Me, A Religious Interpreter? No Way!

By Ray James, M.S., IC/TC, Arkansas

Consider these questions: Have you ever been asked to interpret for a religious assignment and immediately stated that you don’t do that sort of thing? Did you decline the request because of discomfort, or because you do not interpret in religious settings, or that you wish to avoid being considered a “religious or ‘church’ interpreter?”

Let us accept the fact that interpreting in religious settings is a daily occurrence. Yet I hear it is not easy to find someone with credentials in interpreting willing to interpret in religious settings. Are there many requests or needs for interpreters in religious settings, and if so, how are the requests being filled? We know that many of the requests actually are accepted by interpreters who hold national credentials, and that the remaining requests are usually satisfied with someone holding state credentials or no credentials at all.

If there are daily occurrences of interpreting in religious settings, let us define what is meant by a religious setting. More often than not, the first setting that comes to mind is a church (my usage of the term “church” includes churches, synagogues, temples, lodges, or other places of worship). In our mind’s eye we visualize interpreted church services, services in which the majority of the congregation is hearing, including all the church administration, such as the pastor (priest, rabbi, bishop, etc.) and staff. The church is a very common location for interpreting and happens throughout the country in every denomination, faith, or belief one could imagine. However, in my opinion, interpreting in a church is but a small percentage of all religious settings. Even if you count the various activities that happen around or in a church, such as weddings, baptisms, funerals, christenings, holy days (Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur), and revivals, the percentage is still small.

Many settings which I would consider religious are not contained within the walls of a church. Interestingly, more often than not, the following settings seem to attract those interpreters with national credentials. They interpret events such as seminars or retreats that are hosted by groups such as Focus on the Family, Healing of the Handmaidens, or Promise Keepers, and yet these interpreters do not consider themselves as interpreting in religious settings. These same interpreters who “don’t do that sort of thing” also are found in counseling sessions; dedications of babies, buildings, and groundbreaking ceremonies; camp meetings; board or committee meetings; and even entertainment (musicals, concerts, dramas), which are many times founded on a religious theme.

Other settings that are not generally viewed as religious

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Church interpreters, feeling intimidated, tend to be ostracized by and do not mingle with interpreters holding national credentials. However, that will not stop the church interpreters from doing what they do. The reason is that many, if not all, feel that what they do is in response to a "calling" or a "burden," meaning a divine responsibility towards their duty in service to God.

include many hospitals backed by religious organizations who, while administering health care, also have many religious activities happening. Think of the hospitals in your area for a moment and count how many are connected to a religious organization. In their facilities you will find overt displays of scriptures, a chapel, and ministers, rabbis, nuns, priests or chaplains as part of the staff, often working all shifts. Many psychiatric care facilities also are religious based, such as Rafa, Menerith-Meyers, and Living Hope Institutes. Even a majority of rehabilitation programs for addicts (Charter Hospitals, Alcoholics Anonymous, Cocaine Anonymous, etc.) are based on a strong religious theme.

I think you would agree that many interpreters holding national credentials do, in fact, interpret in religious settings. But the "stigma" of being identified as a "church interpreter" or one that "does that sort of thing" overrides the ability to admit the basic truth. That stigma, I believe, deals specifically with the concept of being identified with the "church interpreter," that is, one who basically only interprets church services and may not be particularly skilled. While many church interpreters are very knowledgeable of the church service itself and or the activities within the church walls, many do not have appropriate training nor expertise to interpret outside the walls of the church. Problematic situations have occurred because church interpreters have accepted community interpreting assignments that were beyond their interpreting abilities and they could not handle the situation once it began.

Acceptance of such assignments outside the church walls by church interpreters often happens because a member of the congregation may have asked them to do so. Feeling confident with one of their fellow deaf members of the church, the thought of what may be faced in the setting outside the church walls may never enter the church interpreters' mind in making a decision to accept. Therefore, when a problem arises and another interpreter with appropriate qualifications comes at another time or immediately following to provide interpretation that ends up clarifying or contradicting the previous job done by the church interpreter, a stigma develops.

Church interpreters, feeling intimidated, tend to be ostracized by and do not mingle with interpreters holding national credentials. However, that will not stop the church interpreters from doing what they do. The reason is that many, if not all, feel that what they do is in response to a "calling" or a "burden," meaning a divine responsibility towards their duty in service to God. It is their ministry. Some may do their ministry as a church interpreter while others do not.

