DEAF AMERICA'S ENCOUNTER WITH METHODISM:  
A BRIEF LOOK AT A CULTURE AND A CHURCH  
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The story of deaf people and their relation to American Methodism is one buried in decades of neglect by hearing historians and their lack of awareness of the rich history, language, and culture of Deaf people.¹ Many hearing people, historians included, continue to view the deaf community as a disability group when the Deaf culture has viewed itself as an ethnic group because of its distinct culture and language. Since the ground breaking linguistic studies of William Stokoe in the early 1960s, many more hearing people are writing about the deaf community as a cultural and ethnic group. While many people who become deaf later in life still consider themselves disabled, most of those people born deaf reject this definition and have maintained an ethnic understanding of themselves. Therefore, it is only natural that there should be a history of the Deaf church as an ethnic ministry within American Methodism.

While the story of Deaf people does not directly intersect with American Methodism until the 1890s, the precedents for religious involvement with deaf people, an independent Deaf congregation, and the attitudes of hearing benefactors date back to the Second Great Awakening. One of the characteristics of this era is the establishment of charitable institutions. The founding of such institutions was connected to a religious sense of duty or benevolence to the poor and neglected of society. As beneficial as this benevolence was for its recipients, the actions of the privileged of society had a deep and lasting shadow of paternalism underlying it.

This love, or benevolence, was more than a general feeling of good will or giving money to the poor or thinking the best of one's neighbor. Love for man was the obligation that Christians had to make others good—through "proper warning, instruction or reproof," to make sinners obey God's will.²

¹The capitalization of the term "Deaf" signifies that person's or class of people's cultural identity with American Deaf culture as contrasted with the term "deaf" which merely indicates hearing loss of some significant degree.  
This combination of benevolence and paternalism was present in the founding of the first charitable institution in the United States, the American Asylum at Hartford for the Education of the Deaf and Dumb, in 1816. The founding of this school for the deaf began with a member of the “Hartford Wits,” an elite group of wealthy men in Hartford, Connecticut. As early as 1811, Mason Cogswell (h) wrote to the Connecticut Assembly expressing hopes for some form of school for his daughter and other deaf children in the state. Interest gathered speed quickly when a young seminarian from Andover Theological Seminary, Thomas H. Gallaudet (h), became interested in the education of Cogswell’s daughter, Alice, while visiting his neighbors, the Cogswells, during a vacation from seminary. After graduation, T. H. Gallaudet agreed to take a trip to England to study deaf education methods with the Braidwood family of schools in London.

The Braidwood schools were all owned and operated by the Braidwood family and used exclusively oralist methods. These methods held to the philosophy that deaf children should be educated to speak as well as possible and taught their subjects through lip reading in order to prepare students to function as if they were hearing. Like most oral schools they were only interested in educating children from wealthy families who could pay the high fees they charged for their services. Also, they wished to keep their methods secret and within the family to protect the growing Braidwood fame and fortune. One of the Braidwoods began teaching deaf children of wealthy landowners in Virginia on a private basis as early as 1812. This effort would eventually fail as John Braidwood (h) was driven from place to place around America because of debts accrued related to the alcoholism which would eventually kill him before he could establish any lasting effort for deaf education in America.

However, the Braidwoods were still well established in England as the premier educators of the deaf in Great Britain. Most likely because of the similarities of the English language and the British origins of New England, T. H. Gallaudet was sent to London to learn the Braidwood methods in 1815. As Deaf folklore tells the story, Gallaudet was given delay after delay and excuse after excuse for not teaching him any of the methods used at the school. After a similar treatment with another Braidwood school in Edinburgh, Scotland,

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4 Another writing convention used in Deaf studies and utilized in this paper is to include the marker “(h)” after the first mention of someone’s name if they are a hearing person. Otherwise, it can be assumed the individual is deaf.
Gallaudet felt discouraged as time was running out on his trip to Europe to learn methods for educating deaf people. While he was in London, the Abbe Roch-Ambroise Sicard (h) and two former students, Laurent Clerc and Jean Masseu, from the Institution Nationale Des Sourds-Muets in Paris were on tour displaying the manualist methods of education throughout England.⁷

