



# WATCH TOWER

BIBLE AND TRACT SOCIETY OF BRITAIN

THE RIDGEWAY LONDON NW7 1RN

TELEPHONE 020 8906 2211

March 26, 2010

TO ALL TRAVELLING OVERSEERS AND BODIES OF ELDERS

Re: General guidelines for sign-language interpreting at meetings, assemblies and conventions

Dear Brothers:

Jesus instructed Peter to feed his little sheep. (John 21:17) Circuit assemblies, special assembly days, and district conventions are used by Jehovah's organization to carry out that loving instruction. Among the Lord's sheep there are deaf individuals who, by means of sign language, must also receive the timely spiritual food that is dispensed on those occasions. (Matt. 24:45-47) Even though these guidelines have been prepared specially to help coordinate sign-language interpreting at regular assemblies and conventions, many of the points are also applicable at events presented directly in sign language. With this in mind, please note the following:

**Sign-language overseer:** At every assembly or convention sponsoring a sign-language arrangement, there should be a qualified brother appointed as sign-language overseer under the direction of the assembly overseer (in the case of circuit assemblies and special assembly days) or the programme overseer (in the case of district conventions). If possible, he should know sign language. As soon as possible before the event, the district or circuit overseer (or the programme overseer when at a district convention) should give the sign-language overseer a copy of this guideline letter along with a small supply of Sign-Language Interpreter Survey forms.

**A. Environmental considerations:** The district or circuit overseer, or the Convention Committee when at a district convention, should meet with the sign-language overseer to decide on the following matters:

## 1. Seating Area

- a. If possible, select an area that allows all deaf persons to see the sign-language interpreter(s) and the main platform in the same line of sight but where the interpreters will not distract the hearing audience too much. Many deaf individuals will benefit from an elevated seating area to look down at the interpreter(s) and beyond to the main platform. However, the sign-language area should not be directly in front of the platform, as the signing will be distracting to the main audience. Have a spiritually mature deaf brother assist you with this selection.
- b. This area for the deaf audience should be free of visual distractions such as traffic, obstructions, glare, or house lights. When using outdoor facilities, neither the deaf nor the interpreter(s) should face the sun if at all possible.

- c. Be sure the area can accommodate the families and companions of all deaf attendees and of the interpreters. The number of hearing family members and friends may be twice that of the deaf persons in attendance.
- d. If the attendance in this section is higher than expected, those who come merely to improve their interpreting skills may be asked to sit in the outer perimeter.
- e. The seating area should be clearly marked "SIGN LANGUAGE."
- f. Tactile interpreting may be arranged for deaf-blind attendees. Their interpreters need to be located where they can clearly see the main interpreter without obstruction. Deaf brothers and sisters are usually excellent tactile interpreters.

## **2. Lighting**

- a. When meeting at a location other than an Assembly Hall, be sure to have good lighting so that shadows are minimized and the interpreters can be clearly seen by those in the rear of the designated section.
- b. If necessary, up to four outdoor-type floodlights (not fluorescent) may be placed in front of the interpreter, one or two on each side, slightly higher than the interpreter's face. These fixtures should be shielded so that the light beam is controlled and focused on the interpreter and does not become a distraction to the deaf or the main hearing audience.
- c. When at outdoor facilities, the floodlights may still be needed so that the interpreters are not considerably darker than the sky and field in the background.

## **3. Sound**

- a. In certain situations where the sound is not optimal or where there is the potential for noise from outside sources to interfere with the programme, such as planes flying over an outdoor stadium, it may be necessary for the Sound Department to provide quality headphones for the interpreters.

## **4. Interpreters' Platform and Backdrop**

- a. When circumstances require a platform for the interpreters, it should be at least 4 by 8 feet (1.2 m x 2.4 m), but not more than 8 by 12 feet (2.4 m x 3.7 m). If a drama must be interpreted, consider how many signers will be needed. Should the seating area be on risers or otherwise, with an aisle in front where the interpreters will have enough space to work, there may be no need to build a platform.
- b. If elevated above ten inches (25 cm), the platform should include steps (wide enough for two persons, or two sets of steps) and a railing for safety.
- c. Use a solid, matt, pale or medium blue backdrop, at least six feet (1.8 m) high. This will help eliminate eyestrain caused by a multicoloured or glary background and will make the interpreter's signing stand out. Usually, cloth works best. At outdoor facilities, a dark, screen-type material might serve equally well.