Without stripping individuals of their faith and duty, clarity of roles would be the first step in educating members of the church who "interpret." Regardless of an individual's "calling," not all individuals with a "calling" have the language skills and abilities to interpret in the church. Since I believe that there are other areas of service within the ministry to parishioners who are deaf, I basically see three roles being taken in the churches.

The first role is those members who have the appropriate skills and language abilities to be considered interpreters. These members may or may not hold national credentials, but have the appropriate skills and knowledge of the church service, as well as demonstrated interpretation skills.

Communicators is the second role. Communicators are those individuals who have signing abilities and can hold their own in communication. They may be able to facilitate the process of welcoming new parishioners who are deaf, but do not have the abilities to interpret. Understanding one's own limitations with language is important. Sharing one's own thoughts in conversation is not the same as taking another person's thoughts and interpreting them. Therefore, if a communicator has fairly decent language skills and still struggles at the interpreting process, they should limit their ministry to the areas they can best serve.

The third role is supporters. Supporters sometimes will be able to sign or fingerspell limited conversations, but cannot converse independently. Nevertheless, supporters are very important because they are needed to assist in various areas of the ministry of the church when working with parishioners who are deaf. Many times this group of members tend to be behind the scenes doing a variety of tasks necessary for a ministry to work effectively.

The key is to educate all those members who may be involved in "church interpreting." Each individu-
On March 2, 1994, Utah joined a handful of other states in showing support for the rights of deaf people when the “Certification of Interpreters for the Hearing Impaired” Act passed the state legislature and became law. The Act delineated requirements for interpreting in Utah, provided for state money to be used in establishing a state Quality Assurance (Q/A) system, and established a certification board to oversee the testing and enforcement of the Act. The law went into effect July 1, 1994 and, as a result, Utah has seen increased numbers of interpreters going through evaluations to determine skill and obtaining certification. The process of education and skill development is far from over in Utah, but in the past three and a half years the progress of our profession here has made leaps and bounds and we are proud to work for a deaf community who values the profession of interpreting as shown by their spearheading the movement that culminated in a law we can be proud of.

The Act reads:

An act relating to the hearing impaired; providing for certification of interpreters for the hearing impaired; providing definitions; providing for an interpreters certification board; requiring certification to provide interpretive services, except as otherwise exempted; providing for denial of certification and for disciplinary proceedings; providing a penalty; and providing an effective date.

The sections contained in the Act were specifically described in order to assure that compliance with the law was possible through the establishment of a certification board that would administer and oversee certification for the state testing, and the allowance of other certifications to be recognized by the state as valid and appropriate to the profession.

Although the wording of the actual law does not mention RID certification, RID certification is recognized in the policies and procedures developed as mandated by the act. The act states: Certification is required to provide interpretive services, except as specifically provided in Section 53A-26a-305. This statement was written this way to ensure recognition of other certifications deemed valid by the state.

PREPs Certification Board. This recognition is granted to RID certified interpreters in the “Policy and Procedure Manual” developed to further describe the law as written. In that document it states:

The only interpreter certification recognized by the State Board of Education, other than the DSDHH Utah Interpreter Certification, is the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) Certification.

A RID certified interpreter shall be required to follow the guidelines and ethics of RID.

This recognition of RID in state law as the only other certification recognized by the state shows confidence in the testing procedure and certification of interpreters by RID. Utah certification consists of three levels with differing, delineated, allowable practices. Because RID certification is not regulated by the state they are not able to make any specific description of allowable practices for interpreters holding a CI, CT, CSC, etc, and so all certifications given by RID are accorded the level III equivalency for allowable practices. That is to say, any person with a current RID certification is allowed to interpret in any situation, even the most sensitive as deemed by the state, as long as they abide by the ethics of RID in determining if they are qualified for the assignment. This is consistent with the following statement made by RID’s Board of Directors: “RID is satisfied if RID Certified individuals have their certificates honored at the highest levels of state credentialing systems.”

