

Deaf conference confronts ministry needs, interpreter shortage

*By Tony Martin
Associate Editor*

The 2022 Mississippi Baptist Conference of the Deaf held its annual meeting at Garaywa Camp and Conference Center in Clinton on Sept. 23-24. The theme for the weekend was, "Spiritual Warfare – Lord, Help Deaf's Hurting Hear." There were approximately 140 participants.

Vickie Stuart is contract consultant for the Deaf with the Multicultural Ministries Department of the Mississippi Baptist Convention Board. She has served in that role for four years. She works for Mississippi Department of Rehabilitation Services as an interpreter.



Stuart

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Gallaudet is noted for being the premier American Sign Language school in the country. “I finished my studies and came back and began interpreting in Mississippi,” Stuart said.

The conference is held at Garaywa in the fall of each year. One feature of the weekend is a Saturday interpreters workshop for those already qualified by the state of Mississippi. “We also invite students who are in training programs to come,” Stuart said. “We had 42 interpreters in this workshop.”

However, “We really need 242,” said Paula Smith, director of the Multicultural Ministries Department. “There is an interpreter shortage in Mississippi.”

The Deaf is a largely unreached group. There are only 58 churches in the Southern Baptist Convention specifically geared toward three million Deaf, and 40% of those churches are without a pastor. There are 100 major cities in the United States with no church for the Deaf.

Fifteen hundred Deaf people in the U.S. die daily without Jesus; 72 million deaf worldwide are unreached. There is a critical need for Deaf churches, Deaf pastors, and Deaf missionaries.

“I interpret for some of the churches also,” Stuart said. “I see the shortage and the need for interpreters. I constantly get calls from churches wanting to know where they can get a sub, and sometimes I just have to turn them down.”

The 2022 conference included games, fellowships, workshops, interpreter-specific workshops, a college-specific workshop, and worship services.

The annual event has been offered for many years in Mississippi. “I know that when I was ten, I met Jerry St. John at Garaywa. He was the Mississippi missionary for the Deaf,” said Smith. “Jim Booth took the mantle from him, and he served 30 years. Then Vickie has taken the mantle from Jim.”

“It may have been going on for 65 years,” Stuart said. “We can’t find any pictures or information and our older group who would’ve been there are gone, but we can be sure of at least 35 years and it goes back much farther than that.

“We had four college students accept Christ during the conference. One was baptized in the Garaywa pool on Sunday. Actually, the one who was baptized was already out of college but he was part of that age group,” she said.

Churches and individuals interested in Deaf ministries can contact Smith at psmith@mbcb.org.



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