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THE SILENT MINORITY SEES THE LIGHT

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CHURCH HISTORY

PROF. FREDERICK

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MAR 7:32-37 There were some people who brought to him a man who was <deaf> and could hardly talk, and they begged him to place his hand on the man. 33 After he took him aside, away from the crowd, Jesus put his fingers into the man's ears. Then he spit and touched the man's tongue. 34 He looked up to heaven and with a deep sigh said to him, "Ephphatha!" (which means, "Be opened!"). 35 At this, the man's ears were opened, his tongue was Loosened and he began to speak plainly. 36 Jesus commanded them not to tell anyone. But the more he did so, the more they kept talking about it. 37 People were overwhelmed with amazement. "He has done everything well," they said. "He even makes the <deaf> hear and the mute speak."

During Christ's ministry on earth, he found it important to help many people who were afflicted with disease and physical disorders. Today many of the afflicted are labeled as handicapped. Webster gives the word "handicap" the following definition: "a disadvantage that makes achievement unusually difficult." Already as early as the late 1800's, there were Missouri Synod pastors who recognized what disadvantage the "deaf" had in hearing the Word with ears that wouldn't function properly. Already such pastors realized the consequences of such an affliction called "deafness." The disadvantage of such an affliction could and in many cases would lead to the deaf person's utter destruction in the fires of hell.

Reverend Augustus Reinke of First Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Chicago took it upon himself to learn Ameslan (American sign language). This led to his first service for the deaf on March 4, 1894, for 16 deaf persons. 1 However, Reinke did not stop by ministering to the few at First Bethlehem Lutheran Church. Reinke continued to spread his ministry into the states of Missouri, Ohio, Wisconsin, and Kentucky. He also submitted a memorial to the 1896 convention of the Synod urging the Synod to

take over this ministry for the deaf.

Reverend Reinke not only laid the foundation for ministry to the deaf, but at the convention he laid the first support beams. On Sunday, May 3, Reverend Reinke in a crowded St. Paul's Church in Fort Wayne delivered his sermon to the synod delegates, visitors and his special front-pew guests, the deaf of the Fort Wayne area. Reverend Reinke showed what it meant to be put in a situation of disadvantage, by preaching his sermon to everyone the way he would conduct a deaf service. Yes, he preached his service in sign language (there is no record that he ever interpreted his sermon). 2

The Missouri Synod adopted the memorial proposed at the 1986 convention with this statement:

**"Resolved** that Synod assume and carry on the deaf-mute missions begun by Pastor A. Reinke."

Such early ventures back in the late 1800's for the Missouri Synod has sown fields throughout the United States for ministering to the deaf. One of the earliest Missouri Synod deaf congregations (since 1898) lies in the heartland of Wisconsin Synod territory, Milwaukee. Emmanuel Lutheran Church still functions in the 1980's with Reverend William Palmer serving its almost entirely deaf communicant membership of 138. Reverend Palmer also serves some smaller deaf "preaching stations" in the state -- one with about 15 members in the Oshkosh area and another with about 10 in Sheboygan.

So then the theme of this paper is to investigate what the Missouri Synod is doing for their deaf-members! No, the purpose is to see that the church body that was formerly Wisconsin

Synod's big sister recognized that the deaf were included in Christ's command, "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation" (Mark 16:15). It is a command that our former big sister still carries out through their continued concern for the deaf.

However, after the WELS/LCMS split in the early 1960's, WELS had no organized ministry for the deaf. Our smaller church body had found it advantageous to let her larger counter part serve in the area of deaf ministry. However, after we had become a separate entity the WELS had to take to heart Christ's command of Mark 16:15. No longer could we rely on our big sister to cover certain areas for ministry outreach. The consequences of splitting with the LCMS laid the responsibility for a number of outreach ministries into our laps.

The ministry for the deaf was an area that was not addressed until two laypeople, William and Carolyn Hughes, asked for materials and spiritual training for their deaf son Stephan. When their inquiry met with the response that no such materials or training was available through the WELS, William Hughes was asked to sit on the Special Ministries Board to chair a committee to study the needs for the "hearing impaired." The result of this study was the formation of the Hearing Impaired Committee in January of 1977. The committee's first members were: Chairman - William Hughes, Mr. Quentin Albrecht, Pastor Charles Learman, and Mrs. William Hughes.

It has been more than eleven years since the formation of this Committee for the Hearing Impaired, and much has been

accomplished both for the deaf and the hearing impaired. \*\*\*  
At this points we would like to focus our attention on the churches that are currently active in providing services for the deaf by means of signed services.

