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## THE CHURCH'S WORK WITH THE DEAF AS AN INTERFACE BETWEEN CHURCH AND SOCIETY

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In this article, we examine the Church's work with the deaf in Finland from the beginning of the 1900s to the beginning of the 1980s. We look at the objectives of the Church and of society as well as the position of the deaf throughout different eras using a genetic-historical approach. Two particular issues are connected to the time period in question: racial hygiene and the shift to oralism. At the end of the 1800s, the concept of racial hygiene gained support throughout Europe, leading deafness, among other handicaps, to be categorized as a defective characteristic. Furthermore, there was a change in how people related to sign language. Through oralism, the medium for teaching the deaf changed from signing to the spoken word, and sign language was forbidden. This resulted in a lower level of general knowledge in the deaf population and a weakening of its position in working life. These particular issues caused changes to how people related to deafness. Earlier, the measure of a good citizen was that they could support themselves. In contrast, the demands of good citizenship during this period grew; good citizens were to be healthy, both mentally and physically. They were to be able to communicate through the spoken word; the deaf's own language was discountenanced. However, sign language lived on in deaf communities. Moreover, the Church's work with the deaf in Finland was always carried out in sign language. This work was shared between the Church and the state. The main responsibilities of pastors and diaconia workers working with the deaf were their social and pastoral care, as well as spreading the gospel and teaching. The social work being done with the deaf currently is the responsibility of society, while the Church is responsible for spiritual work. The position of the deaf has improved. There have been changes in the church's work with the deaf as well. The position of the deaf has changed from being a passive receiver of care to an active participant and actor in society.

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**Kirchliche Aktivitäten für Gehörlose im Spiegel der Rolle von Kirche und Gesellschaft:** In diesem Artikel werden die kirchlichen Aktivitäten für Gehörlose von 1900 bis Anfang der 1980er Jahre in Finnland untersucht. Es wird ein Überblick über Beweggründe der Kirche und der Gesellschaft sowie über die Situation der Gehörlosen unter genetisch-historischem Aspekt in verschiedenen Zeitabschnitten geboten. Zwei Themen sind für den untersuchten Zeitraum hervorzuheben: Rassenhygiene und Verbreitung des Oralismus. Gegen Ende des 19. Jahrhunderts war das Konzept von der Rassenhygiene in ganz Europa breit akzeptiert, Gehörlosigkeit und andere Behinderungen wurden demzufolge als unerwünschte Merkmale betrachtet. Gleichzeitig veränderte sich auch die Einstellung der Gesellschaft gegenüber der Gebärdensprache. Mit der Verbreitung des Oralismus wurde in der Erziehung von Gehörlosen die Gebärdensprache durch die Lautsprache abgelöst, die Verwendung der Gebärdensprache wurde weitestgehend untersagt. Dies hatte zur Folge, dass das Bildungsniveau der gehörlosen Bevölkerung sank und sich ihre Position und ihre Chancen auf dem Arbeitsmarkt verschlechterten. Dadurch veränderte sich auch die Einstellung der Gesellschaft gegenüber ihren gehörlosen Mitgliedern. Zu früheren Zeiten galten diejenigen als Musterbürger, die für ihren Lebensunterhalt sorgen konnten. Nun jedoch wurde die Latte etwas höher gelegt: An gute Bürger wurde die Erwartung gerichtet, sowohl über geistige als auch über körperliche Gesundheit zu verfügen. Gehörlose mussten also befähigt sein, in der Lautsprache zu kommunizieren, da die eigenständige Sprache der Gehörlosen immer stärker abgelehnt wurde. Die Gebärdensprache ist aber in der Gehörlosengemeinschaft dennoch erhalten geblieben. Zudem hat die Kirche in Finnland bei ihrer Arbeit mit Gehörlosen immer die Gebärdensprache verwendet. Kirche und Staat teilten die Aufgaben untereinander auf. Die Pastoren und die diakonischen Mitarbeiter, die mit Gehörlosen arbeiteten, waren neben Predigt und Lehrtätigkeit an der Schule vor allem für die soziale und seelsorgerliche Versorgung der ihnen anvertrauten Menschen verantwortlich. Heute übernimmt der Staat die sozialen Aufgaben im Zusammenhang mit gehörlosen Menschen, während die Kirche für die spirituelle Arbeit verantwortlich ist. Die Situation von Gehörlosen hat sich verbessert. Auch in der kirchlichen Arbeit mit Gehörlosen kam es zu Veränderungen. Gehörlose sind heute nicht mehr passive Hilfsempfänger, sondern aktive Beteiligte und gesellschaftliche Akteure.

**Schlüsselbegriffe:** Behinderung, Ehegesetz, Oralismus, Seelsorge für Gehörlose, Rassenhygiene, Gebärdensprache, Sterilisation, Aktivitäten für Gehörlose

The work with the deaf of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Finland is signed spiritual work among the deaf. Currently, there are seven pastors and over 20 diakonia workers involved in this work. However, the road to this point has had many turns. The Church's workers working with the deaf have had to simultaneously respond to the needs and wishes of the Church, society and the deaf themselves.

Finland was a part of the Russian Empire at the end of the 1800s. The ruler of the Grand Duchy of Finland was the Tsar of Russia. Nevertheless, Finland maintained a position of autonomy and its broad rights of self-government also included the right to its own Lutheran religion. As the state church, the Lutheran Church had a stable position and relatively liberal operational possibilities; 98% of Finns belonged to the church. At the turn of the century, the political situation was some-

times restless but that did not threaten the position of the Church. On the contrary, it confirmed the Church's position as the safekeeper of unity. Administratively, the country was divided into four dioceses (HYVÄRINEN 1913, 5; MURTORINNE 1992, 15–18, 318–20, 394–96; JUSSILA 2006, 16–18).

