

# AN INTRODUCTION TO SUPPORTING PEOPLE WITH HEARING LOSS IN YOUR CHURCH



## **An introduction to Supporting People with Hearing Loss in your Church**

Methodist Women in Britain [MWiB] offer these guidelines to the church to support the many people in congregations with some degree of hearing difficulty. Ministers, Local Preachers and Stewards especially, may find the information useful in helping to ensure a warm and inclusive welcome to everyone attending worship and other events.

### **WORKING TOWARDS BEING INCLUSIVE**

Hearing loss affects many people to a lesser or greater extent, especially as we age – at least 40 % of those over 70 are likely to have some hearing deficit.

However, being inclusive is complicated because it can be a hidden condition, or because people are reluctant to draw

attention to themselves. Plus there are many different degrees of hearing loss. This makes it difficult to have one defining or straightforward approach to providing support systems.

This guide sets out to be a starting point for leaders and members of churches seeking to be inclusive

and supportive to those with hearing loss. It aims to give some basic suggestions that are relatively easy to implement, as well as signposting where further information can be found for those who may need more detail or specific help.

## LEVELS OF DEAFNESS

It is sometimes necessary to distinguish between people who are profoundly deaf and those who have any level of hearing loss. It can be helpful when considering deafness, to use Deaf, with a capital 'D' for the profoundly deaf and deaf with a small 'd' for those who have some level of hearing loss. For the purpose of this paper which aims to provide support for all who have any hearing loss the small 'd' will be used after this section.

People who are Deaf [capital D] and consider themselves to be a member of the Deaf community will usually have learnt BSL [British Sign Language] and be part of a culture that communicates with one another. They tend to see deafness as a positive, and do not consider themselves disabled. Most will have had specialist teaching.

There are some deaf [small d] people who see themselves disabled, but it is very hard to generalise. The experience of deafness is unique to each individual, and their view of it, and their choice of communication can vary widely, from using spoken language, using hearing aids, and trying to lip read.

## PROVIDING WELCOME IN OUR CHURCHES

Hearing loss at many levels can make communicating with others, whether hearing or non-hearing, more difficult, and lead to feelings of isolation, but deaf people can bring gifts and talents to a community.

## GUIDELINES FOR COMMUNICATING WITH DEAF PEOPLE

- Ensure the person can see your face, especially your mouth clearly [keep hands, mugs, other obstacles away from your mouth]
- Ensure the person[s] are looking at you before you speak [a gentle touch may be needed]
- Try to make sure there is light on your face
- Speak clearly and normally, but not too quickly. This will help lip readers, which is always a part guess work activity.
- There is no need to speak loudly – it just distorts the shape of the lips.
- You may need to repeat or rephrase. Try not to use complicated words.
- Try to avoid or minimise background noise.
- Allow time for the person to respond as it can take longer to process part hearing and lip reading.

## IN SERVICES AND MEETINGS

- Ensure the church loop system is on and there is a sign displayed so that people are aware it exists.
- A portable loop system may be useful in meeting rooms
- Background noises can be amplified through the loop as well as the main speaker
- Preachers, speakers and readers need to be aware of the guidelines above, and endeavour to have only one person speaking at a time
- Train those who speak to use microphones correctly
- Anyone speaking in a service or meeting should use a microphone and preferably come to the front

- Switching off the microphone during singing can leave deaf people in a vacuum. Either keep it switched on or use a microphone that picks up the singing.
- Try to ensure that deaf people can follow what is happening, using visible hymn boards, projecting written words, -[hymns, readings]. Where projection facilities are not available consider providing a written sheet/order of service that gives references for bible readings etc. plus any additional material.
- Encourage preachers to prepare slides [e.g. PowerPoint] or provide a paper with key points of their message.
- If using pictures/videos add sub titles if possible
- Encourage creative ways of delivering messages e.g. actions, drama, someone as a bible character
- Do not hide behind a lectern or other furniture
- If using visual aids allow a little extra time for those who need to look but cannot lip read at the same time
- Stand where you can be seen clearly. This may require standing away from the lectern, or from a shady position.

## COMMUNICATION SUPPORT

Technology is moving quickly at present and creating effective means for deaf people to be engaged in services and meetings. For example speech- to-text aids are increasingly available.

Individuals will have developed their preferred method of communication. This must be respected.

Some people will prefer to use sign language. Internationally there are a range of different signing languages, but BSL [British Sign Language] is the most commonly used in Britain. This is a tiring process for both participants. They need a few minutes break, ideally every half hour.

Some situations [often larger meetings] may require an interpreter, especially if there are a number of deaf people to be present. Some considerations:

- Length of the meeting [a full day will need two interpreters] Interpreting is tiring!

- What type of interpreter will be needed – someone to sign, a lip speaker or a speech-to-text operator for example
- A lecture will have different requirements to most worship services
- A wedding or funeral may present unique challenges which can be overcome with good planning
- It is helpful to provide information about an event in advance
- Interpreters should be given information in advance of an event so that they can be prepared

- In a smaller group setting ensure only one person speaks at a time
- Encourage those who are deaf to sit where they can see what is going on even if the audience stands up as this can obstruct a clear view

Some churches or groups of churches may wish to provide some special services for the D/deaf. It may be worth using a particular church for this where facilities are available to support the hearing needs. This does not mean that deaf people should not be included in services for everyone.

## SOME SOURCES OF FURTHER INFORMATION

There are a number of organisations that support the deaf. Below are listed websites where further information may be found.

[www.ndcs.org.uk](http://www.ndcs.org.uk)

[www.signsofgod.org.uk](http://www.signsofgod.org.uk)

[www.openears.org.uk](http://www.openears.org.uk)

[www.gosign.org.uk](http://www.gosign.org.uk)

[www.deafchurch.co.uk](http://www.deafchurch.co.uk)

[www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk](http://www.actiononhearingloss.org.uk)

[www.themethodistchurch.org.uk](http://www.themethodistchurch.org.uk)

[www.british-sign.co.uk](http://www.british-sign.co.uk)

National Deaf Children's Society

Signs of God – signing in Christian settings

A non-denominational Christian group [formerly Hard of Hearing Christian Fellowship]. They publish a magazine, organise events and provide information and advice, including loops etc.

Go Sign – sharing Jesus, empowering deaf lives. They have a 'sign me in' document which gives guidance to including deaf people in church

Deaf Church

Action on hearing loss

Here you can find a Toolkit regarding general inclusivity in church. It is not specifically about the deaf.

Information about learning sign language courses

Methodist Women in Britain [MWiB] have set aside some funding to support Methodist churches in making provision for the deaf. Churches have a duty to provide a loop system, and a basic loop system will not be funded. Requests for other resources and/or training [such as signing] will be considered. Applications giving details of what is required, with costings, and an explanation of the purpose of the request should be sent to [finance@mwib.org.uk](mailto:finance@mwib.org.uk)

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