 Utah: Laws, Policies, and Progress
By Billy Kendrick, CI, UT-RID Vice President

ut RID is proud to live in a state that values professionalism in interpretive services. We are grateful for a community of consumers who band together in order to improve a small but vital aspect of their lives. We are hopeful that, as a result of this law, interpreting will continue to develop here into a viable profession where income and benefits reflect the level of skill and work that is the profession of interpreting. There is yet much to be done to ensure quality and consistency among us as professionals, but this law was definitely a step in the right direction.

1 Division of Services for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing
Interpreting in Jewish settings is a bit different than other religious settings, as the Hebrew language is used throughout the service.

Interpreting in Jewish settings is a bit different than other religious settings, as the Hebrew language is used throughout the service.

I was raised in a Conservative (not Orthodox or Reform) Jewish home, and was exposed to the prayers for the Sabbath (Shabbat) and all the holidays my entire life. I was also a musician (guitarist/folksinger), so I had a basic understanding of what Hebrew meant. However, a brief synopsis of the meaning of a prayer is not enough when interpreting. So I started researching the subject in 1977. When, for example, I translate the prayers for the High Holidays, (Rosh Hashanah/New Year, and Yom Kippur/Day of Atonement) I use a Reform prayerbook (as it's the one used in the Temple where I interpret), a Conservative prayerbook (with different interpretation of the Hebrew), a Hebrew-English dictionary, an ASL dictionary, and Hebrew sign dictionary. After I gloss a prayer, I consult with several Rabbis to see if my interpretations are accurate. Then I meet with Jewish Deaf friends and students to evaluate what I've done. We rearrange the signs when necessary to ensure clarity and ASL correct grammar. I also have met with other Jewish interpreters—on-line and face-to-face to see what they use in similar situations. We consider geography, client-preference, and denomination; was NOT developed by a Deaf person, and isn't widely accepted in the Jewish-Deaf community.

The sign often used in Christian settings for “MOSES” confused me when I first saw it—it looks similar to the sign for “GALLAUDET” (and coincidentally, “TEL AVIV”). However, after researching, I found it originated from the statue of Moses that shows what appears to be horns coming from his head (making it offensive). The signs used mostly in my community are:

1.) “M” circled around, like “MONDAY”

2.) “M” on the palm, like “L” for “LAW” or “C” for “COMMANDMENT”; however, this is also the sign for “MITZVAH” which means COMMANDMENT.

Another term often used is the Hebrew word BARUCH (the CH being a guttural sound). It often is the first word in a blessing and the books have the English term either as PRAISE or BLESSED, which is misunderstood. It is pronounced BLESS-ED, as opposed to BLEG, and many sign it as “BLESS”. However, when asking Rabbis what it means, I was told that we do not bless G-d; so the more appropriate way to sign it and convey the meaning is a compound sign: “G-D” + “THANK” + “PRAISE”.

These are but a few examples. Feel free to contact me with questions and/or comments and I'm always willing to share ideas (and for those of you who were so helpful with information, many thanks!! All my stolen files were returned!).

Author's note: It is a Jewish custom to write “G-d”, (instead of spelling it out) as a sign of respect, in case the paper on which it is written is placed on the ground or thrown away, unlike a prayerbook.

Interpreting In Jewish Settings

By EJ Cohen, CT, M.Ed., California
The Joys and Challenges of Interpreting Jewish Prayers.
It Isn’t About Signs Any More!

By Naomi Brunnehrman, Associate, New York

There is a story of a man who approaches Rabbi Shammi and asks the rabbi to teach him the entire Torah for as long as the man can stand on one foot, suggesting that all the concepts of the Torah can be relayed to him in a modest amount of time. Rabbi Shammi chases the man away. Surely, the rabbi reasons, it is impossible to explain the entire Five Books of Moses before the man would get tired and have to drop his foot. This same man then approaches Rabbi Hillel with the same challenge. Rabbi Hillel accepts the challenge, explaining the entire Torah in the briefest moment by replying, “What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor; this is the whole Torah. The rest is commentary; now go and study.”

I have been often asked for quick responses to very intriguing questions about ASL interpreting within Jewish settings. Not to compare myself to the great rabbis of old, but, similar to Rabbi Shammi, I typically am also unable to give quick answers to the ASL interpreting questions that I am asked. Through this article, I hope to copy Rabbi Hillel’s model and try to summarize the essence of Jewish interpreting. However, like Rabbi Hillel, I believe the real work must be done through a commitment of study that interpreters themselves must undertake. Without such a commitment, we cannot render a clear interpretation of the texts found in the Jewish prayer book.