The purpose of this paper is to provide a review of the work carried out by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Finland with the deaf from its inception at the end of the 1800s to the 1980s. More specifically, we will explore issues for which society and the church had common goals, and those where their objectives diverged. Furthermore, we will examine how the concept of good citizenship was defined in different eras and how this affected the position of the deaf in society at different times.

The research method used for this article was genetic-historical and is based on archive materials about the Church's work with the deaf. The most important sources are the worker's reports, documents concerning work with the deaf in chapters and parishes, as well as minutes from Synod meetings and parliamentary sessions.<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Workers to lighten the burden of those who are suffering

If the Bible says that the harvest is plentiful, then it is especially so for deaf mutes and other wretched people with sensory handicaps, and therefore a need for our pastors and others who pity the wretchedness of those with sensory handicaps to cry unto the Lord to send workers who would try to ease the heavy burden of those miserable beings. (*Jyväskylän pappeinkokouksen pöytäkirja* [The minutes of the Jyväskylä General Synod meeting] 1898, 199)

'Those miserable creatures with sensory handicaps' and their exclusion from the gospel was a theme that was repeatedly raised in discussion during the 1890s. This topic was timely for two reasons. The first one was related to the transition occurring in society. The industrial revolution was underway in Finland, as in the rest of the world, and an industrializing country needed an educated workforce at its disposal. Therefore, there was a need to improve the population's education and this need also led to more attention being paid to the situation of special education. In Finland, the education of the deaf and the blind had been started on the initiative of individuals and it had proven to be fairly worthwhile; the majority of deaf and blind people who received an education were able to support themselves and become productive members of society. Because education gave these sensorily impaired people 'back to society' in a way, both education and religious authorities felt it was justified to develop their education. Different stakeholders had different reasons for this, and these reasons sometimes diverged, but the common goal was to see that all deaf and blind people were provided with an education (HALILA

<sup>1</sup> More extensive research on the subject has been done in L. RANTALA'S (2010) doctoral dissertation.

1949, 1:380, 2:93–94; GARBE 1966, 2–5; HARJULA 1996, 75; MCLOUGHLIN 1987, 45; MARKS 1999, 80–82; VEHMAS 2005, 63–64).

The other dialogue came from within the Church. At the turn of the century, the challenge was to develop the Church's social work activities. Upon studying the activities of the Church's charity work, it was discovered that the sensorily impaired, in other words the deaf, the blind and the simple, had often been unreached by this charitable work and an even more significant shortcoming was their exclusion from pastoral care. In the case of the deaf, this exclusion had up until that point been caused by a lack of a common language. However, when the number of schools for the deaf grew, so did the amount of deaf people who could sign. This new situation made it possible to begin signed pastoral care for the deaf. In fact, many initiatives were taken starting in 1896 to establish pastorships for pastoral work with the deaf (KANSANAHO & HISSA 1974, 56; RANTALA 2010, 35–48).

The discussion in the Church about work with the deaf coincided with two changes. The municipal legal reforms of 1865 transferred the relief of the poor from the Church to the municipalities. This resulted in the separation of pastoral care and social work, which resulted in an estrangement between the two activities. The other change resulted from the Church law reforms of 1869, which saw the removal of decrees concerning the Church and poor relief. In turn, this meant that the social work connected to pastoral care was removed from the Church; the Church not only gave up its poor relief work but also the social work related to it. This presented new challenges to the Church to develop its welfare work (KETTUNEN 2001, 24–25). It is interesting to examine the connections between social work, welfare, pastoral care, teaching and spreading the Gospel during the following decades in the domain of the Church's work with the deaf.

## **2. The civil rights of the deaf in the Church and in society**

At the beginning of the 1900s, many influential people in the Church and society unanimously agreed on the need for the education and pastoral care of the deaf, as these activities were seen as being connected. From the Church's perspective, schools for the deaf gave deaf people a language and in doing so, made it possible for them to participate in spiritual activities. From the schools' perspective, the Church's activities supported the religious education provided in schools. More concretely, this connection was visible through the teaching of confirmation to the deaf, which occurred for many decades in concert with the schools for the deaf. Organizing the education and pastoral care for the deaf was mutually beneficial for both parties (RANTALA 2010, 31–33). At the turn of the century, a more critical in-

spection of this dialogue brought forth common perceptions that people held of the deaf at the time. The opinions voiced were often very emotional. This phenomenon was not only Finnish; it was similar in other parts of Europe. Synonyms for the word 'deaf' were 'miserable', 'the unfortunate' or 'hard luck children'.<sup>2</sup> Applications were based on pity and the deaf were presented as a group needing help and guardianship. Only seldom were the personal opinions of deaf people made public. More commonly, officials like teachers, pastors and doctors presented themselves as experts (LEWIS 2007, 50–54; RANTALA 2010, 50–51).

The deaf were often considered as minors, whose opinions had no value. Other people living with handicaps were also treated in this manner (HARJULA 1996, 11)<sup>3</sup> and therefore, were kept as people with lesser rights. However, the borders defining handicaps varied at times. In agricultural societies, there were many tasks available which did not require literacy or oral skills. However, in an industrial society, the definition of handicapped changed. When an individual's worth was determined by his productivity, everyone who was incapable of productive work was considered handicapped (WIDELL 1993, 460–61; HARJULA 1996, 12; MARKS 1999, 98–99; VEHMAS 2005, 22, 54–55; LEWIS 2007, 64–65).