This school in Paris was the first public deaf school in the world and had a long history of commitment to the manualist method. Unlike the oralist methods, manualists used sign language to educate deaf students and placed no negative value on being deaf or using sign language. Sicard and his students happened to be touring England at this time because Sicard was an ardent and outspoken French royalist. With Napoleon just returning from Elba to take power from the French monarchy again, Sicard feared for his life.⁸ T. H. Gallaudet had attended several of Sicard’s lectures and met with the Abbe himself on occasion. When Gallaudet finally became discouraged with the selfishness of the Braidwood family, he gained permission from his financial backers to extend his journey and travel to France with the Abbe and his two students to learn their methods. Gallaudet was made welcome there and studied the school’s methods until he convinced one of the school’s teachers, Laurent Clerc, to return to Connecticut with him to establish the first deaf school in America.⁹

Upon their arrival in America, T. H. Gallaudet and Laurent Clerc made a call on a fellow Hartford Wit and the President of Yale University, Timothy Dwight (h). In the words of Clerc, this visit was made at the request of Gallaudet,

[b]ecause the key to federalist philanthropy must be religion, and the crux of the religious argument must be the Christian’s responsibility for benevolence; if Thomas and I [Clerc] were to travel about New England preaching the obligation and feasibility of educating the deaf, then Thomas wanted his doctrine clear and convincing.¹⁰

It seems apparent that the benevolence that was to lead to the founding of the institution that would bring education to the deaf people of America was laced with its share of paternalism. Gallaudet himself related to the students and even the adult graduates of the American Asylum by calling them his children and thinking of himself as their guardian as well as benefactor.¹¹

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⁹Again, these details are extracted from T. H. Gallaudet’s journals cited above.


The sons of Sophia Fowler Gallaudet and her husband T. H. Gallaudet would have a continued influence on the lives of deaf people in America for many years. Their youngest son, Edward Miner Gallaudet (h), was the founder of the National Deaf-Mute College, now Gallaudet University, by federal charter in 1863. This college was the first institution of higher education for deaf people in the world and remains the only four-year liberal arts school specifically designed with the cultural and linguistic needs of deaf students in mind. In 1852, eleven years prior to the founding of the university, T. H. Gallaudet’s eldest son, Thomas Gallaudet (h) established St. Ann’s Protestant Episcopal Church for the Deaf in New York City. While mandatory chapel services had been a part of the lives of deaf students since the inception of their education in America, this was the first Deaf congregation. St. Ann’s served as a model for other Deaf communities who desired to have regular worship and access to the sacraments but found themselves barred from the sanctuary or unable to understand the worship in hearing congregations which depended heavily on the oral/aural acts of preaching and music.

II

American Methodism, like many Protestant churches of the Second Great Awakening, thrived on the energy created by charismatic preaching and a dynamic hymnody. The Methodist movement was multifaceted in its evangelism using everything from camp meetings to tracts, but it was their orality that was most memorable and effective.

For all the tracts and treatises and sermons that Methodist preachers published and read, they were remembered first of all for their preaching and for the spontaneous verbal responses of their congregations—the shouts, the groans, the sobs of persons brought together to express their most interior and private thoughts. These acts and this noise were at the core of the movement.

This comparative disorder in worship was reflective of American Methodism’s organic connection to the lower economic class which found a suitable expression against the rigid order in their lives imposed by the elite class.

American Methodism with its heavy oral emphasis, British roots, and strong connection to an economic class that had little money to spare for benevolence, might appear to be an inhospitable place for the Deaf church and deaf people. However, by the first recorded direct interaction between

Gannon, Deaf Heritage (Silver Spring, Maryland: National Association of the Deaf, 1984), 11-12.


American Methodism and Deaf people, in the early 1890s, Methodism had begun to change. A growing section of the church who identified with more elite and middle class concerns brought a new character to Methodism at the end of the 19th century. This signaled a presence of a section of Methodism which functioned more like the Congregational and Episcopalian elite establishing missions and benevolent institutions.