As a freelance ASL interpreter who is fluent in Liturgical Hebrew, I am often asked about my experiences as an ASL interpreter in Jewish settings. Since I am able to understand Hebrew and often think in Hebrew, I frequently do not depend on English translations in order to interpret the material. Additionally, as the co-founder of The Jewish Deaf Resource Center, Inc. (JDRC), a non-profit, bi-cultural organization that serves as a resource to the entire Jewish community on issues of access, I have been asked to teach and share my experiences with other ASL interpreters. Here is what I have learned.

Fluency in the language of the subject you will interpret is not nearly as important as understanding the cultural context of the texts you are interpreting. That means that you don’t have to be fluent in Hebrew nor be Jewish to create a meaningful interpretation in a Jewish setting. In fact, knowing Hebrew and being Jewish is not an automatic prerequisite. While knowing Hebrew certainly is very important and very helpful, what is mandatory is the interpreter’s understanding of the cultures and the values of Jewish prayers and Jewish texts. Interpreters must be able to discuss these cultures and values in their own native tongue if they hope to provide a meaningful interpretation. Being able to recite by memory the English translation of a specific prayer is not the same as being able to convey the meaning of the prayer in your own words.

Jewish prayer as an expression of the Jewish people’s religious spiritual experiences was not published in a prayer book until the 9th and 10th centuries. Many of our prayer books today still strongly resemble those first prayer books. Until that time, Jewish liturgy remained strictly an oral tradition, just as ASL is a face-to-face tradition with no written format. We know from the Jewish Bible that Jews prayed long before the existence of the first published prayer book. We know from the Talmud that prayers were recited at certain times of the day, but we did not always know exactly what those words looked like.

Today’s prayer book primarily represents two cultures.

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The first is the culture of Biblical Judaism including the Temple in Jerusalem. The second is the culture of the Jews after the Temple was destroyed in 70 B.C.E., which is the Judaism we observe today. This is called modern Rabbinic Judaism. Within each of these cultures, there are a variety of customs that are now included in the spectrum of prayer books used both in the USA and around the world.

In spite of the intimidating language, Jewish prayer is highly organized and has distinct patterns. This comes as a surprise to most ASL interpreters who feel overwhelmed by the foreign languages of the prayer book and the awkward English translations. Understanding the culture of the ancient Temple in Jerusalem, which was highly structured, will reassure the ASL interpreter that while it is a challenge to understand the intricate details of the Jewish prayer book, it is not a book without structure and in fact is, at times, extremely clear and concrete. This understanding of the culture of the ancient Temple in Jerusalem is key to interpreting the second culture represented in the prayer book, that being the culture of Rabbinic Judaism which began after the Temple was destroyed. In my opinion, the greatest obstacle facing most ASL interpreters working in synagogues is the complex relationship between these two cultures, both of which are expressed in the Jewish worship service. Even in the most liberal prayer books, this relationship lays the foundation for some of the most famous and well-known prayers.

The challenge of learning the culture of the Temple in Jerusalem is that this culture no longer exists. As a result, we cannot socialize with the Jewish community that lived in a world of animal sacrifice. However we can immerse ourselves in their culture by studying their texts. There is NO shortcut to this process of study. Getting together with other interpreters and Deaf community members and discussing how to sign “Moses” or the “Ten Commandments” or even “God” isn’t going to assist the interpreter to convey the spirit and the meaning of the culture of long ago. Study is a discipline, and like all disciplines it requires commitment.

Just as one cannot learn ASL and Deaf culture exclusively from videotapes, so too one must study these ancient Jewish texts in the same way that they were studied long ago. The tradition is to study, not alone, but in groups called Chevrutah, which means study partner or study group. Most of these texts are written in ancient Hebrew with vocabulary that is frequently not used in modern Israel today. However, more and more of these books are being written in English, and a tremendous competition results in some excellent English translations of these various texts. So for example, one of the best English translations of The Five Books of Moses, known as the Torah, is the first part of the Jewish Bible, is published by Everett Fox.

