

# Working with Sign Language Interpreters in Catholic Ministerial Settings

**These guidelines have been adapted from the 2003 policies of the National Catholic Office of the Deaf that have backing from the USCCB.**

The Diocese of Des Moines “promotes accessibility of mind and heart, so that all persons can fully, consciously and actively participate at worship and at every level of service as full members of the Body of Christ.” Every pastor should take care that deaf and hard of hearing persons have access to the sacramental life of the Church. It is not an option to simply say to a person who requests a sign language interpreter that “we don’t offer that.” It is our responsibility to make every reasonable effort to provide interpreting services.

For additional assistance in providing an ASL interpreter, and available funding through Rothermel//Disability Ministry Foundation to assist with the cost, please contact Patty Origer, Persons with Disability Ministry Coordinator, 515-237-5073 or [poriger@dmdioocese.org](mailto:poriger@dmdioocese.org).

## **What is an interpreter? What does an interpreter do?**

A professional sign language interpreter translates between spoken language (such as English or Spanish- known as the “source language”) and a form of manual communication (sign language- known as the “target language”). The interpreter facilitates communication so that the parties involved have equal access to information. The interpreter is not to be involved in the discussion or do any other tasks.

An interpreter must be fluent in both the source language and the target language used in order to accurately convey the message. Most professional interpreters have completed a minimum of two to four years of study of Deaf community, Deaf culture and sign language before beginning their careers.

Deaf and hard of hearing persons in the United States use a variety of communication modes, including American Sign Language (ASL, a true language that does not follow English grammar rules), contact signing (previously referred to as “Pidgin Sign English” (PSE, which borrows vocabulary from ASL while preserving English word order) and the oral method (which depends primarily on lip-reading). Knowing which method an individual or group prefers will determine what type of interpreting skills are needed and what the interpreter should expect upon arrival.

Professional interpreters are bound by the Code of Professional Conduct of the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID), including:

- the interpreter shall keep all information strictly confidential
- the interpreter will accurately translate the spirit and intent of the parties involved, using language most readily understood by those who are being served
- the interpreter will not counsel, advise or interject personal opinion
- the interpreter will accept interpreting assignments using discretion with regard to skill, setting and consumers involved

The Diocese of Des Moines requires all contract interpreters to abide by the RID Code of Professional Conduct, as well as be familiar with this document specific to Liturgical Settings.

## **When is an interpreter needed?**

Many Deaf and hard of hearing persons depend on a sign language or oral interpreter to enable them to be fully involved in whatever is going on around them.

An interpreter should be made available whenever a Deaf or hard of hearing person or the parent/guardian of a Deaf or

hard of hearing child requests the services of an interpreter to participate in situations such as meetings, educational classes, medical/legal appointments, workshops, retreats and religious events. The preference of the person requesting the service should be honored; it is the responsibility of the sponsoring agency or institution to make every effort to provide the interpreting service according to the format requested.

Offering a sign language interpreter when advertising an event such as a conference, workshop or diocesan liturgy or event will encourage Deaf people to attend, and will equalize access to opportunities that previously have been available only to the hearing population.

According to the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), no individual shall be denied "full and equal enjoyment of the goods, services, facilities, privileges, advantages, and accommodations of any place of public accommodation" on the basis of disability. "Auxiliary aids and services must be provided to individuals with ... hearing impairments." This includes the provision of professional interpreting services. (Title 111) More important than civil law concerns is the gospel mandate to accompany and support all people, especially the most vulnerable among us.