Although citizens were appreciated based on their economic productivity in society, the Church, in contrast, emphasized the Christian perspective that every person had value because they were the creation of God. Despite this fundamental perspective, the question of an infirm or handicapped person as an image of God was more complicated in practice. The opinion that a person suffering from a handicap was being punished for their sins existed concurrently with the one above. It was because of this that handicapped people were often considered defective or damaged, as the consequences of either their own or of society's sins. Furthermore, a particularly problematic question was connected with the deaf: how should the scripture in Romans describing belief springing from listening to the word of God be interpreted in relation to deaf people (PLIT 1984, 35; HARJULA 1996, 39–40, 67–69; VEHMAS 2005, 26–30; LEWIS 2007, 60–69, 76–84)?

Because deafness was usually discovered only after the first year of a child's life, the deaf were commonly baptized as children. In contrast, their rights to communion were questioned. Luther had already noticed this. He emphasized that the sacraments were God's gift to everyone, including the deaf. This opinion was also upheld in Finnish Churches. Being familiar with the tenements of Christian faith was a prerequisite for participation in communion, but the mute, infirm and feeble-minded were relieved of this requirement (*Kirkkolaki* [Church Law] 1873, §67; PLIT 1984, 35–38; HARJULA 1996, 82–83).

According to Church law, the deaf had the same rights as other parishioners, but they were absolved from demands that required commitments. This was com-

<sup>2</sup> For example, *Kuopion hiippakunnan pappeinkokouksen pöytäkirja* [The minutes of the Kuopio Diocesan Synod] 1896, 328–44; LADD 2003, 114; LEWIS 2007, 40–42.

<sup>3</sup> Typical expressions of the day were for example 'defective' and 'pitiful'. The expression 'handicapped' replaced the previous terms only in the 1970s.

mon elsewhere in Europe, too. Contrastingly, the deaf had lesser rights in society than other citizens, and, for example in an inheritance situation, were left in an unequal position compared to others. What is noteworthy is that other sensorily deprived members of society, namely the blind, had almost full societal rights and responsibilities. The difference resulted from the opinion that deafness was an obstacle to development. At that time, the understanding was that the ear was the most important learning organ. Blindness on the other hand was not considered a handicap that weakened intelligence and learning ability (PLIT 1984, 26; SACKS 1989, 12–13; ABRAMOV 1993, 200–02; HARJULA 1996, 60, 73).

According to the law, the deaf had the right to marry as long as they understood the core teachings of Christian beliefs and were able to take care of their family. Despite this basic principle, the reaction to deaf people marrying each other was often one of rejection because it was believed that deafness was hereditary (PLIT 1984, 40–41).

### 3. Working with the deaf in a hearing society

#### 3.1. An occupation with a multi-stakeholder working field

The years-long debate on organizing pastoral care for the deaf was finally resolved when the Senate formed two posts for pastors to work with the deaf in 1906. The pastors carried out their work under the supervision of the cathedral chapter but their salaries were paid by the state. This solution demonstrates that the Church and society had joint interests and close cooperation. The decision was also affected by the fact that there were only a few deaf persons in many of the parishes, so signed pastoral care had to be organized on a wider scale, across parish borders (RANTALA 2010, 35–50).<sup>4</sup>

The job of the ‘travelling pastors’ was the pastoral care of approximately 3000<sup>5</sup> deaf people around Finland (SALMI & LAAKSO 2005, 32). Pastoral care, in this context, was understood quite broadly as can be noted from the instructions the pastors were given. According to the instructions, the pastors were responsible for worship, ceremonies and teaching the catechism in their own parish territory. They also directed the deaf to schools and were responsible for taking care of all of their ‘physical and spiritual’ needs. The work of pastors for the deaf was organized in a similar way in all of the Scandinavian countries<sup>6</sup> (SANDER 1994, 20; ERIKSSON

<sup>4</sup> The Church’s work with the deaf was considered to go beyond the borders of the parish, as was pastoral work done in prisons and with soldiers. For this reason, it was considered appropriate that the state paid for their care, as it paid for the operations of diocesan chapters.

<sup>5</sup> The estimate of the numbers of deaf persons at the time corresponds to later research, which indicates that they made up one thousandth of the population.

<sup>6</sup> *Porvoon hiippakunnan tuomiokapitulin kiertokirje* [The Bulletin of the Porvoo Diocese Cathedral Chapter] 421/12.3.1908; *Turun arkkihiippakunnan tuomiokapitulin kiertokirje* [The Archdiocese of Turku’s Bulletin] 995/30.7.1908.

1999, 116; ERLANDSEN 2004, 7–8). The list of activities indicates that the work that the Church has carried out with the deaf has been broader than the spiritual work associated with it since its inception. The state, which paid the pastors, decreed on paper mainly social work responsibilities. Pastors working with the deaf were the only workers with sign language skills for over half a century.

The political and national events of Finland's history had little effect on the structure of the work carried out with the deaf. Finland became independent towards the end of the First World War, in 1917. This effected no change in the work, which carried on in the independent state as it had before. The small number of pastors working with the deaf sparked a debate after the Second World War regarding their broad responsibilities (MURTORINNE 1995, 137–38; RANTALA 2010, 81, 142–43, 236–38). Because they were paid by the state but the work was the 'Church's work with the deaf', it was justified to question their work from both society's and the Church's perspectives.

As society changed, the amount of social work and care continuously increased. The number of social workers working with the hearing grew, while signing work remained the responsibility of three church employees. In this situation, many individual parishes noticed the weakened position of the deaf and established social work positions specifically for working with the deaf. Concurrently, the Church criticized society for its lack of investment in the care of the deaf (RANTALA 2010, 119–24, 135). The government felt that it was enough that it paid the salaries of the pastors working with the deaf. The Church, in contrast, strongly argued that society, not the Church, was responsible for organizing social services for the deaf in their own language.

