



**CATHOLIC
HOME
MISSIONS**

Deaf Ministry Training Helps Mission Dioceses Reach the Marginalized



Deacon Billy Griffin, a Deaf deacon from Philadelphia, PA, signs the penitential rite while Bishop Stephen D. Parkes looks on. Deacon Griffin was invited to assist at Mass while other members of the National Catholic Office of the Deaf were in attendance on January 9, 2022, at the Cathedral Basilica of St. John the Baptist in Savannah, GA.

By Beth Griffin

Deaf Catholics live in every diocese, but are often overlooked and sometimes underserved. While their marginalization is not intentional, it creates challenges for the Deaf and also represents missed opportunities for the hearing.

“The Deaf community is hidden. It’s interspersed in society and the Church. There is a general lack of awareness, but every once in a while, you get a breakthrough,” says Bishop Steven Raica of Birmingham, Alabama.

Deaf communities tend to form and settle around schools for the Deaf or in urban areas where job opportunities match their skills, he says. Parishes and dioceses can welcome Deaf people by accompanying them and by recruiting Catholics who are fluent in American Sign Language (ASL) to interpret and help with catechesis, Bishop Raica adds.

Bishop Raica developed an interest in ASL when

he watched a classmate interact with his Deaf grandparents in Grand Rapids, Michigan. As a priest, Bishop Raica encountered a Deaf community in his diaconal assignment in Flint, Michigan. He studied ASL and ultimately became a chaplain for Deaf Catholics while he engaged in parallel pastoral assignments.

“I have been moved by the Deaf community and the people around them and am honored by their welcome,” he says.

Bishop Raica is the episcopal moderator for the National Catholic Office for the Deaf (NCOD), a nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting pastoral ministry with persons who are Deaf or hard of hearing.

NCOD implements its ministry by collaborating with bishops, diocesan leaders, and pastors; by providing support to ordained and lay pastoral workers in Deaf ministry; and by assisting catechists and families with Deaf children. It is a clearinghouse of information and creates special media resources for Deaf Catholics.

NCOD organizes an annual Pastoral Week conference for people in Deaf ministry. The event showcases new resources and offers a forum to share experiences and insights.

Savannah, Georgia, hosted this year’s Pastoral Week in January 2022. As part of its commitment to the professional and formational development of Church personnel in mission dioceses, Catholic Home Missions provided scholarships to those seeking to attend the program.

Deacon Mike Gutierrez, director of pastoral services at Catholic Community Services of Southern Arizona in Tucson, jumped at the opportunity. “It

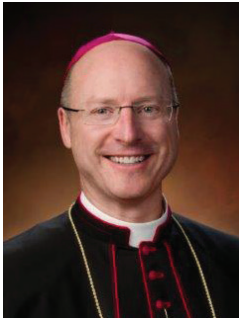
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Neighbors

ISSUE 2 2022

A QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER FROM MISSION AMERICA

FROM THE CHAIRMAN



Dear Brothers
and Sisters in Christ,

Our Christian vocation as disciples calls us to bring the Good News of Jesus Christ to the whole world, especially those on the margins who are overlooked or isolated. Members of the Deaf and hard-of-hearing community are among those who do not receive the pastoral attention and support they need, especially outside cities and metropolitan areas, in

which more people might use American Sign Language (ASL).

The National Catholic Office for the Deaf (NCOD) works to address the pastoral needs of the Deaf community through training diocesan personnel in Deaf ministry, assisting catechists who minister to families with Deaf children, and creating and distributing media resources for Deaf Catholics.

Pastoral ministers in home mission dioceses were able to participate in NCOD's annual Pastoral Week conference in January 2022 with the help of professional development scholarships provided by Catholic Home Missions. Though most resources for the Deaf, especially ASL interpreters, are found in cities, Deaf and hard-of-hearing people live everywhere. By helping Deaf ministry leaders in home mission dioceses, the Church is better able to bring the Gospel to all.

Your ongoing support of Catholic Home Missions makes a vital impact, allowing dioceses not only to sustain their current pastoral ministries but also to grow and expand their outreach to those on the margins.

Thank you for all you do to make this possible. I am

Sincerely yours in Christ,

Most Reverend W. Shawn McKnight
Bishop of Jefferson City
Chairman, USCCB Subcommittee on Catholic Home Missions



Pews are reserved at the Cathedral Basilica of St. John the Baptist, in Savannah, Georgia, for members of the National Catholic Office of the Deaf who attended Mass with Bishop Stephen D. Parkes on Sunday, January 9, 2022. Members of NCOD were in Savannah attending their Pastoral Week, which is an annual conference that assists Deaf and hearing Catholics who work in the field of Deaf ministry around the United States and Canada.