Catholic churches and organizations are further challenged by the "Pastoral Statement of the U.S. Catholic Bishops on People with Disabilities" (promulgated Nov. 16, 1978) which stated that the Church must defend the rights of persons with disabilities to "achieve the fullest measure of personal development of which he or she is capable ... including the right to equal opportunity in education, in employment, in housing, as well as the right to free access to public accommodations, facilities and services." (Section II, Paragraph 7)

"It is essential that all forms of the liturgy be completely accessible to people with disabilities, since these forms are the essence of the spiritual tie that binds the Christian community together. To exclude members of the parish from these celebrations of the life of the Church, even by omission, is to deny the reality of that community. Realistic provision must be made for persons with disabilities to participate fully in the Eucharist and other liturgical celebrations such as the sacraments of Reconciliation, Confirmation and Anointing of the Sick Celebrating liturgies simultaneously in sign language enables the deaf person to enter more deeply into their spirit and meaning." "Pastoral Statement of the U.S. Catholic Bishops on People with Disabilities" (Paragraph 23)

### **How do I work with an interpreter?**

Be comfortable with the interpreter; the interpreter's job is to facilitate communication. Everything that is interpreted will remain confidential for the interpreter; it is a violation of interpreting ethics to reveal anything communicated while interpreting to an outside party. Speak naturally, clearly and at a normal rate; the interpreter will inform the speaker if he or she needs to adjust the rate of speaking. Allow extra time for responses and discussion; the interpreter will be a little behind the conversation. Face the Deaf person(s) while speaking; this will feel awkward at first, since the Deaf person(s) will be watching the interpreter and may not always be in direct eye contact with the speaker. Avoid phrases such as "Tell him ..." or "Ask her ..." "speak as if the interpreter were not there. Avoid asking the interpreter for an opinion or to explain something.

### **How do I find an interpreter?**

First, determine the basic information concerning the event (date(s), times, duration, nature of the event) including language used. Second, obtain referral for a qualified interpreter. Parish makes arrangements with the interpreter and communicates if payment is to be done by the parish or diocesan fund. (Note: If diocesan funding support is needed to pay interpreters, contact the Persons with Disability Ministry Coordinator for prior approval of payment.)

The general guideline is that for situations lasting an hour and a half or more, two interpreters are used and rotate

about every 20-30 minutes at the interpreters' discretion. Keep in mind this time guideline may lengthen or shorten depending on the nature of the situation, its density of content, and speed. For a typical mass, one interpreter is sufficient.

## **General Principles and Policies for Working with Interpreters in Religious Settings**

Interpreting is a distinct role, requiring an interpreter's complete attention. It is not possible for a person both to participate and interpret at an event. Thus, it is unfair to expect a parent, relative or friend who is attending a function also to serve as an interpreter. A third party is needed to allow all to participate fully.

1) Competence is essential in selecting an interpreter. Competence includes necessary fluency in the "target language"- sign language- and in the "source language" (English, Spanish, etc.), adherence to the Code of Professional Conduct and knowledge of Catholic and religious vocabulary and signs. Knowledge of Catholic belief and practice is certainly desirable, and may be a necessity in some situations (e.g. a theological talk or catechetical conference). An interpreter is expected to use the mode of communication preferred by the Deaf person(s), i.e., American Sign Language (ASL), Contact Signing (Pidgin Signed English), etc. Deaf persons have the right to work with an interpreter whom they understand clearly and with whom they feel comfortable.

2) When hiring interpreters regularly, it is ideal to work with the same interpreter or group of interpreters each time.

3) Interpreters perform a professional function and have professional training; in justice, they have a right to compensation. Paying interpreters is the responsibility of the sponsoring parish, agency, or institution, not the deaf individual, the family or guardians. In cases when parishes lack the financial resources, a diocesan fund is available to assist to compensate the interpreter. Compensation rates vary from place to place and can vary with the interpreter's level of certification and experience, the type of setting, and time. In secular settings, travel time is sometimes paid as interpreting time. The Diocese of Des Moines for Diocesan events pays for mileage based on the current federal rate. Current 2024 typical rates are around \$70-\$150 an hour with some agencies/interpreters requesting a 2 hour minimum. The 2 hour minimum is to insure that an interpreter's preparation time is covered. The Diocese sponsored ASL interpretation at a local Sunday parish current rate is \$100 per mass and includes travel expense when in Des Moines metro area. If the Mass, or an event, is expected to be over 75 minutes then you should use the hourly rate instead of the basic Sunday Mass rate and you should secure two interpreters. At times, interpreters may choose to volunteer their services, but that is the interpreter's choice.