Progress and success in such a challenging ministry as this can not be measured in numbers. Progress for one church may be ministering to one deaf person, while progress in another church may be ministering to fifteen deaf members. Success is bringing Christ to the soul of one deaf person at a time. Any soul that hears or in this case sees and believes is Success spelled with a capital "S" by the Signer's hands who interpret God's beautiful Word of Salvation.

At the present time there are nine reported churches in the WELS with signed services and a couple churches who are presently considering holding signed services. Let's take a look at each of these churches and what is being done for the deaf in them through a brief history of each.

#### FAITH LUTHERAN OF RUSSELL, KANSAS

The woman behind the scenes at Faith Lutheran has a far reaching story to tell about how God guided her to minister to the deaf at Faith Lutheran. Bev Wedermyer who was an active

\*\*\*(For more information concerning the early beginnings or history of the Committee for the Hearing Impaired some publications you can consult are: 'What (WELS) Has Done And Is Doing For Their Hearing Impaired.' or Ewald, Greg. A History Of The Committee For the Hearing Impaired. Both publications are available through Special Ministries Board, Division for the Hearing Impaired.)

member of a Missouri Synod church started a special Sunday school class for the mentally retarded and the learning disabled. Soon Bev realized that to incorporate Nancy (a deaf girl) with the rest of the class was not really providing sufficient training for her. Bev said, "I had to learn different modes of teaching to help her." This lead Bev to take sign language classes at Olathe along with Nancy's mother. Constant studying and struggling accompanied by prayer enabled her to teach Nancy the precious truths of God's Word.

Bev and her husband, who is a highway patrol captain, then joined a WELS exploratory mission in Topeka, Kansas. There at Beautiful Savior Lutheran Church, Bev continued to teach Nancy who began attending Beautiful Savior. Soon after joining Beautiful Savior, Bev's husband was transferred to Hays, Kansas because of his highway patrol job.

Bev did not let her talents go to waste, but began searching the eighteen Northwest counties of Kansas for the deaf. Bev realized that there was no one serving the deaf with signed services or Bible calss in all of Northwest Kansas. After locating all the deaf in these areas, she witnessed to them and evangelized them with the Word. The results were, that three deaf people regularly attended the signed church service and Bible class. Bev also started a home church service once a month exclusively for the deaf. Bev regularly served six deaf members and at times as many as nine.

Because of some family health problems, Bev was required to spend more time at home and could not drive to make personal

visitations. It was during this time that one deaf member drifted away. However, during this same period of time all the signed services were continued! Bev, however, has some relief signing that is provided by her daughter, RoxAnne Doyle. Bev has also taught two other ladies and her previous pastor how to sign. Bev said, "When we did finally hear about other WELS churches reaching out to the deaf, it made us happy."

Faith Lutheran Church has had signed services since 1981. They have signed services every Sunday and also on Wednesday nights during Advent and Lent. Wednesday evenings there is a signed confirmation class and on Sunday morning a Bible class. Currently there are two regular deaf members that attend Faith's signed services. However, the deaf church service that is held once a month gathers six to nine members.

What is Faith's future plans to help the deaf? "There is no specific program," Bev said. "The best way is to stay in contact with the deaf members and then keep witnessing, witnessing and witnessing with the Law and the Gospel!" One can see that God has blessed the deaf in the area of Northwest Kansas through the signing hands of Bev and RoxAnne which reveal to the deaf His loving message so they might see the Light.

#### **ST JAMES EV. LUTHERAN CHURCH OF WEST ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA**

In 1979, Saint James church began signed services for the deaf in their congregation. They have services every Sunday, at the 10:30 a.m. service. They also provide signed services for

the festival services. What began as a service for a deaf boy in their congregation has grown over the years to serve up to four individuals. The pressure behind the starting of such a signed service didn't necessarily come from the deaf boy or his parents. The real pressure came from a girl who was a student of sign language.

No preliminary services were provided for the boy until that time, mainly because he was very good at lip reading. However, statistics show that even one of the best lip-readers can only lip-read about twenty-five percent of what is being said. Therefore a trial signed service, approved by the church council, took place from Thanksgiving to Christmas. The congregation evaluated the service at its January meeting and approved to endorse and support the signed service.