The activities of pastors (and since 1945, diakonia workers) working with the deaf took place within the framework of a hearing society. Pastors travelled within their districts, holding worship services for the deaf, and providing them with pastoral care. At the same time, they helped the deaf with many other social things, such as finding work or accommodation, guiding them in occupational choices and acting as interpreters in a variety of situations. The deaconess' activities were particularly oriented towards nursing. Deaf people often travelled long distances to have deaconess workers with sign language skills accompany them as interpreters to a doctor or to a hospital. There were many social and service tasks as well. Both the pastors and the diakonia workers often felt a conflict in that there was very little time left for spiritual work. Furthermore, a lack of materials to be used in signing work made things difficult. What was also distinctive was the need for continuous training; the education for pastors as well as diakonia workers proved to be too narrow for church workers involved in multi-situational signing work (RANTALA 2010, 95–99, 141–42, 161–66).<sup>7</sup>

The changes in the Church and in society affected both those working with the deaf and those working with other groups in the same way. When comparing the

<sup>7</sup> *Kansanterveyslaki* [The National Health Law] of 1972 transferred nursing responsibilities to the state. This transfer was not as noticeable in the work done with the deaf as in other parish work, because there were few to no nursing staff skilled in signing.

pastoral care of the deaf with other activities of the Church, one can find similarities but also differences. At the beginning of the 1900s, worship services were the main form of gathering in the parish, for both the deaf and for the hearing. In the second half of the century, the focus began to shift to smaller gatherings, such as Bible study groups, sewing circles and mission groups. Additionally, organizing activities for children and youth was also considered important, even though in the case of the deaf this was challenging because of their small numbers in each locality.

Thus the work with the deaf included social and pastoral care as well as spreading the gospel (evangelizing) and teaching. The difference between social and pastoral care, which was determined in principle in the new Church law of 1869, had no effect in practice on the work done with the deaf. When the form of work was called pastoral care, it distinguished itself from other special forms of pastoral care in that its core functions included teaching and spreading the word of God as well. In this sense, as a title for an area of work, it was more analogous with the pastoral care in prisons than with pastoral care for the sick or with family counselling services. The traditional question of whether social work was pastoral care or if pastoral work was social care was not relevant in the work with the deaf; these two aspects were inseparable. This work involved both simultaneously (see KETTUNEN 2001, 24–28).

In addition to this, the Church's work with the deaf encountered completely different issues than the Church's work in other spheres. There are two particular phenomena that affected work with the deaf deserving examination: the issue of racial hygiene and the position of sign language in society. These two issues demonstrated how the Church's work with the deaf had to shuttle between two realities, between the reigning and conflicting opinions in society and in the Church.

### **3.2. Racial hygiene changes how people react to handicaps and to the deaf**

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the deaf had established their position as accepted members of society, at least in principle. Through education, the deaf had taken their place in society. A large number of deaf people were supporting themselves and their families, which was often presented as the measure of a good citizen (HARJULA 1996, 14, 45; VEHMAS 2005, 63–64). According to this definition, people with lesser abilities were not automatically granted value or position in society. It was conditional and demonstrated a concept of humanity where a person had to earn their place. This perspective was in conflict with the concept held by the Church, which holds that every person has inalienable human worth without needing to earn that right.

Nevertheless, public debate on this issue was soon refuelled. The concept of racial hygiene born in the wake of genetics was based on the position that through degeneration, the human race would eventually stagnate. The father of the degeneration concept was French psychiatrist Bénédict Augustin Morelia. His idea spread quickly throughout Europe. In Finland, it gained broad support already at the be-

ginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (MAZUMDAR 1992, 58–59; HARJULA 1996, 130–31; MARKS 1999, 33–35).<sup>8</sup>

Through education and propaganda, people were led to believe that degeneration meant the weakening of genetic material. It was the responsibility of society to stop the spread of degeneration by preventing the people carrying these harmful characteristics from reproducing. Those classified in this way included people suffering from mental illness and idiots, epileptics, alcoholics and criminals, as well as the deaf and persons suffering from hereditary diseases or handicaps (BARKER 1989, 348–50; MATTILA 1999, 88–89).

Preparation of a new Marriage Act began in the 1920s when the atmosphere was very favourable towards racial hygiene. The purpose of the act was to prevent marriages that were disastrous from society's point of view. Furthermore, from the 'racial hygiene' point of view, it was necessary to limit those marriages that might bring about degeneration in future generations (*Ehdotus uudeksi* [Suggestion for the new Marriage Act] 1924, 53–55). With the help of legislation, the elimination of both disabilities and the possibility of such were being attempted.

The draft of the proposed act forbade the marriage of close relatives and explicitly denied those suffering from mental illness or idiocy the right to marry. Conditional barriers to marriage included hereditary epilepsy and sexually transmitted diseases. The committee drawing up the proposed act was also convinced of the disastrous effects of tuberculosis and alcoholism on the next generation, but it finally came to the conclusion that these proposed barriers to marriage would be too limiting to an individual's freedom (*Ehdotus uudeksi* 1924, 73–75).

From the 'racial hygiene' perspective, deafness was a borderline case. It was a question of a small minority, which was not usually connected with degenerative traits. However, deafness, along with other disabilities, was still a stigma, which was considered to point towards a person's degeneration. Out of all of the sensory handicaps, deafness was the one associated with the most negativity. Traits that were considered typical of the deaf were childishness, frivolity and the inability to make judgements. For this reason, the deaf were seen to be in constant danger of succumbing to evil and moral disaster (PICK 1989, 50–52; HARJULA 1996, 12, 70–74, 142–43; MATTILA 1999, 28).