In 1890, Grace Methodist Episcopal Church granted an Exhorter's license to Philip J. Hasenstab and on April 17, 1890, he was granted a license to preach making him the first deaf man to gain credentials in the Methodist Episcopal Church. Although Hasenstab traveled to Chicago from his teaching job in Jacksonville to lead Bible studies in various homes around the city beginning in 1890, it was not until 1893 that the Methodist Episcopal Church would accept an organized church and class meeting into its structure. The Chicago Missionary Society and the Rock River Conference officially formed the Chicago Mission for the Deaf in 1893 with Hasenstab as the directing pastor. Hasenstab was ordained a deacon in 1894 and an elder in 1899. He had various assistants in ministry including a deaf deaconess named Vina Smith who lived in the Deaconess' Home in Chicago. Consecrated in 1902 by the Rock River Conference, Smith was the first deaf woman to receive credentials for public ministry in any denomination. Smith assisted in worship, class meetings, represented the mission at conferences, and although she could not be ordained by the Methodist Episcopal Church, she occupied the pulpit as early as 1904, when the pastors were traveling to various locations. Another assistant was Henry Rutherford. Ordained a deacon in 1906 and an elder in 1908, Rutherford did a majority of the traveling to locations in the west. For a short time in 1906, another deaf man, Frank E. Philpott, was licensed to preach, as a supply pastor, by the Rock River Conference to cover the locations to the south of Chicago and Laura Sheridan was appointed as a Mission Evangelist. Together, the Chicago mission had regular monthly contact with deaf communities from Ohio to Nebraska. With a Sunday attendance of 150 to 200 in Chicago, widespread outreach, an active Ladies' Aid
Society Chapter, Epworth League Chapter, and a women’s circle, the Chicago Mission was a vibrant and active church. The Chicago Mission began outreach in Cincinnati, Ohio in 1910 and would later establish a deaf church in that city. This church, Cameron Methodist Episcopal Church, obtained its own building in 1932 and named it after their founding leader, deaconess Mary V. Cameron. When Hasenstab died in 1941, his daughter Constance Elmes (h), who attended the University of Chicago Theological School, continued his ministry in the Chicago area and was assisted by Rutherford. Elmes was ordained a local deacon by the Rock River Conference on October 3, 1926, giving her the right to preach, perform baptisms, and assist in the Lord’s Supper within her appointed charge. Then, on October 5, 1930 Elmes was ordained a local elder with the right to administer the Lord’s Supper within her appointed charge. The Chicago Mission for the Deaf was a vibrant Christian community whose members remained in contact with each other by a monthly church newspaper called the Silent Herald. This newspaper contained a sermon, Bible study, the itinerary for the pastoral staff, announcements, and news about the members. The Silent Herald served the same function for its subscribers as the family of newspapers known in the Deaf community as the “little papers.” These “little papers” were published by various deaf schools and Deaf clubs to inform their readers of news in the community and provide a forum for discussion on issues important to the Deaf community that was not found elsewhere. Philip J. Hasenstab was not only the first deaf man to be ordained in the Methodist tradition but also a dedicated pioneer in deaf ministry.

In Baltimore, Daniel E. Moylan established the Eutaw Street Mission for the Deaf in 1896 and the Whatcoat Mission for Colored Deaf in 1901. First ordained a deacon in 1900 by the Methodist Episcopal Church, Moylan later was ordained an elder in 1908 and became a full member of the Baltimore Conference in 1917. In 1912, when Moylan was first made a trial member of the Baltimore Conference, Eutaw St. Mission for the Deaf became Christ Methodist Episcopal Church. Along with these two separate deaf congregations, Moylan also taught at the Maryland School for the Deaf in Frederick, Maryland and the Overlea School for Colored Deaf and Blind in Baltimore.

24 Krafft, A Goodly Heritage (Columbus, Georgia: Brentwood Christian Press, 1989), 82.
31 Johnson with Farris, History (n.p., 1995), 15, passim.
Here he organized and taught religious education classes that are still a part of the ministry of Christ United Methodist Church of the Deaf. Moylan was assisted in his ministry by John A. Branflick. While he was never ordained, Branflick served for more than 25 years as a local pastor and much of his work was done with the Whatcoat Mission. Like the Chicago Mission, the pastors traveled to various locations as far south as Atlanta, Georgia. In addition to his ministry, Moylan was also a leader in the local and national deaf community. He was a co-founder of the National Fraternal Society of the Deaf (the Frat) which was established in 1901 to provide insurance for deaf people who were often unfairly discriminated against by insurance companies. The Frat later became one of the major social clubs of the deaf community along with the National Association of the Deaf. After his death in 1943, Moylan was succeeded by Louis Foxwell Sr. (h) who served as pastor of Christ and Whatcoat until 1974. Under the leadership of Foxwell, Christ MEC and Whatcoat Mission for Colored Deaf merged into one congregation. This church was the first racially integrated church in the Baltimore Conference. Christ United Methodist Church of the Deaf celebrated its 100th anniversary in 1995 and has written a full history of its first 100 years.