4) Good visibility is crucial to interpreting. Ideally, interpreter and deaf persons are close to each other. Sight lines need to be clear and unobstructed; reserved seating for Deaf persons in front usually accomplishes this. Good lighting - bright, but not glaring is essential. Ideally, an interpreter works in front of a neutral background: i.e., plain, single dull or darker color, without decorations or persons moving about. Interpreters generally wear clothing that contrasts with their skin tone and little jewelry to make seeing their signs easier. Lack of contrast or bright background lighting/colors can cause eye strain for deaf persons. Do not position the interpreter in front of a window in the daytime.

5) Some situations, such as working with a Deaf-Blind individual, require one-on-one interpreting. In such cases, the interpreter and participant require nearness, i.e., sitting across from or next to one another.

## **Working with Interpreters at Mass and the Celebration of Sacraments**

General Principle: Interpreting at Mass or any liturgical celebration demands a special role on the part of the interpreter. Ordinarily, an interpreter "facilitates communication so that the parties involved have equal access to information." In a prayer setting, an interpreter's role is not merely to convey information, but to facilitate the deaf people's "full and active participation" in the liturgy. ("Sacrosanctum Concilium," paragraph 14) Accordingly, the interpreter is best understood to be supporting our liturgical ministers in their proper role and function, as are the lector, song leader, servers and Eucharistic ministers.

1) At the vast majority of liturgies, a single interpreter works throughout. However, it is appropriate to utilize several interpreters at a liturgy (i.e., a different interpreter for the presider, the lector and the music, in keeping with the various liturgical roles), for special celebrations. When a Deaf person proclaims the readings in sign language, the interpreter proclaims the readings orally ("voices the readings.")

2) Deaf persons must focus on the interpreter for everything that is spoken. For Deaf persons to be able to see - and therefore participate - in the action of the liturgy, it is necessary for the interpreter be as close as possible or in a clear line of sight to that action. Ordinarily, this means that the interpreter will stand near the presider at the chair, the ambo, and/or the altar and near the lector during the readings. In churches with very large sanctuaries, such as a cathedral, it may be advantageous for the Deaf participants if the interpreter is closer to them, outside the sanctuary. In such cases, the interpreter must still be in line of sight with the altar. It is never appropriate to place the Deaf congregation and the interpreter "on the side" out of sight of the liturgy. Since every worship space is different, it is best for the interpreter to see the space prior to the Mass and then meet with the presider or the Director of Liturgy and possibly a representative of the Deaf community at the parish to determine the positioning that will be the most conducive to the interpretation and at the same time respectful to the flow of the Liturgy itself.



3) The interpreter should be given a copy of all texts used in the service in advance. These include the readings, petitions, lyrics for all songs, commentary and, if possible, the homily. Translation of any foreign language text (e.g. Latin or Spanish) should be made available as well. An interpreter may wish to have a music stand during the service to enable quick reference to a text.

4) Some song lyrics are difficult to translate into sign language. Ideally, a representative of the deaf community or an interpreter can be part of the liturgy planning process, to enable the choice of selections meaningful and accessible to all.

5) Changes to a liturgy plan, especially in the texts or choice of music, need to be given to the interpreter as soon as possible. It is also helpful to inform an interpreter of any special aspects or elements to the service, such as a procession. Interpreters are expected to be available to sign for any pre-service announcements or practices.

6) Especially when a parish begins providing interpreted Masses on a regular basis, it is appropriate to provide some orientation to the hearing congregation. This orientation can include basic information about Deaf people and sign language, the role of an interpreter in allowing Deaf persons to participate fully in the liturgy and practical information about which Mass (es) will be interpreted, where the Deaf members of the congregation will be seated, etc. It can be particularly effective when a Deaf person can address the congregation and explain what interpreting the liturgy means to him/her. It may also be helpful to ask the regular interpreter to provide input for or give one of these orientations. Most hearing persons find that the interpreting actually adds to the beauty and prayerfulness of a liturgy. Even those few who initially find the interpreting distracting usually become accustomed to it within a few weeks.

**Contact Diocese of Des Moines, Persons with Disability Ministry Coordinator, for current list of local ASL in person and remote ASL interpreters available.**