Studying together will allow ASL interpreters to learn from other students in the class as well as from the instructor. Like all cultures, some of the most cherished values can be overlooked if the human process of teaching face-to-face is not an integral part of the process. I have made the commitment to try to get a MA in Jewish Studies for just this purpose. The students in my classes represent future rabbis, cantors, Jewish educators, professors of Jewish studies, etc. I have frequently learned more from my peers than from my teachers. Many of my teachers are rabbis, and many are highly educated Jewish scholars.

One of the joys of interpreting in the Jewish world comes from the ability of the interpreter to bring to life the ancient culture of the Temple in Jerusalem and to facilitate whatever connection the modern day rabbi and cantor are creating within the congregation. Many Jewish interpreters worry about “working” on the Sabbath and holidays instead of perceiving our work as part of the team of clergy. Like their work, our work is also holy as we too engage in the spiritual process that is hopefully unifying the congregants with another and with God. As in any religious setting, it is a very spiritual experience to see the eyes of Deaf congregants who feel connected to the prayers, the congregation, and to God. To the extent that we are able to facilitate this process, there is a joy of doing holy work that is unique to this setting.

I interpret in church as well as in synagogue and have learned that theology has its own language. Every religion has a way of conveying their belief in a Higher Power, their belief in the responsibilities of people to that Higher Power and to each other. If theology is not a comfortable topic for you, then I urge you not to interpret in religious settings. If you plan to interpret in Jewish settings, I urge you to study the culture and the values of Jewish theology.

As we become more educated and are better able to convey the cultures and the values of the ancient Jewish texts found in the prayer book, Deaf community members will become more sophisticated consumers. They will demand from us a clear understanding of the texts we are interpreting just as medical or legal ASL interpreters are expected to convey the meaning of the messages being communicated. We will need to know the subject of the prayer, the theme, and the important background information. As our interpretations become richer, standing up and “signing” the English words on the page will no longer be acceptable. We will, as in any interpretation, convey the meaning of the text regardless of whether the spoken language in the room is Biblical Hebrew, Mishnaic Hebrew, modern Hebrew, Aramaic, or English, all of which can be found in the Jewish prayer book.

While we as humans on this earth hope for a world of peace, we as ASL interpreters are bound by our professional commitment to convey the cultural values found in the words of the speakers whenever we interpret. Jewish texts of long ago carry the same values that many of us believe in today, including a world of peace, a world of love, and a world where we love our neighbor as ourselves. I look forward to the day when all interpretations in the Jewish world convey these values along with all the other cultural messages of these ancient Jewish texts. Only then will our Deaf colleagues be able to become our Jewish Deaf teachers, Deaf rabbis and our Jewish Deaf ASL interpreter trainers.

Notes
1 From the Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 31a.
people take for granted. When week after week, month after month, year after year, you are the primary source of communication between a deaf individual or individuals and other churchgoers, certain results are inevitable. If the deaf client is a seriously religious person, the message of the church is of ultimate importance to them, because it relates to their very existence, their eternity. When the interpreter shares this view, some unavoidable sticky ethical challenges will surface. These challenges exist not simply because it is the nature of interpreting. They are broached rather, because this type of interpreting lends itself to the development of close relationships. If relationships do develop, and ethical quandaries arise, the interpreter will find him or herself having to navigate through a maze of roles. Generally speaking, unless the interpreter is acting strictly as a paid freelancer, there are three primary roles the interpreter in the religious world will have to negotiate. First is the role of professional interpreter, one who depends on clear ethics for guidance and who represents a field much broader than the religious environment. Second is the role of friend, an individual who, because of the very climate, nature and purpose of the church, engages in relationship with others, even those who are clients. And lastly is the role of religious individual, a person who embraces a specific faith that recognizes God as having ultimate authority. It is a hat dance, and determining the appropriate hat to wear at any given moment can be extremely difficult.

