to assist any diocese in developing and evaluating job skills and expertise levels as needed.

Experience indicates that it is the rare candidate who will possess all the necessary skills. In either deaf, hard of hearing, or hearing candidates it is a matter of selecting the

⁴ (USCCB, *Guidelines for the Celebration of Sacraments with Persons with Disabilities* 2020), p.1

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, etc.
- 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 people 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.

Suggested Objectives

- Support the bishop and his overall diocesan mission to minister to the deaf and hard of hearing Catholics.
- 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 provide formation for catechists to work with deaf individuals
- Recruit and provide suitable formation for volunteers, especially deaf persons, to assist in pastoral ministry
- Provide suitable formation for deaf persons to be Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion and for pastoral visitation in health care, home, and prison settings
- 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 greater 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 that include training 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 and encourage 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 Catholic Deaf 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 meaningfully and integrally 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 Catholic 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 homogenous or monolithic; each Deaf community is composed of various sub-groups. Therefore, it is recommended that care be taken to ensure 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 Pope Saint John Paul II encourage us in this task ahead: "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?"⁵

As Pope Benedict XVI stated in 2009, "[the deaf and hard of hearing] are not only recipients of the Gospel message but also legitimately heralds of it, by virtue of your Baptism. Thus, you live every day as witnesses of the Lord in your living contexts, making Christ and his Gospel known."⁶

The Catholic 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."⁷ 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.

As Pope Leo XIV reminds us, "We are the Church of the Lord, a Church of the poor, we are all precious, all subjects, each one is a bearer of a unique Word of God. Each one is a gift for the others."⁸

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⁵ (Pope Saint John Paul II 2001), 16

⁶ (Pope Benedict XVI 2009)

⁷ (Law 1988)

⁸ (XIV and Pope Leo XIV 2025)

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