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RELIGIOUS SERVICES FOR DEAF PEOPLE

By **DAVID M. DENTON**, Superintendent, Maryland School for the Deaf

It seems strange that I, an educator, am standing before this audience presenting a paper on religion. No doubt it seems equally strange to you. Indeed, perhaps my only qualification is the fact that I am concerned; or could it be that I was selected for this task by some one who was trying to tell me that the involvement necessary in the preparation of a paper such as this, might be good for my own soul.

All kidding aside, I am deeply concerned about an area which I consider to be the most neglected area in the lives of so many of our deaf citizens, including both children and adults. Sometimes it seems that we, as professional people, become so engrossed in the other dimensions of a deaf person's existence, that religious or spiritual development is given extremely low priority or is completely forgotten. More, not less effort is required in meeting the spiritual needs of deaf children and adults than is true of hearing people. This relates, of course, to the problem of communication. Those basic, but oh so important spiritual, moral and religious concepts and principles must be introduced early into the life of a deaf child, and this, of course, must be done in a way that is understandable and usable by the child himself. Basic to this, of course, is the obvious fact that the family must be made able to provide a personal, spiritual involvement for the deaf member of the family. Perhaps this should become a part of rehabilitation counseling and certainly it should become a part of parent counseling while the child is still young.

Before going further, let me identify for you what I consider to be three major problem areas in existing religious programs and services for deaf people. These problem areas involve what we could term — **QUANTITY, QUALITY, STYLE.**

The first and most obvious deals with the number of religious programs available for deaf people. The problem is that far too few churches, on a National, regional or local level provide a program of religious involvement for deaf persons. The need, of course, is for a new level of sensitivity and responsiveness on the part of organized religious groups to embrace fully and

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fully involve deaf persons as active, responsible members of the church congregation.

The second deals with the quality of many existing religious services for the deaf. Too many of them still continue to institutionalize deaf worshippers by separating them into a special group, in a separate part of the church, or by providing opportunities for participation in only part of the total worship experience. Far too frequently, the membership of a local church is aware only of the physical presence of deaf persons, but there is little or no social or spiritual interaction. It is almost as if the deaf persons were considered non-persons. Perhaps we need to be jolted into a realization that deaf people not only have something to get from the worship experience, but they also have much to give.

Number three deals with the style or pattern of typical church programs for the deaf. They tend to be somewhat stereotyped and they seem to follow the pattern of passive or spectator type participation, rather than personal involvement. Some one interpreting a sermon is much better than nothing, but it certainly is not adequate to bring the deaf members into full spiritual fellowship. Another characteristic of traditional programs is that they tend to lack continuity. The church must minister to deaf persons of all ages, from nursery school onward. Whatever a church provides its regular membership, should also be made fully available and usable by the deaf.

The above statements have been made, not as criticism of those who give so much to the spiritual ministry of deaf people. They are mentioned instead to help focus attention upon the many, many wonderful deaf citizens who are not realizing spiritual fulfillment. WE CANNOT IGNORE THEM.

“Whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life.” John 4:14.

About ninety miles south of Tokyo, Japan, is a camp operated by a church organization. On the camp grounds is a spring of cool, clear water encircled by rocks, so that it bubbles up like a drinking fountain. At the spring is a plaque and on the plaque are the words in the verse which I just quoted to you. The words are inscribed in both English and Japanese.

After the camp season was over one year, the newspapers in Tokyo carried the shocking headline that the bodies of a young couple had been found at the spring. They were from rather wealthy families and had been missing for several days and many people had been searching for them. It seems that this young couple had been forbidden to marry and, as had been feared, they committed suicide. Notes to families and friends left by this young couple carried these words “We have wandered many miles together. Here we end our lives together. We drank from the crystal spring nearby. We could not understand the meaning of the words at that spring. Perhaps if we could, we would have known how to go on living.” In a very poignant way this story points up the tragic need for bringing spiritual *meaning* into the

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reach of deaf persons and not just *words*. To consider the concept of rehabilitation without considering man's spiritual dimension, is to deny one of the fundamental truths of human existence. How can we remain so indifferent? If asked what my biggest concern for the future was, I would have to answer that it involves the growing insensitivity to the need for nurturing our children's spiritual lives, and the seeming unwillingness of our social institutions to provide our children with a set of moral, spiritual values sufficient to sustain them during times of personal crises, and sufficient to prepare them for lives of responsible service to other people. I am not talking about the doctrinal nor theological aspects of religion, but rather with the recognition that deaf people *do have souls*. It seems that there is a tendency on the part of adults to timidly retreat from these areas of responsibility, or to simply ignore the fact that children must develop as total persons and that the spiritual and moral dimensions cannot be overlooked. It is a fundamental reality that man reaches out when all else fails and searches for a source of strength which transcends material existence. Man *has* a spiritual life! – Do we really care? As some one recently pointed out, it seems almost paradoxical that in this era when we are so concerned about ecology and the indignities rendered our environment, that we can be so insensitive, so dulled, to the needs of the spirit. Should we not be worried also about the pollution of our spiritual, moral environment?