The committee preparing the act considered congenital deafness hereditary. Moreover, the offspring of deaf people were often observed to have 'destructive effects' such as idiocy or other congenital defects. The committee was aware of the fact that deafness was not considered as an impediment to marriage anywhere else and physicians had not presented anything of the sort. Nevertheless, preventing the marriage of those suffering from congenital deafness was proposed (*Ehdotus uudeksi* 1924, 76; HARJULA 1996, 142–43; SALMI & LAAKSO 2005, 200–04).

The preparation process of the new act showed that racial hygiene was generally

<sup>8</sup> Racial hygiene, or eugenics, has been particularly thought of as a German and Nazi concept but the phenomenon is noticeably more widespread. Hitler was a supporter of racial hygiene but he was not its inventor (MATTILA 1999, 19–20, 27).

accepted in society. When the new act was discussed during the general meeting of the Ecclesiastical Council in 1923, no one questioned that racial hygiene was its starting point. When it was debated in Parliament, many speakers emphasized the importance of racial hygiene to the future of the nation. Society's unequivocal responsibility was to prevent those marriages that would possibly result in 'inferior' offspring (*Suomen evankelis-luterilaisen kirkon* 1924, 389–91; MATTILA 1999, 257).<sup>9</sup> The new Marriage Act came into effect in 1929. According to the law, two congenitally deaf people who wanted to marry had to apply for a special permission from the president.<sup>10</sup>

From the deaf community's point of view, the discussion on racial hygiene marked a new way of thinking. Previously, the disabled were protected from society but through racial hygiene, society was now being protected from the disabled. The Marriage Act brought forth strong criticism from the deaf community. The deaf accepted the principle of racial hygiene in most cases but they did not consider deafness as a fatal phenomenon to the nation. They felt that it was incorrect and insulting to compare deafness with alcoholism or mental illness. The deaf emphasized that they, as people earning their own livelihood, were not a burden for society (HARJULA 1996, 96–97, 148–49; MATTILA 1999, 33, 270–72; SALMI & LAAKSO 2005, 204–05; RANTALA 2010, 105).

In practice, the new Marriage Act proved to be problematic from the deaf community's perspective. If two deaf people planned on getting married, they had to obtain a doctor's certificate proving that one of them had become deaf after birth. This was often impossible for a doctor to prove, thereby making deafness an impediment to marriage. If there was no doctor's certificate, special permission had to be applied for from the president. Permission was not necessarily granted, even in situations where there were already hearing children born from that particular couple, proving that deafness was not hereditary in their case. In addition, the deaf community felt that the basis for the act was already problematic; the law was attempting to reduce the number of deaf children by limiting the marriage of deaf people, even though most deaf children were actually born to hearing parents (MATTILA 1999, 273; JOKINEN 2000, 92).<sup>11</sup>

To complement the objectives of racial hygiene, a sterilization act was formed in 1935 to control reproduction outside of marriage. During the drafting of the act, there was a debate on whether to sterilize those suffering from congenital deafness but they were finally left outside the scope of the act. However, the act allowed voluntary sterilization for those who feared that they would produce inferior offspring (MATTILA 1999, 302, 312).<sup>12</sup>

Changes to the law also appeared in the work of pastors working with the deaf. Like the deaf community, pastors criticized the comparison of the deaf with the groups deemed handicapped by the Marriage Act, as well as the difficulty of getting

<sup>9</sup> Cf. *Valtiopäivien pöytäkirjat* [Parliamentary session minutes] 1929, 55–62, 66, 261.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. *Asetuskokoelma* [Code of Statutes] 234/13.6.1929, §12.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. *Asetuskokoelma* 234/13.6.1929, §12.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. *Asetuskokoelma* 227–28/13.6.1935.

permission to marry. In the case where a deaf couple refused sterilization, they were forced to live together out of wedlock, which was regarded as an immoral lifestyle. According to records, pastors working with the deaf seldom handled this problem (RANTALA 2010, 105–08).

There is little yet known about the sterilization of the deaf. Their numbers are impossible to trace because statistics on this information were not kept. The issue was debated within the deaf community for a considerable amount of time. Oral accounts repeatedly brought up situations where the pastor or the deaf person's parents would encourage them to apply for sterilization in order to get permission to marry. For many, the experience is still painful (SALMI & LAAKSO 2005, 209; RANTALA & KUUSI 2008, 26).<sup>13</sup> It seems that many deaf people were pressured into making a decision. They did not necessarily understand the implications of the procedure or its irreversibility. Furthermore, they did not have enough information with which they could have opposed the authorities' arguments. According to the accounts of the deaf, the pastor's role in matters of promoting racial hygiene was more active than was previously assumed.

The deaf community was active in working towards changing the unjust Marriage Act. In 1944, the changes made to the act allowed those who were born deaf to marry. Only hereditary deafness continued to be an impediment to marriage. Racial hygiene concerning the deaf ended rather late in Finland, as the obstacles relating to deaf marriage were finally eliminated in 1969 (SALMI & LAAKSO 2005, 206–09; RANTALA 2010, 108–10).<sup>14</sup>

The most radical racial hygiene occurred in Germany, where physical and psychological disabilities led to extermination in some cases. These actions were justified for economic and medical reasons. In relation to the deaf, the racial hygiene carried out mainly consisted of the systematic sterilization of those suffering from hereditary deafness. The deaf were still permitted to function in society. During the Nazi reign, many French and German deaf people belonged to official state organizations for the deaf (MARKS 1999, 35–36; PROCTOR 2002, 34–39; RYAN 2002, 2–6; HOLMILA 2010, 51–59).