The 1900s also saw the rise of missionary efforts for the deaf in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. The Crussell-Freeman Mission for the Deaf was established at St. Mark’s Methodist Episcopal Church in Atlanta, Georgia. This Mission began as a Bible study in 1902 with five people and grew to 250 by 1949. The Florida Conference also established a mission for the deaf in 1914 led by Frank Philpott, who had been active in the Chicago Mission. This mission grew to an itinerant circuit of preaching stops which covered the state of Florida. Philpott was ordained a deacon in 1928 and elder in 1931 in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South.

III

The foundation of independent deaf churches with deaf leadership in the Methodist Episcopal Church coincides with the establishment of deaf clubs and societies in America. This simultaneous generation of private deaf gathering places can be accredited to one of the darkest events in Deaf history. In 1880, an international congress of educators of the deaf convened in Milan,
Italy and passed by an overwhelming vote eight resolutions, the first of which set the tone for the rest.

The Convention, considering the incontestable superiority of articulation over signs in restoring the deaf-mute to society and giving him a fuller knowledge of language, declares that the oral method should be preferred to that of signs in the education and instruction of deaf-mutes. 38

This conference was a tightly controlled event by oralist educators and is viewed by most historians as a miscarriage of justice whereby oralist educators simply affirmed their views and gave them legitimacy for promoting their methods. First, the congress was more international in name than in its constituency. Of the 164 participants, 87 were from Italy, 56 from France, 8 from England, 5 from the United States, and 8 from other countries. 39 Only a single delegate, James Denison, from the United States was deaf himself. In the aftermath of Milan, this type of chauvinistic invasion of oralists swept through deaf schools in Europe firing or demoting deaf teachers and replacing them with hearing people who could fulfill the “new” methods of oralism. While the tidal wave of oralism was slightly delayed in America by a strong deaf community and the support of E. M. Gallaudet, the oralists, led by Alexander Graham Bell and his fortune from the Volta Prize for his invention of the telephone won the day and oralism began to displace deaf culture and sign language from the residential schools. 40

The shock of the Milan Resolutions of 1880 did not come as a total surprise to the deaf community in America. They had seen a rise in the power of oralists and a steady decline in the attention given to the concerns of deaf people on the matter of deaf education. A few months before the Milan congress was to convene, deaf people from twenty-one states formed the National Association of the Deaf (NAD). 41 Along with the aforementioned, National Fraternal Society of the Deaf, NAD established chapters in almost every state and worked to create a space for deaf leadership as it was forced from the schools. The leaders of these clubs were primarily the deaf elite who aspired to middle class values and looked down upon the behaviors of poor deaf who resorted to begging and peddling fingerspelling cards to make money. 42 For this reason there was always a section of the deaf community that did not feel welcome in NAD and Frat gatherings. Such discomfort gave impetus for the founding of local deaf clubs which were often comprised of more working class deaf people. In these clubs, deaf people exchanged the news of the day, found out about events in the city and nation that were not accessible through the printed word because of a lack of English literacy. Perhaps most importantly, the local deaf clubs were a safe place to use sign language and be deaf without apology.

38 Gannon, Deaf Heritage (Silver Spring, Maryland: National Association of the Deaf, 1981), 63.
40 Lane, When the Mind Hears (New York: Random House, 1984), 394–414.
Although Hasenstab and Moylan were both part of the deaf elite, their churches remained much like the local clubs where the “underside” of the deaf community gathered. A young woman only referred to as Roberta who also was born with a cleft lip and disfigured face, once came to Philip Hasenstab’s wife, Georgia, contemplating suicide. A young deaf-blind man attended services at the Chicago Mission and used signs and tactile fingerspelling for communication. Another woman, Maggie Jenks, who was biracial also attended the Chicago Mission and at times articulated her anger concerning her “ancestor who had crossed the color line and made her an outsider to either race.”

Fellowship was crucial to the church experience and sign language was honored as the natural language of deaf people. The plethora of women’s groups, young people’s meetings, class meetings, and social events are evidence that like in much of the deaf clubs, the community was a place where deaf people socialized and exchanged news and opinions with one another. This function remains a strong characteristic of United Methodist churches of the Deaf today as fellowship often continues for hours after the worship service ends. The Deaf church remains a sacred space for the deaf community where deafness is the norm and no apologies need to be made for being who we are created to be.

