

Deaf Church

An article written by Susan Myatt for the Baptist Ministers' Journal – October 2014.
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by Susan Myatt

I was born profoundly deaf. I knew from an early age that God existed, but I had a long and difficult journey to come to faith in him. Generally people assume that if there is an interpreter, the Deaf have no further needs, but this is far from the truth and is not inclusion. I know people mean well, but I do not require prayers for healing or for the sins of my fathers! I am currently training for ministry in the Baptist denomination, within which there is currently no Deaf church. Part of my role is outreach into the Deaf community to explore spirituality and to help the Deaf to have a true relationship with God and become fully part of the church.

We are all 'one', but we are not all the same. We are all members of the body with different functions, vital to the working of the whole (Romans 12:3-8; 1 Corinthians 12:12-26). In this context, how do we think about Deaf and hearing—is there really a way in which we can become one body? Or are our worlds so far apart that this is impossible?

There are of course differences within the Deaf community: hard of hearing; deafened and deaf; each having different needs. There are 800,000 people in the UK who are severely or profoundly deaf and it is estimated that 70,000 use British Sign Language (BSL) as their first and preferred language. Deaf people do not view themselves as disabled but to be a linguistic/cultural minority (Ladd).

The 'deafened' (people who have become deaf during the course of their life) have different needs to the Deaf. Their first language is spoken English. They may be able to lip-read from 3-6 ft with eye contact, but even then, they only understand 30% of the spoken word. They need good lighting, words spoken at a slow pace and a clear lip pattern (no beards, no chewing gum or large pieces of jewellery!). Lip-reading is very tiring and requires a high level of concentration. Deafened and Deaf both find it difficult to communicate within a group. It is hard to follow the conversation or prayers and to know who is speaking and when.

Belonging, as in being part of the body, recognises that there is a connection between the parts. A common language makes us feel connected and part of a group, and helps us to develop relationships. As a Deaf person I am very aware that the Deaf can easily become isolated, and feel more like an add-on to the hearing church rather than actually belonging and participating fully. For one thing, the quantity of words used in church is so overwhelming that the Deaf become passive onlookers, rather than having an opportunity to develop spiritual understanding and relationship with God. They may be Deaf but they really do want to know about God!

In my role as MIT at Rising Brook BC, I set up a Deaf Café Church in March 2013 to enable the Deaf to open their minds and ask questions without fear of judgement. Deaf Christians were previously unable to access Bible groups and prayer sessions, because any Deaf sub-group in church is controlled by the language of the hearing and their ideas. Although the hearing are needed to aid in learning, the Deaf can be spoon-fed and are often left feeling undervalued and unworthy.

I have undertaken pastoral responsibility for the Deaf who attend the Café Church. When I visit homes the Deaf are so relieved to be able to communicate in their own language with me. They often release fears and anxieties that have been suppressed for many years; previously they would have felt uncomfortable having to go through an interpreter, who is in effect a third party. These visits require lots of time to build up trust and establish a positive relationship.

When I started up the Deaf Café Church I did suggest Deaf only, but when the hearing wanted to attend, what

right did I have to say they are not welcome? I had to maintain my position and be careful that the Deaf still felt empowered and comfortable to communicate in their own language. Despite their best intentions hearing people have a tendency to take over and inflict their opinions!

To build the relationship between Deaf and hearing there is a need to shift the balance so that the hearing get a better understanding of the culture and language of the Deaf. Each part needs to know the other's needs. The Deaf Café Church allows freedom and release of emotions; it is a wonderful opportunity to witness people being true to themselves. Although hearing people may mean well, often the Deaf cannot express themselves for fear of being judged. Hearing people will also correct the Deaf, and undermine them because of a lack of understanding and respect for the Deaf culture. There is also a lot that the Deaf can learn from the hearing. The main issue is about wanting a relationship with each other and a desire to communicate with others, whether Deaf or hearing.

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As early as the 1830s, Deaf churches were established to enable the Deaf to worship in their own language and culture. There are now estimated to be 100-125 well established Deaf churches in the Church of England and Roman Catholic traditions, but none in our denomination. Deaf church offers a sense of belonging: people can pray, encourage and support each other. People generally go to homogeneous groups where they share a common language and culture which gives a sense of belonging. Deaf people desire this too, which is why they want to meet up, and they are prepared to travel long distances to have this opportunity.

The language of the Deaf is generally visual but this varies depending on educational background or age. Communication is the major barrier in meeting the needs of Deaf people, who find English words difficult to understand, resulting in a lack of confidence and a loss of personal value (see Shrine).

Main issues of inclusion

Deaf people are restricted because of the need for interpreters, and when interpreters are present, they can still feel excluded because of the language and pace of the events—the resources do not meet their needs. There are different levels of interpreters and at least a BSL Level 2 qualification is required to interpret prayers and worship songs, and a Level 3 qualification for sermons and group discussions. Also, DVD subtitles are often not included and when they are, the language is often inaccessible.

Storytelling is very much part of Deaf culture because it is visual and more meaningful than verbal information. Deaf people can take on the roles of characters in a story and have no inhibitions about doing so, because that is part of their visual language. This medium could be a real opportunity for Deaf and hearing to enjoy working together. Language is the barrier between Deaf and hearing, and so is the biggest challenge for me in ministry with Deaf people. It takes effort on both sides to ensure that there is equal access to worship and the Bible by both Deaf and hearing.

There is much to learn, and I have to work towards building relationships and bridging the gap between Deaf and hearing in a way that does not offend or destroy the spirit of the other. In my experience, in both Deaf and hearing churches, there is a clear need for the majority to consider how they can change, allowing the minority to be encouraged and developed. Here is a challenge for us within the Baptist church: how do we help Deaf people to be included and to participate in the full life of the church. As Shrine states, 'There can be no inclusion without empowerment'.

Conclusion

A community by definition has common values, and we need to allow the Deaf community to receive the gospel, recognising the differences between Deaf and hearing and acknowledging that both can serve God in the

church and need to belong. To ensure that the Deaf, the marginalised minority, truly become part of the body, there is a need for all parts of the one body, hearing and Deaf, to understand and acknowledge the needs of the other.

I have identified two major issues that impact on successful ministry with Deaf people: culture and language. Language is the most challenging problem and is clearly not easy to overcome. Words play a major part in Bible study and worship. There is a need to explore other ways to allow a variety of methods of communicating the gospel to ensure that Deaf people are empowered and included.

Each part belongs to the other (Romans 12:5), so we need Deaf and hearing to find new and exciting ways to build relationships. Building the body of Christ is more about relationships than it is about being Deaf or hearing. My role of ministry to the Deaf has to focus on building bridges to enable the growth of relationships as well as seeking new ways to teach and facilitate spiritual growth for Deaf people.

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Further reading

P. Ladd, 2010 *Understanding Deaf culture: in search of Deafhood*. Clevedon Multiigual Matters, 2010, p15.

B. Shrine, *Inclusion and empowerment: unresolved issues for Deaf people in the church*. Papers presented at meeting of the Deaf Perspectives Telford Conference Centre, July 2013.

H. Lewis, (2007) *Deaf liberation theology*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007.

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