In Hungary, the civil rights of the deaf were comparable to children or those suffering from mental illness and even fewer rights were given to deaf Jews. At the beginning of the Second World War, Hungary was considered a safe place for Jews but in 1944, Hitler's armies occupied the nation. Many Jews were sent to concentration camps, the rest were enclosed in ghettos and were forced into labour. However, racial hygiene was not applied to Hungarian Jews. The headmaster of the country's only Jewish school for the deaf was able to hide some of his students and after the war, over half of the students returned to school (SCHUCHMAN 2002, 169–75).

<sup>13</sup> Between 1935–1970, about 54,000 sterilizations were carried out in Finland. Of these, approximately 7,500 occurred for 'racial hygiene' reasons. In addition to the deaf, this number also included those suffering from idiocy and physical disabilities.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. *Asetuskokoelma* 212/23.3.1944, 73/10.2.1950 and 324/23.5.1969.

In Finland, racial hygiene affected the position of the deaf in society. Previously, the measure of a good citizen was the ability to provide for oneself, whether they were able-bodied or handicapped. In contrast, during times of racial hygiene, the measure of a good citizen was a person who was physically and mentally healthy. Disability was seen as a fault from which society should be protected (MARKS 1999, 38–41, 50), and those who were considered carriers of disability were put into a subordinate position.

During work done on the Marriage Act, the deaf were ignored throughout the discussions, both as individuals and as an organized group. In other words, they were not given full citizen's rights. Decisions were made based on the knowledge of hearing experts. The deaf were treated as a homogeneous group towards which actions were collectively targeted. At the same time, deafness was categorized as an undesired characteristic.

### 3.3. Signing put aside to make way for teaching speech

Signing skill was an essential requirement for pastors working with the deaf already when these pastorships were established. The justification for this was the pastor's role of conveying the gospel to the deaf. The work with the deaf emphasized that the work being done must be carried out in the language of the listener, as was emphasized in missionary work as well (*Pöytäkirja, joka syntyi* 1896, 329–42). The reaction to signing was one of the areas where the Church's work with the deaf and the perspectives of society came up against each other.

In a very short time, the reaction to signing had changed, both in Finland and internationally. Schools for the deaf had started working with signing in the 1860s but a heated language debate changed the situation in the 1890s. Signing had to yield its place to speech-aided instruction as the main method of teaching. Signing was forbidden not only during class, but during recess and free time as well (CLEVE 1996, 144; SALMI & LAAKSO 2005, 144, 148, 173–76).

The prohibition of signing in schools was connected to a much larger historical phenomenon called oralism. Although signing had previously been the language of schools and education, oralism did not recognize its value in the lives of the deaf. Supporters of oralism, particularly teachers, considered signing a primitive language. They felt that signing was negative and slowed down oral skills development, which in turn prevented the development of thinking capacity. Oralism received support for its views from nationalism, which emphasized a unified nation and the importance of a collective language. This perspective brought another justification to the ban on signing; it prevented the deaf from isolating themselves in their own linguistic and cultural activities (CLEVE 1996, 143–44; RAINÖ 2004, 24–25; SALMI & LAAKSO 2005, 28, 62–65, 144–47; SALMI 2008, 19–22).

Despite the ban on signing schools and the punishments levied against them, signing stayed alive in the deaf community. Schools were operated as boarding

schools and there students learned signing from each other and used it in secret. An interesting characteristic of signing was that it was a language that children taught to other children. On the other hand, hearing children learned their language skills from their parents, while most deaf children did not have a common language with theirs. When deaf children finished their education, they often participated in local organizations for the deaf. These organizations were established based on examples that they had seen of similar organizations abroad. They were often called a 'second home', indicating how important it was for the deaf to have their own language and a place where they could meet other deaf people. Schools and organizations for the deaf had a significant role as the guardians and conveyors of their language and culture (SACKS 1989, 37, 179–80; LADD 2003, 43, 120; RAINÒ 2004, 141; SALMI & LAAKSO 2005, 178–80; SALMI 2008, 24–25).<sup>15</sup>

The ban affected the lives of the deaf in many ways. There had been deaf signing teachers and headmasters working in schools for the deaf in Europe as well as the United States. However, through speech training, the deaf were pushed aside and education eventually moved entirely into the hands of the hearing. Through this, the deaf not only lost a respected professional position but also the possibility to affect how and what they were taught. The objective of the schools now was to adapt the deaf to a hearing environment. Signing, the only natural language of the deaf, was considered a demeaning and undeveloped language of 'monkeys' and its opponents strived to prevent its use in many ways. The sign that identified the deaf as human was not their own language or knowing their own language but knowing speech. Thus speech was intrinsically linked to humanity (SACKS 1989, 121; McDONNELL & SAUNDERS 1993, 256–60; JOKINEN 2000, 95; LADD 2003, 113–14; SALMI & LAAKSO 2005, 52, 156, 165–76).

In schools, speech training comprised the majority of time in class and it was considered the central measure of giftedness. Training focused on producing sounds and lip reading, but the contents of the subjects being taught often remained secondary. The deaf learned to form words, but the meaning of those words often eluded them. Learning how to speak was easier for those who had learned to speak as children and had subsequently gone deaf. In contrast, those who were born deaf found it virtually impossible to learn to speak intelligibly without any hearing assistance and their other gifts for learning remained unnoticed. The objectives of speech training remained far from being achieved but in spite of this, deaf education in Finland continued to be based on it until the 1970s (MALM & ÖSTMAN 2000, 9–10, 30; SALMI & LAAKSO 2005, 148, 165–72).

The appreciation of sign language only started in the 1960s through studies done on signing and deaf culture in the United States. These studies indicated that sign languages were independent languages that satisfied all the criteria determining a language. As a result, the general atmosphere towards sign languages became more positive. In Finland, signing became accepted incrementally in schools as

<sup>15</sup> For more information about cooperation within the deaf community in Europe, see FISCHER & LANE (1993).

well, although, due to a lack of teachers' language skills, very few deaf students received their education in it. Since 1995, signing's position has been protected and entrenched in the Finnish constitution (STOKOE 1960; PADDEEN 1980, 90; LAPPI 2000, 71–73; SALMI 2008, 30–31).