There is a story about a spider which built his web in a barn. Before undertaking the job of building a web, he first of all selected a place that would give him a commanding view of the whole barn . . . a place where he could be above the comings and goings of a common existence and a place from which he could see the flies which would be caught in his web and which would provide him with nourishment. He began high up among the rafters where he started to spin a long thin thread and attached the end of it to one of the beams. Then he jumped off, not in the least afraid, for although the thread was very thin, he knew it was strong enough to bear his weight and that the beam to which it was attached, was very, very strong. Spinning out more thread, he continued to descend. When he reached the spot where the center of the web was to be, he sent out other threads like the spokes of a wheel, fixing them to the walls and other suitable places. Next, beginning at the center of the web, he spun another thread in a spiral fashion, round and round, the circles becoming bigger as he went. Very carefully he fastened this thread at each point where it crossed the spokes. By this time, he had the necessary framework of the right size and shape, but the job was not yet finished. He began again at the outside with a different kind of thread . . . a sticky thread this time, going round and round in smaller and smaller circles until he reached the center. Then the web was complete and he was very proud of it. The web caught many flies and the spider had an abundance of food. He soon began to grow fat and was very, very pleased with himself. One day, as he was admiring his beautiful web, he saw the long thin thread stretching upward to the roof. "I wonder what

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that's for?" he said. "It doesn't catch any flies. Why did I ever put it away up there?" Thinking it to be of no use, he cut it. Then a sad thing happened for as soon as he had broken this one thread, the whole wonderful web collapsed. How foolish of the spider to forget the purpose of that thread upon which everything depended. How foolish to break the line that linked him with the strong supporting beam above. And how foolish to attempt to weave a web of meaningful human existence without that strong supporting thread firmly attached to the beam high above. How insensitive for us to believe that the education or the rehabilitation of deaf people is complete **without** provision for the direct link with the source of strength – **SPIRITUAL STRENGTH.**

It would seem that the prevailing attitudes toward the spiritual and **religious** growth of deaf children have been strongly influenced by the prevailing attitudes toward communication modes for these same deaf children in the educational setting. Communication involves and presupposes **understanding** and the same could be said for the spiritual development. The **assumption** seems to have been that if the child happened to be physically in **an** area where **communication** was occurring, he would somehow, through a process of **osmosis**, which I fail to understand, absorb an education. The parallel **assumption** seems to have been that if the deaf child was physically brought **into** a church, that through this same mysterious process of osmosis, he **would** be able to engage himself in spiritual worship. Probably the hard **reality** is that in both instances, he has been turned off rather than turned **on**. **Passive** involvement is simply not enough. To have meaning, the worship experience requires participation.

For your consideration and for possible discussion, let me suggest a series of factors which I consider essential if America's deaf citizens are to be able to enjoy their basic entitlements as far as their spiritual lives are concerned.

1. A family in which all members are taught to communicate manually as well as orally. Only in the accepting, loving atmosphere of a family, in which all members share and participate equally, can a child really have his **spiritual** needs nourished. Some one has said "The family who prays together, stays together" and I am not sure this is so wrong. For the deaf child this means the right to learn a simple child's prayer which can be said in the language of signs at his mother's knee. These very, very basic, but all powerful principles and concepts of religion, are formed early in the mind of a child. This is a part of family living and very much in keeping with the American tradition. (It might be well to pause at this moment and say that all of my remarks are based upon a strong belief in the humanitarian philosophy of Total Communication.)

2. A second factor to consider is the need for a sensitive attitude and response on the part of local churches to the needs of deaf persons within the community . . . deaf persons of all ages. Too few churches reach out and attempt to involve deaf persons in the worship experience. Much too

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frequently, deaf persons have to seek out a church which provides an interpreter, even though it may not even be a church of their own faith. An interpreter is better than nothing, but it certainly is not enough for meaningful worship. Our deaf people need to sing when the congregation sings, and pray when the congregation prays, and make decisions in the business meetings of the churches. Again, religious involvement requires personal involvement.

3. There seems to be an overwhelming shortage of ministers who are prepared to minister to the needs of deaf people. Why have we not made the various seminaries aware of this need and what can we do to begin to bridge the manpower gap in this area?

4. We might consider new approaches in meeting the spiritual needs of our deaf children while they are still in school. Perhaps a **personalized, individualized** approach would be **more satisfactory than the traditional** approach. It would seem to me that **all of the various faiths which** are represented in a school program, are **under an obligation to provide services**. A minister or a lay person from a particular church group who simply make himself available to talk with individual students, can do much toward filling the spiritual void in the lives of so many deaf youngsters.

5. What about considering the minister as a basic part of the rehabilitation team? He may be just as important as the audiologist and his input into the life of this person may be of much more lasting value than the results of a physical examination.

LET US MAKE SURE THAT DEAF PEOPLE HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO LEARN THE MEANING OF THE WORDS ON THAT PLAQUE.