

“Stop Saying I’m Not a Professional Interpreter Just Because I Interpret in a Church Setting”



“Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. “Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?”

Matthew 7:1-3

For many years, church interpreters were not recognized by the interpreting community as professionals. Many of those who interpreted in a church setting were children of deaf adults (CODAs) or those who were fascinated with the language without any formal training. Some of the signers would only sign the music portion of a religious service and many signed to a hearing audience.

As American Sign Language (ASL) evolved over the last 50 years as a profession, Interpreter Training Programs (ITPs) have popped up across the country offering those who desire training the opportunity to attend and receive training on the linguistics of ASL and the culture of the Deaf. In addition to ITPs being offered at local community colleges and universities, trained facilitators who have mastered specific skills have offered workshops and seminars in an effort to share their knowledge with individuals interested in learning the language and culture.

The reason the stigma was assigned to church interpreters years ago is because many church interpreters never took advantage of the opportunities to excel and advance in the language. While workshops and training were being offered at minimal to no cost, many church interpreters passed on the opportunity to attend. To many, learning the craft before attempting to minister using it was not a priority. As a result, many oppressed the Deaf community by not properly explaining the Word of Truth.

Sadly, today, many church interpreters still won't take advantage of the opportunities for growth through ITPs, workshops, or conferences. Many have become set in their ways and have no desire to pursue excellence. IIDS has even offered complimentary registration for a few of our conferences to more than 18 individuals, and of these 18 only one or two have attended.

This plight is not true for all church interpreters. There are many interpreting in a church setting who are professional, whether working in the secular setting or not. Many recognize the importance of understanding the language and the culture in order to minister effectively. They understand the importance of meeting the needs of the Deaf community by understanding those needs, respecting their language, and being involved in their culture. These interpreters realize that the only difference between "interpreting" in a secular setting and a religious setting is the vocabulary. The processes for message delivery from the source language into the target language are the same. In fact, those who interpret in a religious setting should not only be expected to meet the standards set by the interpreting profession, they should exceed those standards.

As a church interpreter, I have also served as an educational interpreter, a platform interpreter, a free-lance interpreter, and an ASL 1 instructor. The notion that I'm not professional just because I interpret in a religious setting is ludicrous to me. The principles I use in a secular setting are also used when I interpret in church. In fact, an in-depth knowledge of the Word of God is required in addition to all of the ASL rules for effective ministry.

It is my hope that those who pass judgment would evaluate each church interpreter by the merits they possess instead of stereotyping or grouping all church interpreters into a category labeled as ineffective or unimportant. In fact, I wish those who label any interpreter would first look into a mirror.

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