Signing's position in the Church's work with the deaf diverged from its position in society. Pastors worked towards communicating with each deaf person in the language that they chose, whether signed or spoken. At the beginning of their work with the deaf, pastors encountered many deaf people who were uneducated and who had remained without a language within their own families. In those situations, a common language was often hard to find. Many pastors only began to learn signing once they had started their careers working with the deaf, and gaining the sufficient language skills for the work often took many years. However, evaluating workers' sign language skills is difficult because the source material has very little information on how they assessed their own language skills (RANTALA 2010, 54–56, 80).

The Church's pioneering work to promote the position of sign language occurred at a time when signing was forbidden in schools both in Finland and elsewhere. Although the signing skills of the workers were sometimes rather rudimentary, the Church's principle of working with sign language showed respect towards the deaf's own language and simultaneously towards their community. Oral communication continually produced experiences of failure and misunderstanding for the deaf. For the Church, it was clear that signing was the fundamental starting point for the pastoral care of the deaf (LEHTOMÄKI 1992, 34; SACKS 1989, 111, 189–91; RANTALA 2010, 237–38).

#### **4. Pastoral care – obstacle or aid to growing up?**

During the observed period of time, the Church's work with the deaf consisted of both pastoral and social work. Because of a lack in the number of workers and the wide brief they were given, the emphasis of the care often changed at different times and between workers. In either case, the objective was to take care of the Church's spiritual responsibilities. Because the Church workers were the only ones skilled in signing, many secular functions were also made their responsibility. The state committed to this by paying the salary of the pastors working with the deaf. What was distinctive about the Church's work with the deaf was its small and mainly committed group of workers. Almost all of the Church workers working with the deaf were from a hearing culture.

The spiritual work done with the deaf at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was mainly led by the hearing. The dominating position of the hearing could also be seen in the deaf's own organizations and the Finnish Association of the Deaf (SALMI & LAAKSO 2005, 78–85).<sup>16</sup> Both the association and the various organizations

<sup>16</sup> The Finnish Association of the Deaf was established in 1905 to function as an advocacy organization.

had begun on the initiatives of the deaf. The earliest actors were members of deaf organizations, either the deaf themselves or hearing members of their families. When reactions towards the deaf and deafness changed, the ability of the deaf to be in positions of responsibility was questioned. Additionally, many of the deaf themselves thought that in order to advance issues that concerned them, hearing individuals with influence were needed. As a result, the activities and functions of the deaf were driven into the hands of those outside the deaf culture (SALMI & LAAKSO 2005, 115–17; RANTALA 2010, 111–17).<sup>17</sup>

Only after research began in the 1960s did people start to understand that the language, habits, traditions, and collective experiences of the deaf made up the deaf's own culture. The international 'Deaf Power' movement strove to promote the sign language's value and information about its own history and culture to the deaf. This simultaneously spurred the deaf into action and the hearing to yield their position within the deaf community (JOKINEN 1992, 31–35).

Previously, deaf activities were seen as a part of society based on the conditions of the hearing. Only in the last decades has attention been paid to the fact that sign language and deaf culture require a deaf community to thrive. According to PADDEN (1989, 6–8), a deaf community is a group that works on behalf of the common goals of the deaf. BAKER and COKELY (1980, 55–56) state that the hearing can also belong to a deaf community as long as they commit to the community's goals, can sign and are visually oriented. However, Jokinen emphasizes that the deaf themselves make up the core of a deaf community. The community establishes the purpose and culture of its operations, not the outside culture of the hearing or society (JOKINEN 1992, 13–19; 2000, 83–87). This presents a challenge for the Church's workers with the deaf to find a new, equal and respectful way of approaching their deaf clients.

## 5. Pastors as supporters of racial hygiene

When inspecting the work done with the deaf in the 1900s, the strong influence of society and its laws on this work's framework must be noted. Racial hygiene and oralism were accepted as values in society. The deaf had no influence on these issues, only hearing experts acting as authorities.

Racial hygiene's popularity was based on the hopeful perspective that a population of quality was a guarantee for a good future. Earlier on, the measure of a good citizen was going to Communion and supporting themselves. Racial hygiene brought a new way of thinking, which held that a good citizen was healthy, flawless

Its purpose was to improve the quality of life of the deaf through practical activities and to affect decision making through various initiatives and statements.

<sup>17</sup> Eastern Finland's first pastor working with the deaf, Huugo Nyberg, played an active part in the Finnish Association for the Deaf since the beginning of his work. In addition to his own work, he held a particularly strong and central position within the association from 1920 to 1935.

and of a high moral level. Disabilities reduced not only a human's worth but their right to self-determination. Terms like 'sensorily defective' and 'sensorily disabled' often used to describe the deaf, inferred to inferiority. This point of view, based on medical science, emphasized the lack of hearing as the central characteristic of deafness. The human concept held by racial hygiene was in direct conflict with that of the Christian faith, which accepted the weaknesses and faults of man. When pastors agreed to support the 'ideology' of the time, they were in fact working against the values of the Church.

What kinds of objectives can we find in the actions taken by priests working with the deaf concerning issues of racial hygiene? After the Marriage Act and sterilization laws came into effect, there was some mention in the pastors' reports of difficult situations. The problem was not the law but a deaf couple's refusal to act according to the law, which put the pastor into an awkward position. In the case where the couple did not receive special permission to marry, pastors seemed to accept either the sterilization of the couple or the dissolution of the engagement as acceptable solutions. In contrast, the decision to live together engaged but out of wedlock was a decision that did not receive pastors' blessing. In this sense, this reaction represented the attitudes towards wedlock that were held both by the Church and society at the time. However, it did not take into consideration the exceptional situation the law created for the deaf.