- d. If the seating area is wide, the backdrop may wrap around the signing platform two to four feet (0.6 m to 1.2 m) on both sides so that it will appear behind the interpreter from any viewing angle. Make sure not to block anyone's view of the main platform.

**B. Interpreter's survey:** Many skilled interpreters are willing to travel and assist at more than one sign-language convention. If such help is needed at a particular locality, the sign-language overseers involved should coordinate matters so that, if possible, there are at least some skilled interpreters at each event. The interpreters will normally travel at their own expense. Also, they should not represent the organization on policy matters. All sign-language overseers should confirm that any recommended interpreters are still approved by their Congregation Service Committee.

### 1. Interpreter's Qualifications

- a. Spiritual qualifications are of foremost importance. Each brother and sister who serves as an interpreter must be an exemplary Christian publisher.
- b. Accurate knowledge of the truth of God's Word is required in order to interpret Scriptural thoughts correctly into sign language.
- c. Good comprehension of the spoken language is essential. One cannot interpret a message he does not fully understand.
- d. In many countries, sign language is used in two major ways. One form uses signs as a word-for-word transliteration of the spoken language. The other form is generally known as *natural sign language*. It is the form most commonly used by the deaf in their daily conversations. It functions separately from the spoken language and has a different grammar. It tends to put more emphasis on the use of space, facial expressions, and the inflecting of signing motions in order to achieve various shades of meaning. Even though preference for either of these two forms of sign language will vary depending on the deaf individual, the majority of deaf persons converse in *natural sign language* and, therefore, understand it best. So, for interpreting at a district convention or during an assembly programme, please select the most proficient signers in the natural sign language.
- e. Interpreters need to understand the interpreting process. This does not mean merely matching a sign to a word while following the word order of the spoken language. Interpreting requires comprehension of thoughts. Thus, interpreters should concentrate on what is being said from the platform and endeavour to convey such thoughts clearly, accurately, and completely, while keeping up with the speaker. Usually, a word-for-word translation fails to convey the speaker's thoughts faithfully. Therefore, having many years of experience is not the only qualifying factor; one must have learned the interpreting process.

### 2. Selecting Interpreters

- a. The sign-language overseer may have the names and addresses of interpreters who may have been interviewed, auditioned, or used at prior conventions or assemblies. Consult with mature deaf brothers to find out which interpreters they view as outstanding signers. If no such brothers are available, mature deaf sisters can be consulted.

- b. Well in advance of the event, the sign-language overseer should arrange to audition any potential interpreters. The objective is to find six to eight well-qualified signers. He may contact the circuit overseers of the circuits assigned to the convention in order to locate willing interpreters who could be auditioned using about ten minutes of programme-like material drawn from our publications. The audition panel may include the sign-language overseer and his assistant, one or two deaf brothers known as good judges of the sign language most commonly used among the deaf community in the area, and one or two hearing brothers exceptionally qualified as interpreters. It will be beneficial to keep in mind that there is usually more than one acceptable way to express a point in any language. Also, it would be a kindness to take five to ten minutes with each interpreter to point out several good aspects noted in his or her audition and to offer two or three suggestions for improvement. Being auditioned is usually a stressful experience, so try to make all feel appreciated and good about volunteering.
- c. Before a brother serves on the audition panel, his Congregation Service Committee must confirm his exemplary standing in the congregation.
- d. If qualified brothers are not available to serve on the audition panel, the sign-language overseer may privately consult with mature and well-qualified deaf or hearing sisters regarding the abilities of other interpreters who volunteer. In any case, an audition panel should be formed only if and when qualified brothers are available.
- e. The sign-language overseer should ask all who volunteer to complete the enclosed Sign-Language Interpreter Survey form so that, if necessary, he can contact them the following year. (The form can be photocopied as needed.) Each interpreter's ability should be noted on the survey form, which should be retained for at least one year.

**Note:** If a brother or sister whose skills and qualifications are not known to the sign-language overseer offers his/her help as an interpreter at an assembly or convention, arrangements can be made to audition such one if more help is needed. However, before the person is used to interpret a part on the programme, at least one member of his/her Congregation Service Committee must confirm his/her good standing in the congregation.