The signed service is being conducted at this time by a non-WELS Lutheran, by the name of Kim Olson. The question might arise at this point, how can we be using a non-WELS signer. I would simply answer, how can Americans use foreign translators? Each signer no matter who they are is trying to sign exactly what the pastor is saying or preaching or at least breaking long difficult words into smaller and easier to understand words. Could a pastor tell if a WELS signer has just signed a more accurate interpretation than a non-WELS member? Certainly not! That is why the burden lies on the pastor to write his sermons as accurately and precisely as possible for the signer and the congregation. Perhaps the deaf in our congregations are doing pastors a favor by pressuring them to be precise and succinct.



However, there are other pressures put on the deaf by surrounding churches. St. James, which is in the heart of the Twin City area, must also contend with the competition of other church bodies for the deaf. There are LCA and Catholic churches that have signed services and Bread Of Life Lutheran Church for the deaf. Pastor Stadler said, "There are at least a dozen churches in the area that provide services for the deaf."

When I was interviewing a county worker in the area of hearing impaired services, the woman said, "You are doing a disservice to the deaf by providing signed services in a hearing church." "Get your deaf people to a totally deaf church where they feel comfortable and they have companionship." "Even providing a service a week isn't enough for them, they need other groups and organizations through which they can communicate." I then followed with the question, "What if these deaf people don't want to be a part of an interdenominational church that compromises the Truth of His Word which they hold so dear?" The line became silent for a second and then the woman responded that's their choice. Yes, the choice is theirs if we give them the choice by providing signed services and St. James has taken a giant step in the direction of caring for their fellow brothers and sisters who are in the silent minority.

How do those who have their hearing respond to the signed services for the deaf? Pastor Stadler said, "No problem!" "In fact they think it is hand ballet." St. James even has a singing group, that is made up of teenagers that are involved in their Youth Group. They have learned some songs in sign language and

have presented them to the pleasure of the deaf members.

What efforts are being made to reach out to the deaf in the surrounding area? No real program is underway, but many times the deaf who attend the signed services serve as the best ambassadors of Christ to their fellow deaf friends.

#### CROSS OF CHRIST OF COON RAPIDS, MINNESOTA

Cross of Christ has since 1979 been using signed services. The reason for starting signed services was that two girls were deaf in their congregation. One of those girls also had a deaf friend who was interested in learning more about Christ. The congregation then provided confirmation instruction for the three girls in sign language. They followed up the confirmation class by getting some trained lay-people involved in signing for their Sunday services.

At the present time there is a double disappointment for Cross of Christ in the area of ministry for the deaf. The lay-people who had been involved in signing have moved away and left Cross of Christ without signers. However, there is at this time no need to pursue a signed service since one of their deaf members has moved away for schooling and the other two deaf confirmands have become delinquent in their church attendance. Perhaps in the future, a need will once again arise for signed services at Cross of Christ and because of previous experience the church will be able to respond with the signed message once more.

## REDEMPTION LUTHERAN OF MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN

Redemption Lutheran Church in Milwaukee probably has the oldest history in the WELS for starting a signed service that is still being carried out today. As early as 1975-1976, the former pastor, Keith Kruck, enrolled Craig Franklin (a deaf boy) into public school confirmation. It was evident that Craig was not able to keep up through lip reading and personal study. At that time Pastor Kruck heard about some Seminary students who had taken some sign language in Watertown with Mrs. Esther Kiessling, who is herself deaf. Dennis Kleist, who was in his second year at Seminary, began to teach Craig one on one with sign language. The next year Dennis was out vicaring and another Seminary student, James Behringer, took over Craigs instructions. It was in the year of 1977 that Pastor Kruck took a call to Florida, leaving the church vacant for almost a whole year. Paul Tulberg of the Seminary was asked to continue Craig's instruction. Mr. Tulberg was engaged in that work until Fall of 1978 when James Behringer who had returned from vicaring was called to serve as a part time student-vicar.

It was in May of 1979, that Craig was examined and confirmed by Pastor Weigand with James Behringer signing the service at his side. Craig answered the questions just like any other member of the class and he even audibly recited one of the commandments. Vicar Behringer continued to sign services for Craig until he left.

At that time the problem arose as to who could continue to

sign for Craig. Vicar Behringer referred Pastor Kruck to Candy O'Connel who had moved to Milwaukee. Another name that arose was from Pastor Weigand's own relation, Verna Weigand. Verna had a brother-in-law who also was deaf. Together these two signers began signed services for the 10:30 a.m. service on the second and fourth Sundays of the month. The first signed service was held on September 23, 1979. From that time on each signer took one service a month.