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was awesome to learn how many resources are available that I was not aware of. NCOD has a tremendous youth-oriented Catechism translated into sign language," he says.

"It was also inspiring to see so many Deaf priests and deacons and to participate in Masses offered in sign language," he adds.

Mike has taught sacramental preparation for Deaf children and later worked with Deaf adults in a job training and placement initiative of the Community Outreach Program for the Deaf (COPD), an agency of Catholic Community Services. In a survey conducted by COPD, members of the Deaf community described their faith study and sacramental preparation needs.

In the past, Mike says, the diocese was able to help existing Deaf communities in two parishes by providing ASL interpreting for Sunday Mass. The effort flagged somewhat as the Deaf community aged and fewer young children participated. During the pandemic, when churches were closed, the ministry lost momentum and some funding. But he is optimistic.

"It feels like we're starting from scratch, and it will take work and effort, but I'm excited to get things going strong again," Mike says.

Msgr. Glenn Nelson is a longtime board member of NCOD. He is also vicar general of the Diocese of Rockford in Illinois and director of its Deaf apostolate.

As a teenager, he was fascinated by a sign language interpreter who stood at the front of a huge college math class. By his own description, Msgr. Glenn fell in love with the Deaf community and its culture, and he realized he had a God-given ability for ASL. He switched majors from business to Deaf education and taught happily for two years after graduation.

"Then I started wondering who was teaching my students about Christ," he says. "And I wanted to bring the Gospel message

to people who, through no fault of their own, had not received it.” Msgr. Glenn was ordained in 1993.

Msgr. Glenn had a personal epiphany about the importance of his specific ministry when he led a pilgrimage for Deaf Catholics to Rome. One of the participants, who had been deaf from birth, began to weep silently during a Mass he celebrated there. When he asked what upset her, she said, “You are telling me things that in my whole life as a Catholic I have never heard. This is the first time.”

Msgr. Glenn recounts, “She was not angry because it took so long but only grateful that she could hear before she dies from a priest who could communicate with her.”

Ministry to Deaf Catholics is limited both by a lack of awareness and a shortage of interpreters, Msgr. Glenn says. “According to research done by Gallaudet University, about 96% of Deaf people do not attend church or practice religion. I think this is because of a lack of catechetical instruction or evangelical resources,” he says. “Historically, a lot of the Catholic Deaf were educated and raised in the faith at schools run by religious orders but had no follow-up when they returned home to hearing parish communities. The Church has not always understood the needs of the Deaf.”

Deaf people are considered a cultural group rather than a disabled community, Msgr. Glenn says. Most communicate via ASL, a complete language with the same linguistic properties as spoken languages and with grammar that differs from English. ASL uses movements of the hands, arms, torso, and face. In an English-to-ASL interpretation, words are not translated one by one. Rather, the sense and meaning of the English words are communicated through the gestures and expressions that form the vocabulary and grammar of ASL.

“Communication is not just the words we want to say; it’s also about the message,” Msgr. Glenn says. “ASL requires an openness to get out of our head and move more into the body and heart. It forces us to think about the message and show it on our faces.”

“Sign language is not my first language, but I have been immersed in it and welcomed by the Deaf community. Through ASL, the Holy Spirit communicates at a whole other level,” Msgr. Glenn says.

“The visual aspect to prayer [in ASL] is a treasure that the Deaf community has for the hearing community in the Church,” he says. “Think about the Creed we recite. What does ‘begotten’ look like? How powerful is it to hear, ‘And the Word became flesh,’ and actually see the spoken word become a physical manifestation? This is the Gospel message arriving through a second sensory door,” he says.

Parishes and dioceses that offer pastoral services to the Deaf generally rely on volunteer ASL interpreters. Bishop Raica says volunteers are critical to the ministry, yet they face significant challenges in maintaining theological and contextual accuracy. “A lot of the liturgical texts, including the Scriptures, use the passive voice, which is not used in ASL. It’s helpful if the interpreters are aware of Catholic sacred theology,” he says.

Catholic Home Missions is making an effort to increase its outreach to all marginalized groups in mission dioceses. Bishop Raica says that ministry to Deaf Catholics is reminiscent of early evangelization efforts with Native communities. He describes Bishop Frederic Baraga, a mid-19th-century Slovenian missionary who became the first bishop of Marquette and ministered to the Odawa people, among others. “He knew several languages already and had a skill to decipher the Odawa language. He formulated an Odawa-English grammar and dictionary from an entirely oral tradition and developed an Odawa Catechism,” Bishop Raica says.

