

Interpreters and Fellowship

The “Jeopardy” answer: It’s not a fellowship problem. It’s an adiaphoron issue.

The question: “Is there a problem if we hire someone who isn’t WELS to interpret for us?”

Biblical fellowship principles do not require that WELS churches use only WELS members as interpreters. The interpreter is not required to participate in worship as a worshiper any more than Naaman worshiped when he helped the king bow down in the temple of Rimmon (2 Kings 5:18). Interpreting does not imply agreement with the message interpreted; it is a service used wherever there is a communication barrier.

In one sense, using an interpreter is the equivalent of using a microphone or a telephone. The interpreter transmits meaning from one person to another. The religious interpreter does not function as a teacher or preacher. If a teacher tells a deaf student that infants should be baptized, even an interpreter who holds Baptist convictions must interpret that statement without any comment or contradiction. This is an ethical standard that trained interpreters are told they must observe. The interpreter is not to be an editor or judge of the two parties who are communicating. The two people have a right to their own conversation and to judge the other person on the basis of the actual conversation, not the interpreter's version of it.

There are practical issues to consider, however.

First of all, there is the risk that the interpreter may eventually withdraw from interpreting at a church with which the he or she disagrees (a slight risk, I think).

A church interpreter may not be a licensed professional. Is the amateur who attends a different church committed to the ethical standards when it comes to communicating Lutheran doctrine? It is good for the pastor to interview any interpreter and discuss the interpreter’s ethical responsibility in this area. The pastor need not be defensive when asking about this topic. It is one of the first subjects covered in interpreter training, and an issue that deaf people also will judge an interpreter on.

Some religious signs are theologically skewed. Most church interpreters are aware of the language differences, though it may be that Lutheran alternative signs are less well known. The interpreter is expected to use the sign preferences of the church members and generally appreciates being told the preferred sign for any audience. For people interpreting in WELS churches, the sign language dictionary, ***Sign to the Lord a New Song*** will help an interpreter.

Another practical consideration is the skill level of available interpreters. To a pastor choosing an interpreter, it might seem logical to prefer a WELS interpreter over an interpreter who is not of our fellowship. But not all interpreters are equally skilled. An

interpreter who does a poor job of interpreting (a beginner, for example) might frustrate an adult who is used to having quality interpreters, and in such a case the professional interpreter might be better for the church setting than a beginner who is WELS.

Sometimes we treat the subject of fellowship as a negative question, “Who should not be allowed to work with us?” Fellowship, however, is a beautiful blessing. In choosing an interpreter, there is another consideration besides accuracy of interpretation or the ethics of the interpreter. Using a WELS person as an interpreter can become one more spiritual connection between the deaf person and the church (the local congregation as well as the Synod). Here is an additional WELS friend for the deaf person, someone who knows where to go to get further help.

So while a WELS interpreter isn't required by fellowship principles, a WELS interpreter offers some desirable advantages. This shouldn't keep us from finding an interpreter if we need to communicate the Word to a member of our church. The deaf need the Word. If we have a deaf member or prospect, we need to communicate the Word. An “outside” interpreter can bridge the gap until a WELS interpreter is available.

Recently, the options in the field of religious interpreting have improved with the rise of Video Remote Interpreting (VRI). Interpreters are available via Facetime or Skype, so that they are not physically present in the service. Some WELS churches that previously could not hire a WELS interpreter because there were none in their area will be able to use VRI. For more information on VRI, contact Mission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (MDHH) member Ben Olson, olsonterp@mac.com.

The MDHH knows that outreach and ministry to the deaf often stumbles for lack of religious sign language interpreters. Its members are glad to help you navigate the search for an interpreter. Feel free to contact MDHH for more help by emailing specialministries@wels.net.

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