In preparation for each signed service, Pastor Weigand would make a copy of his sermon, scripture readings and the hymn selection for each of the signers about a week ahead of time. Other copies of his sermon were also distributed to each of the deaf members attending on that Sunday. A bulletin was also prepared and mailed to the deaf members in order to remind them about the signed services every other Sunday. At this point in time, Redemption had two regular deaf worshippers and one lady who began to come frequently.

However, the ministry for the deaf did not remain stagnant, but had an opportunity to grow in 1980. A deaf man and his wife who had started attending Redemption wished to join the Lutheran church and so undertook instructions with Pastor Weigand. After a twenty lesson course, Mr and Mrs. Harry Caspersen made their solemn vows before their Lord, while signers interpreted the service. It was through the efforts of Candy O'Connel and Verna Weigand that the instruction course was possible. Each lady took their respective turn an hour before the signed service to interpret the instruction class for Mr. Caspersen.

Circumstances arose so that one of Redemption's signers, Candy O'Connel, moved out of state. This lead to a change in the signed service schedule. The time for the fourth Sunday signed service was changed to a 7:00 p.m. service on the Wednesday following the fourth Sunday. This change was made to access the services of a new signer, Beth Schulz. Beth Schulz has also helped to train one of Redemption's members, Nancy Howard. Nancy learned some signing through WLC and used her signing in the association of the WELS Hands. Nancy has begun signing on the fifth Sunday of any months that have five Sundays.

Other efforts in the congregation have been made to make people more aware of the needs for the deaf. Twice the congregation has had the WELS HANDS sing in church (singing in sign language). Nancy Howard has on occasion taught lower grade school classes to sign a song and incorporate it into the signed service. The evangelism committee has been instructed to look for the deaf while canvassing and to let people know that signed services and instructions for the deaf are available at Redemption.

#### GOOD SHEPHERD LUTHERAN CHURCH OF WEST ALLIS, WISCONSIN

One might wonder why Redemption only has signed services for the deaf on the second, fourth and fifth Sundays of the month. The answer is found here at Good Shepherd. Good Shepherd compliments Redemption (or vice versa) in that it provides services for the deaf on the first and third Sundays of the

month. Therefore the two churches share the endeavor of reaching out to the deaf.

Good Shepherd, like the previously mentioned congregations started a signed program in 1984 because of some members who are hearing impaired. One such lady is Irene Riege, who attends services at both the churches and was the organizer in starting services at Good Shepherd. When the church started signed services it had two or three deaf people in attendance, the figure has remained the same over the years.

At the present time Cindy Royce is helping to conduct signed services with the help of a couple more signers because of scheduling difficulties. Good Shepherd was also the sight at which the Special Ministries' signed service video tape was taped.

#### ZION LUTHERAN CHURCH OF ARLINGTON, WISCONSIN

In 1986, Zion began signed services for the deaf. Like many churches, the pastor had provided a typed out copy of his sermon for the deaf. When Pastor Sturm was asked what prompted the signed service he replied, "I didn't feel I was serving the hearing impaired very well." A signed service was then implemented once a month on the second Sunday of the month, which is still its format today.

The signed service began with five or six deaf members and presently has three or four. Funding for the signed service is paid for by the Dorcas society. The signer who presently signs

for the service is Michelle Godfrey who is of another denomination. A question that still puzzles Pastor Sturm is why more of the hearing impaired don't take advantage of the service provided. Perhaps only time, and the continuous preaching of God's Word will answer and dissipate that question.

#### BETHLEHEM LUTHERAN CHURCH OF OSHKOSH, WISCONSIN

The question of providing a signed service for the deaf was abruptly brought to the attention of the church when one of their deaf members died. The enthusiasm for providing for the deaf became apparent and was immediately responded to by the church council and elders. The undertaking of a signed service began already in 1977. The service was a monthly service on the third Sunday of the month at the 10:30 service, which was not a communion service. From the very beginnings the signed service averaged between four and ten.

At the present time Bethlehem has seven of their own hearing impaired members. These deaf members are signed to by a member of their own congregation, Joanne McAleer. Joanne is a teacher of the deaf in the Oshkosh schools and, as many other signers, has helped to sign services for the synod at various occasions.

Presently, no other classes are being offered in sign language, however, special services such as: Christmas and Easter are signed and weddings and funerals are signed when needed. Bethlehem is hoping in their projected goals to provide services twice a month in sign language. Pastor Moll has also taken a

semester of sign language at Fox Valley Tech. in order to better understand the deaf and their needs. Pastor Stern provides mailed copies of his sermon to the deaf members in order to provide them with the living water in written form.