Peripheral to the difficulties related to roles, not enough can be said concerning the skills required of religious interpreters. As with the deaf world, the church is a culture within popular culture. It has its own jargon, metaphors, biblical and spiritual language, all of which create unique mountains to climb. The religious interpreter must convey concepts as ethereal as “the spirit of God, a spiritual gas station, and people, the vehicles in need of a fill up.” This interpreter must be able to skillfully maneuver from lecture, to scripture reading, to personal stories, to poetry, to music to professional drama, often with no preparation. The interpreter in the religious setting must interpret heart-wrenching stories of personal hardship and loss, even when close friends share them. All the while, they must maintain some semblance of professional composure, that is to say, conveying well the message and the emotion, without being undone by it. The religious interpreter must interpret comedy, philosophy, statistics, names, dates, places, and history. Not uncommon to religious interpreting are pastors who speak and read at the speed of light, and whose lecture styles seem more aptly placed in a university philosophy class than on a church platform. The religious interpreter must be able to articulate voice for a deaf client who is new to the church, sometimes in front of hundreds of people with only a moment’s notice. They must diplomatically and tactfully respond to well-meaning hearing people who approach them to express how impressed they were with their “signing.” The interpreter in the religious setting must be able to delicately field insensitive questions, either by referring them to the deaf person, or in the client’s absence, offer an appropriate reply. It is not uncommon to have questions asked about the deaf person’s literacy. A question frequently asked by churchgoers is “why do you sign the songs when the words are up on the screens?” Truly the interpreter in religious settings is an ambassador.

To be a successful interpreter in the religious world you must transcend many obstacles. This specific type of interpreting is not for everyone. It is certainly not for the thin-skinned, or faint-hearted.

Interpreting in religious settings is a continual and dynamic mix of art, humanity, and technical expertise. It is in many ways a dance, and on any given day the steps can change. It is always an adventure, frequently an ethical challenge, and a wonderful opportunity to grow professionally. Those generous interpreters who continually give their service, without thought of payment, should be appreciated and applauded.

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2 Liturgical Hebrew refers to the various forms of Hebrew Language that are found in the Siddur (Jewish prayer book). This includes Biblical Hebrew, Mishnaic Hebrew, Hebrew used in Piyutim (Jewish liturgical poems), modern Hebrew and Aramaic.

3 Jewish Liturgy refers to all of the texts found in the Jewish prayer book. This includes Biblical texts, Mishnaic texts, poems created for Jewish worship known as Piyutim as well as rabbincic prayers.

4 The Jewish Bible known in Hebrew as the Tanakh represents The Five Books of Moses, Prophets and Writings. The order of the books in the Jewish Bible and the Christian Bible are not the same. Writings includes such books as Psalms, Ecclesiastes, etc.

5 The Talmud is known as the Jewish Oral Torah in contrast with The Five Books of Moses which is known as the Written Torah. The Talmud records rabbinic interpretations of Jewish Law. The Mishnah which is the first part of the Talmud was codified in 200 C.E.

6 While modern liberal prayer books do include some Modern Hebrew and some prayers for the State of Israel, they do not represent the majority of the prayers in the Jewish siddur or prayer book. Most of the prayers in the Jewish prayer book represent the ancient values of the Temple in Jerusalem along with the rabbincic traditions that were established right after the Temple was destroyed.

7 The custom among some people of not writing out the English word for God comes from a Jewish teaching that the Hebrew name of God may not be written unless it is recorded in a holy book. However, there are no restrictions for the English word for God which the rabbincic community agrees does not represent God’s actual name.

8 Theology refers to the field of study that focuses on the relationship between God and the world.

Interpreting in Religious Settings

By the Rev. Dr. Robert H. Grindrod, C.S.C., Illinois

Many highly skilled professional interpreters got their start as religious interpreters. At the same time, many who identify themselves as religious interpreters tend to have a bad reputation among professionals within the interpreting community. Often religious interpreters identify themselves as wanting to help deaf people or wanting to be a religious interpreter so they can set out to save deaf people, or because God told them to do it. While this may be an appropriate response in the mission field, I suggest that interpreting in religious settings is, and must be, interpreting, first and foremost. I believe, and I will present the argument that, interpreting in religious settings must be approached with the same seriousness and professionalism as any other interpreting situation. It is interpreting which occurs in someone’s religious milieu (not necessarily that of the interpreter), and it is the job of the interpreter to focus on his/her interpreting, rather than his/her worship.

Interpreting in religious settings is serious business. Frequently, people get their first involvement in interpreting in religious settings where, in theory, they hone their skills. This fact speaks to the need for better opportunities for interpreters to develop skills. However, that is not the topic of this article. Still, it is ironic that the two most frequent areas in which “beginning” interpreters practice are education and religious settings. What two areas of one’s life are more important than education and faith? Deaf children deserve the best that the interpreting profession can offer in the educational setting. Equally important is that we are dealing with nothing less than the souls of believers when we interpret in religious settings. People who want interpreters in religious settings deserve the best skills, the highest ethical standards and the most professional behavior. There are some crucial and constant issues which one faces when interpreting in religious settings.