### 3. Assigning Interpreters

- a. The district or circuit overseer (or the Convention Committee if a district convention is coming up) may ask the appointed sign-language overseer to arrange an audition for those willing to interpret at the event if there is any question about their skills.
- b. After determining which interpreters are best qualified, the sign-language overseer should make a schedule of assignments in advance. (Please note: If at all possible, brothers, rather than sisters, should be used for the principal talks.) All assignments should be sent out to the interpreters as soon as possible. Each year, before the convention, he should get renewed approvals from each interpreter's Congregation Service Committee.
- c. When possible, assistant parts, such as experiences, interviews, and demonstrations, should be assigned to separate interpreters. Instruct these interpreters to face the audience while signing any assistant parts, but to face the signing interpreter while waiting their turn.

- d. When preparing for a district convention, six to eight highly skilled interpreters should be chosen (preferably brothers) who could be assigned two main parts per day, besides some assistant parts when needed. Fewer interpreters may suffice when handling a circuit assembly or a special assembly day. If there are only a few highly skilled interpreters in the area, some from other areas could assist. Otherwise, each local interpreter may have to get more than two main parts per day. The lesser skilled interpreters may be used for smaller, easier parts, including assistant parts, only if needed. *The organization wants to provide the best interpreting possible for the entire programme.* Conventions or assemblies are not the place for novices to train or hone their interpreting skills; they can do so in the congregation and in daily conversation with deaf persons.

#### **4. Interpreter's Attire**

- a. The interpreter's appearance should be exemplary, measuring up to the standards set for programme participants on the main platform.
- b. No distracting jewellery, watches, clothing, or long and brightly painted fingernails should be worn.
- c. Solid-coloured clothing contrasting with the interpreter's skin tone should be worn. This will help eliminate distractions caused by busy patterns. Also, clothing that clings to the body should be avoided.

#### **5. Attendants**

- a. If available, brothers who know sign language would be preferred but if none are available then brothers who do not know sign language may be used.
- b. They should control who sits in the designated section. Family members and companions of deaf attendees should be allowed in this area.
- c. Once the music begins, attendants should help clear the aisles and the work area between the audience and the interpreters.
- d. If all or most of the seats in the sign-language section get used, kindly give the best seating to the deaf and their immediate families or helpers. It may be necessary to restrict access to this area. Of course, if there are enough seats even for hearing persons who wish to improve in their use of sign language, and their joining this audience will not overcrowd the designated area, there will be no need for any restricting measures.

#### **6. Chairman Interpreter**

- a. If possible, assign a different interpreter to each morning and afternoon session. (It is strongly recommended that only brothers be used if at all possible.) If this is not possible to assign different brothers to the various sessions, the same brother may be used to interpret for several sessions. His duties will include the following:
  1. Invite all deaf attendees to their seats at the beginning of each session.
  2. Interpret chairman parts and introduce the next speaker.

3. Cue the right interpreter during talks with assistant parts.
4. Pay close attention to the interpreters and prompt them upon request on any missed Scripture citation, statistic, and so forth.
5. Prompt song interpreters, or those prompting the interpreter, in time with the music if they are falling behind.

If necessary, the sign-language overseer can distribute these duties among other interpreters.

## **C. Programme considerations**

### **1. Talk Content**

- a. The sign-language overseer should be alerted to technical, scientific, sexual, or spiritually deep information featured on the programme. While no photocopies of the programme letters or the outlines should be made, a copy of a manuscript talk may be shared with the interpreter. (Please see the box entitled “When Your Talk Is to Be Given Through an Interpreter” on page 55 of the *Ministry School* book.) The information provided will help the sign-language overseer to determine which interpreter he should assign for each talk. The best signers (preferably brothers) should be used for interpreting the talks given by the circuit and district overseers, or by the guest speakers when at special assembly days. Aside from interviews and demonstrations, if a well-qualified sister must be used to interpret any of the programme talks, she should wear a modest and appropriate head covering as a sign of submission to the theocratic arrangement in the Christian congregation. (1 Tim. 2:11, 12) **Note:** This is a change in policy from what is stated in the Question From Readers in the 1977 *Watchtower*, page 383.