The living water that these deaf people see can then be passed on by themselves to other deaf people. These deaf evangelists can often times prove to be the best evangelists with the deaf. They can enter an elite circle of non-hearing individuals where pastors sometimes fear to tread or cannot tread because they are outsiders in the silent world of the deaf.

In such a silent world, Bethlehem has been opening new doors for ministering to the deaf. They have done this by inviting other interested congregations to have representatives view their signed service for the deaf to become acquainted with signed services. The result is that a couple more congregations have opened their hearts and doors to the deaf so that they might see the Light.

#### **EMANUEL LUTHERAN OF NEW LONDON, WISCONSIN**

Emanuel is another example of a church that saw a need to provide for the spiritual well being of a few deaf members. Pastor Margraff who is no longer a pastor at New London presented the need to the Board for Lay Ministry. The Lay Ministry Board then recommended signed services to be approved by the congregation. Upon approval signed services began in June, of



1986. The signed services were set up on a basis of twice a month. The attendance for those services was their three members, which remains the same today.

Two signers are used in interpreting the services. Both signers, Debbie Brooker and Sheryl Beyer are members of Emanuel. One of the signers is the mother of a ten year old deaf girl and also interprets a private Sunday School instruction class for her daughter. In addition to the signed services, one Bible class called "Life With God" has also been interpreted. Special services such as: Christmas, Thanksgiving, and Easter are also signed. One service for Lent and Advent are signed along with the children's Christmas Eve service and any services that the deaf couple's hearing children sing in.

#### TRINITY EV. LUTHERAN CHURCH OF WAUKESHA, WISCONSIN

Trinity church is one of the most recent churches to begin sign language services. The services started in 1987 because of a request from one of the families of the congregation who had a hearing impaired child. At the present time one service per month at the second Monday evening service is a signed service. However, no other signed services are being provided for at this time. A WELS signer who interprets for five hearing impaired individuals interprets the service.

Upon the approval by the Board of elders signed services are being carried on and will be reviewed after one year. Before the implementing of signed services, typed out sermons

and trial signed services were provided. At this time no formal deaf evangelism is being done, however, Trinity church would encourage any church to participate in the ministry to the deaf.

Where there was no road in the early 1970's the Wisconsin Synod has slowly developed a road. The road is still rough and not very many miles have been added to it. However, the progress that has been made in overcoming some of the obstacles to date is encouraging. The road I speak of is of course the road of ministering to the deaf. As you can see there are really eight churches that are active in signed services. That is not to say that there are no other churches which have helped the deaf and are doing so at the present time without a signed service. I personally know of churches that have provided signed instructions to a single deaf member.

Yet when we consider the vast number of deaf people, we have not even dented the surface. There are some who feel they can not afford signed services for one deaf member. My response is, "Can you not afford to save a soul?" Christ certainly didn't turn the deaf away, but healed them. What better cure has God entrusted to us except to "Preach the Gospel." If signed services are not in your congregations immediate future, the least that could be done is to distribute a written sermon to the deaf individual. Excuses like: "I don't write out my sermons." or "I only use an outline." are feeble excuses at best to justify one's neglect in carrying out his God given call to serve all men with the preaching of the Gospel.

Churches that are providing services for the deaf should prayerfully consider, "Are we adequately providing for the spiritual needs of our deaf members?" We often ask this question concerning our congregations and other questions such as: "Do we have enough Bible classes?" "Should our organizations be more spiritually orientated?" "Are the pastor's sermons in touch with the congregation?" We are concerned about our congregations and yet a single deaf person is also an intricate part of that congregation and an intricate member of the universal church.

Would we provide one service a month for our entire congregation? Would we tell our members not to come to Bible class? Would we turn people away from joining our organizations? Isn't that what we are doing to the deaf when we don't provide an avenue through the means of sign language for them to become part of the Church? Spend six months at an entire deaf church and relate how much you enjoy the experience of worship without understanding what is being said!

No, all things are not possible immediately. When a hearing church begins to provide for the deaf, all the provisions are not completed overnight. What is possible is planning ahead so that long term goals become short term goals and short term goals become reality. There is a vast field to be harvested all over the world, let's not by pass the corn stalks that have a few defective ears! Praise God for what is being done in the WELS today, and praise him for what can be done tomorrow.

A sincere thanks to all who helped through the giving of their time to answer questionnaires or by speaking to me personally.

## B I B L I O G R A P H Y

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E N D   N O T E S

1 "Ephphatha Conference A Historical Overview," Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly, 50,2 (Summer, 1977), 71.

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