Professionalism

Interpreters probably spend more time talking about “professionalism” than anything else. Professionalism is a constant goal, but the variety of situations in which interpreters find themselves makes it difficult for us to know exactly what professionalism means in a given situation. As ethicist Joseph Fletcher remarked, “situations alter cases.” The religious setting involves a number of variables. However, I argue that there is one constant: professionalism must prevent one from offering poor to mediocre interpreting services and expecting God to “make it better.” Here are some key areas upon which to focus.

Preparation

Interpreting in religious settings requires as much preparation as theatrical interpreting. Preparation for religious interpreting goes beyond simple childhood catechism. At the first level, preparation means getting the worship service material a few days in advance and practicing. This means getting the worship bulletin or leaflet, the sermon, the hymns, any special prayers, music to the anthem, the scripture readings, and more. It means reviewing all of those materials. Ideally, it means going to choir practice and working out the details of your interpretations as the choir practices their hymns and anthems. It means reading the sermon at least once and then checking your understandings with the preacher to be sure you are getting what he/she is saying so you can give an accurate and correct interpretation. At the very least, a one hour to one and a half hour Sunday morning service should have two to three hours of preparation time, minimum.

Further, there is preparation on a deeper level. If you interpret regularly in a worship community, you need to familiarize yourself with the nuances, history, tradition and milieu of the congregation. The basic understanding of faith and doctrine is quite different in a Church of the Nazarene from that of a Metropolitan Christian Church. You are well-served to know these differences in advance. Whether you agree or disagree philosophically and theologically is a private matter. If you do not or cannot subscribe to what is being taught or preached, then as a professional you have at least two options: do not accept further assignments there or interpret what is there without interpreting your own bias or opinion.

Staff Relations

The first issue is establishing your credibility as a member of the staff. An interpreter is not just someone off
the streets. You are a professional and are entitled to be treated as such (so long as you reciprocate by acting as such).

a. Clergy - Get to know them. They can make your life easier or more difficult. Check out the expectations of the Senior Pastor or minister. He/she is, in theory, the head of the congregation. He/she may or may not have an interest in what you are doing there.

b. Organist and/or Choir Director - Remembering that hearing people generally swoon over interpreted music, this is a political ally to cultivate. As a fellow artist, one can hope for a certain amount of support from the music department. On the other hand, remember that their focus is the spoken and sung word and this deafness business may be something they just don’t get. In any case, they can make your life much more difficult if they want to. It is hard to do a credible job interpreting an anthem if you have not seen it before Sunday morning.

c. Director of Religious Education/ Sunday School Superintendent - Often churches or synagogues get their first inkling of the need for interpreters when the parents of a deaf child show up wanting to participate in Sunday or Sabbath School. A well-trained and well-prepared D.R.E. will work with you to help you get a grasp on what is being taught, the dynamics of the Sunday School, etc. People in these positions tend to be inclined to “like” interpreting. They may not know much about it, but they like it.

d. The Church Secretary - If you want to know where the power lies, who knows what’s going on, and who can make your life simple or difficult, look to the church secretary. He/she is really the hub of the congregation. Everything eventually flows through the secretary’s hands and he/she can make the work of the interpreter, especially the preparation phase, much easier.

Payment
Interpreters in religious settings should be paid. They should be paid at the prevailing rate. If possible, given the amount of preparation time required, they should be paid for at least one to two hours of interpreting time when they are not in the worship service. Here’s why.

a. Churches, like other institutions, value what they pay for. Simple but complex psychology has shown that something we receive for free is given less regard than something for which we have paid.

b. If a congregation has decided to be intentional about their outreach to deaf people, they should do it. Paying for interpreters is one way of showing that commitment. A church’s budget reflects its priorities. A church which claims to be committed to ministry among deaf people, but only if it costs nothing, needs some self-examining.

c. Quality control is more easily managed if you are paying for a product. It is hard to fire a volunteer, specially if he/she is a member of the congregation. (It is for this reason, also, that I believe interpreters should come from outside the congregation).

d. If you, as the regular volunteer interpreter, go on vacation, what do they do? Do they simply drop the interpreted services? Do they hire and pay for a substitute? If they pay for a substitute, what does that say about how they value you?

e. As important to the worship of hearing people is the organist, so is the interpreter for deaf people. Arguably even more so. The other professional staff get paid.

f. Many professional interpreters depend upon interpreting to put food on their table. Interpreting in religious settings is a legitimate source of income for interpreters. It should be respected as such by other professional interpreters.

