



## United Methodist Committee of Deaf and Hard of Hearing Ministries

### Brief Guide: Ministry with Hard of Hearing and Late-Deafened People

By Rev. Leo Yates, Jr.

Working with Global Ministries' United Methodist Committee on Deaf and Hard of Hearing Ministries, I often receive inquiries from (hearing) churches wanting to start a Deaf ministry. Many people initially think of the interpreted ministry, a ministry model that has a sign language interpreter providing interpreting services for Deaf and hard of hearing individuals and their families. The interpreted ministry is mostly a sign language based ministry, often serving culturally Deaf people who may be attending with hearing family members or for personal reasons. Yet, within the scope of Deaf ministry, there are other ministry models for churches to engage in. Not only are other models available, some are easier to begin and build upon. One such model is the hard of hearing and late-deafened ministry.

#### Some Facts

According to the Center for Hearing and Communication, 48 million people live with hearing loss. Statistics reveal:

- \* 14% of adults between 45-64 years have hearing loss.
- \* 15% of children between 6 and 19 years of age have hearing loss (this is approximately 3 million children)
- \* 1 in 3 seniors over the age of 65 have some type of hearing loss.
- \* 2 out of 3 seniors over 75 have hearing loss.

While repeated exposure to noise is a common cause of hearing loss, there are other reasons for it as well. When measuring hearing loss, it ranges from mild, moderate, severe, and profound. Although many people with moderate to profound hearing loss use sign language to communicate and might be a part of the Deaf community, the majority of people with hearing loss, those ranging between mild to severe hearing loss, do not use sign language, but use spoken language and written language as means of communication (e.g. hearing aids, speechreading, captioning, pocket talk devices, and so on).

Those who are hard of hearing typically have mild to severe hearing loss, while those with severe to profound hearing loss are late-deafened (usually unable to understand spoken speech). Not surprising, the terms hard of hearing and late-deafened can be interchangeable for some people. Late-deafened individuals are those who become deaf post-lingually (spoken language is their primary language) and most do not learn sign language. Some who consider themselves hard of hearing may learn sign language, while others do not. With the popularity of cochlear implants (surgical implants improving hearing), many find a reason not to learn sign language.

#### Hard of Hearing and Late-Deafened Ministry

The vast majority who are hard of hearing and late-deafened wish to remain connected to their hearing community. In church terms, they wish to be in relationship with others. Christian



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relationship is one of the best gifts the church can offer people with hearing loss. For some, their hearing loss often isolates them from both hearing and Deaf communities. If hard of hearing and late-deafened individuals are not culturally Deaf, then they may be somewhat isolated from the Deaf community. They're often isolated from hearing communities due to the communication difficulties; moreover, some have employment problems due to their hearing loss.

A hard of hearing and late-deafened ministry often consists of providing accessibility and empowerment of those with hearing loss. Examples of accessibility includes:

- \* providing printed materials (e.g. a sermon or a speaker's notes)
- \* [offering CART](#) (captioning) or computer-assisted notetaking (typing on a laptop that is projected or to view while sitting next to the typist) for worship and meetings
- \* turning on the captions or subtitles when viewing videos
- \* sitting close to the speaker in order to read his or her lips
- \* offering [assisted listening devices](#) (e.g. an FM system, a loop system, or infrared system)
- \* having a [sign language interpreter](#)
- \* sufficient lighting
- \* access to a video relay system (a computer with a web cam can be used) for those who need to make [video relay calls](#)

It's always important to check with the hard of hearing or late-deafened individual to see what accommodations work best for him or her, as it will likely vary.

Other ways to be in ministry with those who are hard of hearing and late-deafened include:

- \* being intentional in inviting their participation
- \* being understanding and empathetic if they are grieving over the loss of their hearing (everyone grieves differently)
- \* empowering them to be in servant ministry and leadership positions (this reduces isolation)
- \* include education about hearing loss, which helps to normalize it (there are several Scripture references about deafness and not listening) and to reduce or eliminate attitudinal barriers
- \* have a resource [table of brochures](#), as this helps to reduce stigma (e.g. Include [United Methodist Committee on Deaf and Hard of Hearing Ministries brochures](#), community resources, and also [brochures from Hearing Loss of America](#))
- \* being supportive and inclusive (e.g. keeping small dry erase boards around the church for short communications)
- \* promote awareness (e.g. May is Observing Better Hearing and Speech Month and October is Audiology Awareness Month)
- \* promote the ministry on the church's website, audiologist offices, and [Hearing Loss of America chapter meetings](#)
- \* consider starting a support group for the wider community, as some grieve over the loss and may have some struggles over possible lifestyle changes)
- \* offer sign language classes ([click here](#) for a list of free and paid online classes)



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- \* offer [annual hearing screenings](#) for your church and community
- \* including more visuals during worship
- \* establish a Deaf ministry coordinator position (e.g. to receive accommodation requests, to educate volunteers, to review periodic accessibility throughout the church, and so on)
- \* stay connected to the [Association of Late-Deafened Adults](#) (ALDA) and [Hearing Loss Association of America](#)
- \* take a [hearing loss support specialist training](#) through the Hearing Loss Association of America

The [Breaking the Sound Barrier](#) digital booklet has more ideas, information, and an accessibility audit for churches to perform. More congregational resources can be found on the Global Ministries United Methodist Committee on Deaf and Hard of Hearing Ministries [website](#).

### One Church's Efforts

Linda, a 62 year old United Methodist, attended First United Methodist Church. She began experiencing hearing loss in her late 40s. Like others with hearing loss, she began to turn up the volume on her TV, she traded in her alarm clock for a higher sounding alarm clock, she began concentrating more on the lips of the people she was talking with in order to make out what they were saying. Her hearing went from being mild to moderate loss, which began to impede on her relationships, both family and friendships, as communications proved more difficult. Fortunately, the church's pastor inquired to Linda's whereabouts when she stopped attending Bible study. Linda explained that she had difficulty hearing the others in the Bible study. The pastor reached out to an R.N. who attended worship on Sundays. The R.N. provided a couple of health-related referrals she received from [dialing 211](#) (one referral was to an audiologist). With hearing aids, Linda's hearing had somewhat improved. The church's board of trustees agreed to install an assisted listening system (a loop system) in the sanctuary, improving Linda's worship experience. Along with this, the pastor offered his worship notes to ensure Linda wasn't missing anything. The new system also led to two others requesting to use the assisted listening devices as well. So Linda could better participate in Bible study, the pastor moved the study into the sanctuary where Linda could utilize the loop system. It was about a year or so later that the church offered periodic sign language classes.

First United Methodist Church recognized the importance of Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 12:27 (NIV), "Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it." Indeed, each one is, including the hard of hearing and late-deafened individuals who are marginally participating in the life of the church or who left their faith communities altogether due to insensitivity or the unwillingness of leadership to make efforts to include and empower them.

### Conclusion

Most churches have members with some type of hearing loss, some of which might be a part of the senior population. A hard of hearing and late-deafened ministry can help to include and empower individuals to fully participate in the life of the church. The United Methodist Committee on Deaf and Hard of Hearing Ministries has some [congregational resources](#) to assist churches in developing or expanding this form of ministry.



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### References

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\* Rev. Leo Yates, Jr. is a provisional deacon in the Baltimore-Washington Conference serving as the consultant for the United Methodist Committee on Deaf and Hard of Hearing Ministries.