“Today we have Deaf priests, sisters, deacons, and laity who are working in their native language, ASL, to standardize catechetical and liturgical materials. They are helping to provide a baseline for religious language,” he says.

“NCOD offers a great opportunity to develop that baseline through community engagement and coming together to ask questions and discuss issues,” he says.

Msgr. Glenn says the Church can best serve the Deaf community by becoming aware of its members and being missionaries to them. “The Deaf people are out there, but we don’t know them and we don’t see them. Welcoming our neighbor is the best gift we can give,” he says. Visiting secular gathering spots where Deaf events take place, such as

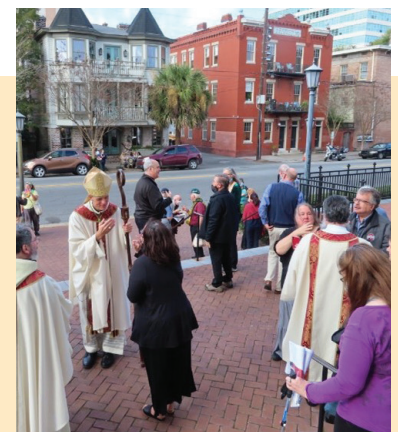
bowling alleys or coffee shops that host Deaf chats, is a way to introduce himself and his ministry, he adds.

While it is not feasible to offer ASL interpretation at all parishes, Msgr. Glenn says that some parishes that welcome the Deaf community are “Deaf meccas” and become regional centers for the community. “No one wants to be isolated. The Deaf community is a mobile one and will move to find its home,” he says.

On a practical level, cities are more likely to have parishes that serve the Deaf. In rural areas where all Catholics are more spread out, ministry to the Deaf is generally concentrated at one parish or depends heavily on livestreaming.

Msgr. Nelson says the upcoming Synod on Synodality is ideally timed for Deaf Catholics. “NCOD is joining the consultation process in a special way to collect the unique perspective of individuals in the Deaf Catholic community. Responses will be collected and offered to the USCCB to be included in the national report summary to the Vatican,” he says.

Bishop Raica concludes, “Our faith is about encountering the wonderful presence of Jesus Christ and walking together and bumping up into reality. Each person experiences it differently. Are we willing to be opened and surprised by what the Lord puts in front of us?”



Bishop Stephen D. Parkes, Bishop of Savannah, GA, warmly greets members of the National Catholic Office of the Deaf after a Mass celebrated at the Cathedral Basilica of St. John the Baptist on January 9, 2022.



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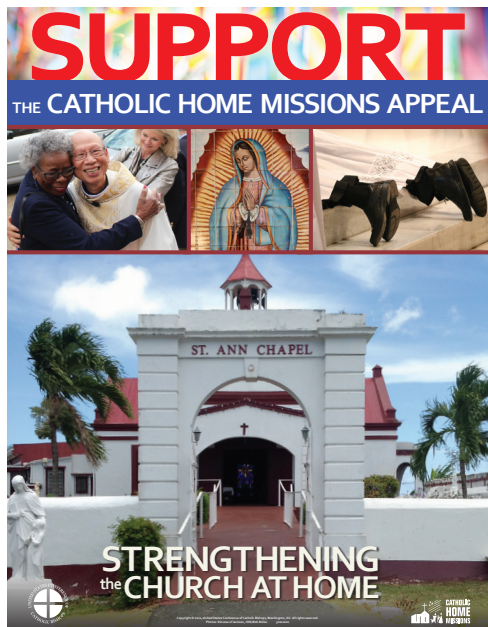
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www.usccb.org/home-missions

DID YOU KNOW?

- 96% of Deaf people do not go to church or practice a religion.
- Deaf clergy, religious sisters, and laity are working to standardize ASL liturgical and catechetical materials.
- Deaf Catholic perspectives are being included in the synodal process.
- Many advocate capitalizing the word “Deaf” when referring to Deaf culture and the Deaf community, especially those who use ASL to communicate, and lowercasing “deaf” only in reference to the audiological condition.

Our work is supported by the annual collection taken up in U.S. parishes. If you missed your parish collection, you may send your donation to: USCCB Office of National Collections | P. O. Box 96278 | Washington, DC 20090-6278. Please make checks payable to USCCB-Catholic Home Missions Appeal.

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