IV

Both Hasenstab and Moylan literally gave their lives to their ministry working until a few years before their deaths. Unfortunately, the next generation of pastors in deaf ministry would be hearing people. In Chicago, Rev. Constance E. Hasenstab Elms, the eldest daughter of Philip and Georgia Hasenstab, took leadership of the Chicago Mission. The Mission seems to have lost much of its focus and shortly after that the Silent Herald was not archived and the story of the Chicago Mission becomes obscure until it ceased to be an independent church and became an interpreted ministry of the Chicago Temple congregation in 1970. However, much of the preaching circuit in Illinois remains a connected network of interpreted ministries. In Baltimore, Moylan was followed by the Rev. Louis Foxwell and other hearing pastors in Baltimore and the church lost much of its status in the deaf culture. Attendance began to dwindle and the church began to struggle.

A new day began for the deaf community when William Stokoe began publishing his linguistic research on American Sign Language (ASL) in the early 1960s. This research was the first major scientific recognition by hear-

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ing people that ASL is a true language in its own regard and not merely a corrup
ted form of English. With this new day, came a new birth of pride and self awareness in the deaf community that did not pass unnoticed by hearing people. Through the next two decades, empowerment models of leadership were being developed and implemented with ethnic and language minorities. The United Methodist Church was no stranger to these models in their minority language ministries and their relation with the deaf community followed much the same pattern. In 1975, Rev. Earl Grose (h), who had been an assis
tant of Foxwell at Christ United Methodist Church of the Deaf moved to Pasadena, Maryland and began a deaf ministry at Magothy United Methodist Church. By 1982 the Magothy ministry was large enough to separate and establish itself as an independent Deaf church, Magothy United Methodist Church of the Deaf, with Rev. Kathleen M. Black (h). This was the first inde
pendent Deaf church in Methodism since the churches founded by the deaf leaders at the turn of the century. Slowly, a willingness and awareness grew in The United Methodist Church and deaf people and pastors in deaf ministry began to form networks for support and the exchange of ideas.

Much of the current growth in deaf ministry in the United Methodist Church is encouraged and supported by the United Methodist Congress of the Deaf (UMCD). Organized in 1978 as an independent caucus within The United Methodist Church, the UMCD hopes to make The United Methodist Church more accessible to deaf, deafened, and hard of hearing people. While this caucus is primarily an information and resource network, it has successfully lobbied for major petitions at the 1988 and 1992 sessions of the General Conference of The United Methodist Church. In 1988, a petition was passed to mandate the development of congregations for deaf ministry in all areas of The United Methodist Church. The passage of this petition began the process of holding The United Methodist Church accountable for deaf ministries. As a result of the petition, two handbooks have been developed independently of each other to assist churches to understand Deaf culture and deaf ministry. That All May Understand is a handbook distributed by the Christian Board of Publication and Signs of Solidarity is distributed by the General Board of Global Ministries of the United Methodist Church.

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5Johnson with Parris, History (n.p., 1995), 70.
7Kathy Black, Signs of Solidarity: Ministry with Persons Who are Deaf, Deafened, and Hard of Hearing (New York: General Board of Global Ministries of The United Methodist Church, 1994), 11. This publication is available through the United Methodist Service Center in Cincinnati.
9Debbie W. Parvin, That All May Understand: Ministering with Persons Who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing (St. Louis, Missouri: Christian Board of Publication, 1992). See above citation for Signs of Solidarity.
In addition to the 1988 petition, the General Conference also passed another major petition in 1992. This petition created the National Committee on Deaf Ministries (NCDM) in The United Methodist Church. This committee has met with UMCD officers and identified the major goals for the 1992–1996 quadrennium. These goals include making the Disciple Bible Study accessible to sign language users, establishing networks for resources and curriculum, and assisting conferences in the establishing of deaf ministries. The 1996 General Conference acted to continue the NCDM for the next quadrennium and the UMCD is preparing for its 25th anniversary celebration.

Deaf people and the Deaf church have been a neglected ethnic portion of American history. The historians of Methodism are not exempt from this neglect. Rare is the reference to deaf history in histories of Methodism. However, a more complete study of Methodism in America would not only include the stories of Deaf Methodists but use them to analyze the impact of Methodism on ethnic groups and the exchange and interaction between cultures in the church. There are numerous gifts to be found which will only be uncovered when we approach the future together, Deaf and hearing alike in the spirit of the Christian hymn, “Now thank we all our God, with heart, and hands, and voices.”

53 “Now Thank We All Our God” from the United Methodist Hymnal, 1989, #102. Emphasis added.