### **2. Song Translations**

- a. If your country uses American Sign Language (ASL) as the local sign language, a DVD of the programme songs in ASL can be used. (The DVD for district conventions will also contain the pre-recorded manuscript talk[s] and drama[s].) The DVD may be requested of the branch office.
- b. If the sign language used in your locality does not have pre-recorded songs on video, the branch office may provide the needed songs in video format. If the songs are not available in video format, the branch office or the sign-language overseer should assign one or a few qualified individuals to prepare written translations that can be used during the programme. In this case, the circuit overseer or programme overseer will provide all song numbers in advance. These translations, and not the text from the vernacular songbook, should be used when leading the deaf audience in singing. This will ensure that the song’s message is conveyed. A qualified and exemplary hearing or deaf publisher may be assigned to lead the signing of the songs. **Note:** If available, brothers should be assigned to lead the deaf audience in singing. But if a sister is given this assignment, she should wear a head covering.
- c. It is best for the song prompter to be in the second or third row of the designated seating section, signing directly from the written translation that has been provided. The song signer on the platform has no notes with him; he merely mimics, or

‘mirrors,’ the prompter. This frees the platform signer from having to focus intently on a printed page, which usually restricts his ability to make the appropriate facial expressions. Song signing requires much practice in order to bring out the meaning of the song while making the signing look natural.

- d. Make sure all song signers are exemplary publishers.

### 3. Meetings With Signers

- a. Arrange a pre-assembly/pre-convention meeting to discuss the instructions in this guideline letter. If a meeting is not practical the information may be conveyed by letter.
- b. In order to review the assignments for the day, schedule an on-site meeting with all the interpreters before the special assembly day programme begins, or at the beginning of each day at circuit assemblies or district conventions. This may also provide an opportunity to discuss various acceptable ways of translating key terms and scriptures. Interpreters need warm commendation, encouragement, and guidance in their work.

### 4. Prayers

- a. All prayers should be offered audibly by qualified elders and interpreted into sign language for the benefit of all deaf in attendance. However, the opposite should not be done.
- b. Where possible, brothers should be used for interpreting prayers. If no qualified brother is available and a mature sister must be used, she should wear a head covering as a sign of respect for the theocratic order of headship. (1 Cor. 11:3) **Note:** This is a change in policy from what is stated in the Question From Readers in the 1977 *Watchtower*, page 383.

### 5. Drama at District Conventions

- a. When arranging for interpreting a drama at a district convention, the branch may provide the programme overseer with a copy of the drama script adjusted for sign-language interpreting along with an instruction sheet, as well as a copy of the drama CD recording. Upon receipt of these items, the programme overseer should give them to the sign-language overseer. (Copies should be given also to each Convention Committee member.) The sign-language overseer may make a copy of the adjusted script and instruction sheet for each interpreter being used for the drama. After the convention, the sign-language overseer should return all copies of drama material to the programme overseer for disposal.
- b. Since drama interpreting is very challenging, much preparation and rehearsal is needed. Only the most qualified interpreters should be used.
- c. Please follow closely the instructions that accompany the adjusted drama text.
- d. An assigned drama prompter should sit in front of the interpreters and follow the drama script so as to cue them during the drama regarding (1) who should be signing at a particular time, (2) when each one should enter and exit, and (3) where each one should stand.

- e. It is recommended that the sign-language overseer, the interpreters, and the prompter attend at least one of the rehearsals of the spoken drama.

**D. Department organization**

- a. The sign-language overseer will need an assistant, and probably other brothers as well, to serve as key men on platform duties and in coordinating the attendants, song rehearsals, drama rehearsals (at district conventions only), and so forth. Deaf brothers should be used whenever possible, otherwise qualified hearing brothers who know sign language may be used.

**E. After the district convention**

- a. The sign-language overseer should return all drama scripts, instruction sheets, drama CDs and DVDs, and song notes to the programme overseer or the assembly overseer.
- b. Interpreters should not keep any such originals or copies.

We are interested in getting the observations of the sign-language overseer regarding these arrangements for helping deaf ones to benefit from our assembly and convention programmes. So please include pertinent comments on how things worked out at your locality in your report to the branch office following the circuit or district event.

We trust these general guidelines will be of assistance to all involved in caring for the needs of the deaf in your area. We send our warm Christian love and best wishes.

Your brothers,

*Watch Tower B. & J. Society*  
OF BRITAIN