To make matters worse, the Church approved society's viewpoint on its entitlement to racial hygiene, and the knowledge of the deaf's position in society did not raise any critical discussion. It is possible that the problems with the law were considered the experience of a very small, marginal group. The objectives and thought process of racial hygiene came from the hearing culture, and they were justified by national unity and possibly economic reasons. It appears obvious that some of the pastors working with the deaf also accepted the concept of racial hygiene. At the least, they were required to comply with the conditions of the law of the day in their work. According to Padden, they were working according to values that were not those of the deaf community. In contrast, there were also some pastors working actively towards effecting a change in the law (MARKS 1999, 63–64, 71–72; SALMI & LAAKSO 2005, 206–07).

Racial hygiene was strongly connected to the concept of a proper citizen's measure, which a deaf person did not satisfy. According to the medical science perspective, deafness was the absence of the ability to hear. Both through education and medicine, the attempt to change the deaf into hearing individuals was made. The question of the right to be deaf has been raised again since the 1990s. At that time, a new medical procedure came into use, where an electronic implant is surgically placed into the inner ear. The deaf community was critical of this surgery and demanded a broader ethical discussion on the issue. This surgery can be seen as a current form of racial hygiene (JOKINEN 2000, 100).

## 6. Analyzing the deaf community through signing

The Church's position on sign language was different from the one that society held. The oralism perspective emphasized speech as the measure of an accepted citizen. The non-hearing minority was not only to learn to speak but to do so in the language of the majority instead of having the hearing majority learn to sign (KORTTEINEN 1997, 79–80; SALMI 2008, 33–35).

The work done by pastors working with the deaf was carried out in languages that society did not respect or accept. This conflict appeared clearly in its reaction to schools for the deaf. A speaking deaf person was the fruit of a teacher's long and patient labour and the school's gift to a hearing society. Many teachers thought that the use of signing was demeaning to their work. The confrontation of these two attitudes was sometimes seen during confirmation classes and other visits by the pastors to the schools. However, bit by bit the schools accepted the point that the abstract language of religion would best be transmitted to the deaf through signing (PAUNU & WALLVIK 1991, 56–58).

Therefore, in issues concerning language, the pastors working with the deaf had common goals with the deaf community. Pastors Lauri Paunu and Eino Savisaari played a particularly significant role in the promotion and development of signing. Through signing, Church workers indicated their respect for the deaf culture. Only much later was it understood how important one's mother tongue is to one's whole mental development. One's mother tongue is not only the language of emotions, but of prayer (RANTALA 2010, 227–28).

Research on deaf culture and signing has brought a significant new point of view to the definition of deafness. The deaf community does not consider the medical perspective a sufficient enough explanation for the solidarity of the community. The common denominator is not the lack of hearing or hearing deficiency but a common visual language and functional culture. Thus, this socio-cultural perspective does not base itself on one of defectiveness but presents people who sign as members of their own language group with full worth. This gives the possibility to see the deaf as people, without the stigma defining them as 'other' (MALM & ÖSTMAN 2000, 12–13; JOKINEN 2000, 88–89).

## 7. The deaf changing from receivers of care to colleagues in care delivery

The discussion the Church led at the inception of its work with the deaf was perhaps more telling than one could have predicted at the time. The labelling of the deaf as unknowing, miserable wretches during the debate was used for rhetorical effect but at the same time, it defined the deaf as helpless, thus creating room for using power over them. Helping the deaf was often based on pity or on Christian responsibility and the objective was not equal relationship between the helper and the one being helped. In addition, some of the early pastors' attitudes transmitted a

strong opinion that the deaf were helpless, uncivilized and lacking judgement. A hearing person could define a deaf person's differing opinion as a result of ignorance and bypass it because of his own position of power.<sup>18</sup>

The position of the deaf in society was tenuous during the Church's first decades of work with them. The deaf felt that they did not have enough information or influence in society, and often were dependent on the hearing to help them promote issues that concerned them. In situations where the hearing did not have complete information about the deaf culture, it sometimes prevented them from truly acting in deaf interests. Be that as it may, it is incontestable that the Church's workers with the deaf had a significant role in bringing the deaf and their needs to light in society.

According to the research material, pastors working with the deaf were accepted and welcome guests, for example during organization meetings. This partly results from the fact that the pastors were the only professionals with signing abilities working with the deaf. In spite of this, the use of power could have also been exploited in their actions and attitudes. Many of the deaf were very dependent on the pastors' help. Pastors worked as interpreters, guidance counsellors and economic and spiritual experts. There is no evidence yet to clarify how the deaf experienced a profession where social and spiritual help were so tightly intertwined. Did those deaf who held different opinions to their caretakers get help?

At the beginning of this decade, there were seven pastors working with the deaf. Currently, this work is paid for by the Church. Furthermore, there are diakonia workers in over 20 parishes that work either exclusively with the deaf or in addition to other social care duties. There have been significant changes in how the Church and society have divided their work with the deaf during the period being studied. For many decades, the Church undertook the deaf's care, social and interpreting responsibilities. Currently, these responsibilities have been transferred to the state so the Church can focus on its spiritual responsibilities.

Another significant change has occurred to the position of the deaf in society. Deaf parishioners are no longer passive targets of workers' actions, but participate in the planning and execution of spiritual activities. In this way, the Church is trying to achieve its goals of inclusion outlined in its handicap program by providing common opportunities for hearing and deaf parishioners to participate and have influence in the Church.<sup>19</sup>

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