



*The United Methodist Committee on*

## *Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Ministries*

### **OVERVIEW OF AUDISM**

#### **Definitions**

##### **Audism**

Audism is a negative attitude or outward prejudice toward deaf and hard of hearing people. It is a form of discrimination which is expressed as unwillingness to accommodate people who cannot hear, or who cannot hear well enough to distinguish speech. Another aspect of audism is believing that hearing people and hearing culture are superior to others. The term was brought into use about 1975 by Tom Humphries. It is a form of discrimination, which leads to unwillingness to accommodate people who cannot hear, or who cannot hear well enough to distinguish speech.

##### **Audist**

People with these attitudes or views that oppress Deaf, hard-of-hearing, late-deafened, and Deafblind people are called audists. If using the term, consider the intent or motivation behind the behavior and consider stating “that attitude is audist” versus “you are an audist.”

#### **Audism Examples**

Not taking time or using accommodations to communicate: misunderstandings may occur; however, taking the time to repeat or clarify should be the norm, not a reason to stop communicating. Not signing in the presence of Deaf and hard-of-hearing persons or not providing an interpreter or captioning videos are also examples.

Assumptions: hearing people often make wrong assumptions about what Deaf, hard-of-hearing, late-deafened, and Deafblind persons can or cannot do. For many, there are no barriers to doing activities, such as driving.

Thinking of being deaf as tragic: many hearing people, have a misconception that deafness is a tragedy, when in fact, many Deaf and hard of hearing people who grew up with hearing loss feel (Deaf) pride and realize there are [Deaf gains](#) (benefits). (It is worth noting, as with any similar occurrence, that people who lose their hearing do grieve over their hearing loss.)

Patronizing behavior: hearing people may patronize Deaf and hard-of-hearing acquaintances by saying something along the lines of “You speak so well for being Deaf” or using fake sign language to be funny. While these may occur with close friends, it can be misunderstood as audism by others.

Employment discrimination: Deaf and hard-of-hearing people often confront barriers to employment because of communication concerns, though there are certain protections under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Simply asking what communication methods are needed will easily resolve such concerns (note that this is required in most countries as part of disability accommodation laws).

Intersectionality: prejudice and/or discrimination of deafness or other forms of disabilities overlap with other social identities, such as race, gender, age, and class. Simply, it's additional "isms" persons face (for more on this, and parallels to other conditions, see the [Ableism Toolkit](#) at the Disability Ministries Committee website).

### **Audism in the Church Examples**

Deciding communication methods: Deaf, hard-of-hearing, and late-deafened people may share the commonality of hearing loss, but the communication method preferred may likely be different. Not asking about preferences is a form of audism, by using privilege to decide for someone else. Some may prefer the use of an interpreter, others may prefer the use of captions, and others may prefer assisted listening devices (or all three).

Leadership discrimination: A common example of audism occurs when Deaf, hard-of-hearing, late-deafened, and Deafblind persons are not seen in leadership or servant positions. When they're not invited, it is likely due to audism due to thinking the person is unable to do the work. Many Deaf, hard-of-hearing, and Deafblind people serve in a variety of positions, such as treasurers, ushers, liturgists (including signing the Lord's Prayer), as greeters, and on church committees. Sometimes they serve independently, sometimes they may partner with a hearing person.

Limiting congregational participation: providing a sign language interpreter for worship is quite often helpful for many Deaf and hard-of-hearing parishioners. However, discipleship mostly comes from furthering one's discipleship. Communication accommodations are needed in other parts of their church life. Accessibility across the church should be offered.

Absent hospitality: it's important that Deaf and hard-of-hearing persons create relationships beyond the sign language interpreter. If hearing persons are unwilling to learn basic sign language or become fluent, this is another example of audism, and reflects partial inclusion instead of full inclusion. Having a group of persons or some of the congregation be willing to learn sign language is ideal. Deaf etiquette also includes avoiding outdated terms such as "hearing impaired." Another point of etiquette is to speak to the person, not the interpreter--avoid such situations as "ask her or let him know..."

Equality: there is often a lack of representation and inclusivity in handing accommodations. Hearing privilege often dominates social venues including church settings. Examples of representation and inclusivity include sharing announcements

pertaining to Deaf and hard-of-hearing people, Deaf-related sermon illustrations, signed choir songs, Deaf and hard of hearing leaders, and Deaf and hard-of-hearing guest speakers or preachers.

Intersectionality in audism and ableism: while audism is specific to Deaf, hard-of-hearing, late-deafened, and Deafblind persons, ableism is discrimination towards persons with disabilities. Some Deaf people, sometimes referred to as Deaf+, have one or more disabilities. Not having wheelchair ramps, handrails, large print bulletins, and/or banning perfumes and colognes (for persons with allergy sensitivities) are just a few of the barriers that some Deaf persons with other disabilities face.

Assumptions: Many Deaf and hard-of-hearing people do NOT view their deafness as a disability.

### **Going on to Perfection**

Periodic surveys and audits can be helpful as people and congregations strive to first reduce and then eliminate audism and ableism. A Deaf ministry or disability ministry committee, or board of trustees can be responsible for completing some or all of the following:

\* Breaking the Sound Barrier (hard-of-hearing and late-deafened accessibility audit)  
<<https://www.umdeaf.org/download/breaking.pdf>>

\* ableism study <<https://www.adl.org/sites/default/files/documents/understanding-and-challenging-ableism.pdf>>

\* accessibility audit (general audit for persons with disabilities)  
<<https://umcdmc.org/resources/accessibility-and-united-methodist-churches/accessibility-audit/>>.

\* Deaf etiquette  
<<https://deafingov.org/Resources/Documents/Etiquette-for-Co.pdf>>

\* Learn about Deaf history and culture  
<[https://www.pbs.org/independentlens/content/deaf-jam\\_timeline-html/](https://www.pbs.org/independentlens/content/deaf-jam_timeline-html/)>

\* Review ministry resources and congregational guides (from the DHM website)  
<<https://www.umdeaf.org/resource/cong.html>>

#### **Citations:**

DeafChoice: [What is an audist?](#)

AI Media: [What is audism?](#)

[Deaf Ministry: A Comprehensive Overview of Ministry Models, 3rd Ed.](#)