Many interpreters do some pro bono work and it may be your choice to do religious interpreting in this way. If you wish to do interpreting in religious settings as a contribution or gift, let me suggest a simple way to do this. Require payment for any or all of the reasons outlined above, but then contribute that amount (or more) back to the church. In this way, your desire to give to the church can be satisfied and the integrity of the interpreting profession is preserved as well.

Interpreting In Your Own Religious Tradition

An issue one must consider when interpreting in religious settings is whether one needs to be a member of a denomination, sect, or even congregation in order to do a credible interpreting job. I think not. There is a perspective that says, “who better than a Roman Catholic to interpret a Roman Catholic liturgy?” After all, a Catholic is familiar with the service and the language. He/she knows the concepts and probably has an inside track to the unique Catholic signs. In some settings it is an article of faith that the interpreter must be “one of us” or he/she is not acceptable. This is not the forum in which to comment on that kind of exclusivist attitude, however, on a practical level, response is called for.

Most people who watch television cannot explain how it works, even though most of us have been doing it all our lives. On another level, classes taken or subjects studied when 12 years old are not likely to be subjects one could teach in adulthood without considerable continued training and education. The point is that things which we supposedly learned at an early age do not necessarily serve us well into adulthood without further cultivation. From this standpoint, a professional interpreter who takes his/her duty of intentional prepara-

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Worshiping/Interpreting

Interpreting is hard work. It requires intense concentration and effort and demands one’s full attention and discipline. Transliterating is no less mentally demanding.

Worshiping is demanding. If one wants to truly worship, it requires attention and concentration.

An interpreter in a religious setting’s job, duty, and responsibility is to focus on the worship experience of the d/Deaf people for whom one is interpreting.

I believe that an interpreter who is worshiping has lost sight of the focus and purpose of the interpreting.

Having said that, I believe that the spiritual life of interpreters is important. People who identify themselves as believers need an opportunity to express and practice that belief. I encourage interpreters to have a spiritual community with which they worship. However, I am quick to add that it should not be the community in which you interpret professionally. Rather, an interpreter would be well-served to find a community where he/she can worship and have his/her spiritual needs met and then participate in the life of that group somehow.

If an interpreter identifies him/herself as a spiritual or religious person, then it is important to take care of and feed one’s self. Be honest and don’t be seduced into thinking that it happens while interpreting professionally because I suggest that either

your spiritual life and your own worship experience is suffering, or the experience you are facilitating for d/Deaf people is suffering.

There are many other factors and issues to be considered when interpreting in religious settings. The place of “frozen text,” the question of multiple roles, and the choice of theologically and conceptually accurate signs are but a few. Sadly, the constraints of space in an article such as this one preclude further discussion.

In closing, I would reiterate what is to me the most important consideration when interpreting in a religious setting. Always remember that interpreting in religious settings must be, first and foremost, not evangelism, not worship, not a personal spiritual journey. It is and must always be interpreting. As professionals we cannot offer any less than our finest effort.
Psalm 23

The Lord is my shepherd,
    I shall not want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside quiet water.

He restores my soul.
He guides me in the paths of righteousness,
For His name's sake.

Even though I walk through the valley
    of the shadow of death,
I fear no evil; for Thou art with me;
Thy rod and
Thy staff, they comfort me.

Thou dost prepare a table before me
    in the presence of my enemies;
Thou hast anointed my head with oil;
My cup overflows.

Surely goodness and lovingkindness
    will follow me all the days of my life.
And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.
THE LORD'S PRAYER

Our Father, who art in heaven,
    hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come,
    Thy will be done,
On earth as it is in heaven

Give us this day,
    Our daily bread
And forgive us our trespasses
    As we forgive those
Who trespass against us.

And lead us not into temptation
    but deliver us from evil.

For Thine is the kingdom, the power
    and the glory, forever and ever.