BE OPENED: SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS WITHIN AND BEYOND THE DEAF COMMUNITY

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Abstract

The concepts of social inclusion, social exclusion, and social connectedness in the Church setting are explored within the context of the Deaf community's linguistic and cultural orientation.[1] An examination of Deaf culture and the presentation of two research studies investigating the spirituality of Deaf persons may assist spiritual leaders and communities to develop best practices for establishing a Deaf ministry. The article concludes with specific recommendations and their rationale for establishing different forms of Deaf ministry.

Introduction

They brought to [Jesus] a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "be opened." And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly.[2]

Be opened. Jesus opens the deaf man's ears and mouth to hear and to speak. What does it mean to be opened? Who and what is changed? The Deaf cultural

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[1] For the purposes of this paper, the terms, deaf and deafness, with the lower case "d" will signify hearing loss while the term, Deaf, with the upper case "D" will relate to those who hold the cultural and linguistic values of the Deaf community.

[2] Mark 7:32:35, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: With the Apocryphal/ Deuterocanonical Books*, New Revised Standard Version (New York: Oxford University, 2001), 43.

interpretation of this story presents Jesus as not merely opening the ears and mouth of the deaf man or healing him from his condition. It is because of Divine intervention that the deaf man's mind and heart are opened. Jesus' relationship to the deaf man through touch and vision echoes a Deaf-centric interpretation and shows Jesus—and thus God—revealing, understanding, and relating to the needs of Deaf people.[3] Likewise, the minds and hearts of both secular and spiritual leaders can also be opened to understand that people who are Deaf can participate in society while preserving the integrity of their language and way of life.

For centuries, the meaning of deafness and resulting attitudes have been influenced primarily by religious and medical authorities, and more recently by educators.[4] Deafness has long been viewed from the perspective of pathology as a disability, where a cure was frequently sought to eradicate the problem. Within religious circles, healing of deafness in the form of exorcism was performed to remove the evil spirit in the deaf person while various scriptural interpretations regarded deafness as a metaphor for wickedness. For instance, the metaphor of spiritual deafness is commonly used to exemplify the concept of the person's sinfulness and estrangement from God.[5] To be spiritually deaf means to be closed, resulting in a failure to be open to the truth and thus consequently a failure in obedience. Conversely, to be forgiven and reunited with God means to be able to hear again and obey.

Another interpretation of this passage relates to the restoration of the member back into the spiritual community where sinfulness as deafness is perceived as a barrier between the sinner and the members of the

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[3] Wayne Morris, *Theology without Words: Theology in the Deaf Community* (Cornwall, UK: Ashgate, 2008), 88.

[4] See John Van Cleve, *Deaf History Unveiled: Interpretations from the New Scholarship* (Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 1999).

[5] http://www.biblemeanings.info/Words/Body/Deaf.html (accessed June 1, 2013)

community. A literal interpretation of St. Paul's letter to the Romans has been applied to the combined concept of deafness and faith. This gave rise to both the perception and its resulting action where equating the inability to hear to the incapacity to have faith barred deaf people from becoming Christians.[6] Historically, such worldviews have been unfairly and unconsciously projected onto deaf people with disastrous results. Examining our own assumptions and hidden beliefs while learning about the Deaf community's cultural understanding of the world holds the rich possibility of opening up to a life-affirming approach. Moreover, understanding the spiritual and religious needs of the Deaf community, while developing culturally appropriate and spiritually sensitive practices, may make way for greater inclusion in the Body of Christ.

Social Inclusion, Exclusion, and Connectedness

Let's begin by looking at our language and choice of words. What does social inclusion mean? What does social exclusion look and feel like? Can one be socially included and not feel connected? Some argue that social inclusion and social exclusion are two sides of the same coin. On one side, social inclusion is defined as "the attempt to re-integrate or increase the participation of marginalized groups within mainstream goals."[7] Thus, participation, integration, and access are words that are often used to describe inclusion. On the other side, these words may imply social exclusion at some level. The language of social exclusion demonstrates mechanisms of marginalization, silencing, rejecting, isolating, segregating, and disenfranchising. Exclusion consists of dynamic, multi-dimensional processes driven by unequal power relationships interacting across the four main factors of economic, political, social, and cultural dimensions.

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[6] See George P. Dwyer, *St. Augustine and the Possibility of a State of Pure Nature: A Study of the Opus Imperfectum Contra Julianum* (1937).

[7] See Bob Pease, "The Other Side of Social Exclusion: Interrogating the Role of the Privileged in Reproducing Inequality," in Ann Taket Beth R. Crisp et al., eds., *Theorising Social Exclusion* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 37.

Exclusion takes place at different levels ranging from individual to global levels and results in a continuum of inclusion/exclusion characterized by unequal access to resources, capabilities, and rights.[8]

Social connectedness refers to the relationships people have with others and the community. The focus on social connectedness as the opposite of social exclusion is more appropriate for understanding people's experiences.[9] The language of social connectedness recognizes mechanisms of acceptance, opportunity, justice, equity, and validation. An individual who is socially included is not necessarily socially connected. Moreover, social inclusion does not imply social connectedness. Inclusion is something done *to* people rather than *by* them. For that reason, inclusion can be experienced as paternalistic or patronizing, and thus, may be perceived as the other side of the same coin—which may be experienced as exclusion.

Social connectedness was considered as a major determinant of the choices people make during a research study.[10] Psychological factors that exert considerable influence on one`s daily life were studied. The researchers developed and evaluated the psychometric properties of an 18-item Personal Acquaintance Measure (PAM) as well as investigated how the PAM relates to self-other agreement in personality ratings. Results showed that six components emerged to help determine the quality of one's interactions and psychologically-defined social connectedness with others. The six components include the following: (a) duration of relationship, (b) frequency of interaction with the other person, (c) knowledge of the other person's goals, (d) physical intimacy or closeness with the other person,

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[8] Ann Taket et al., "Introduction," in Ann Taket et al., eds., *Theorising Social Exclusion* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 8.

[9] "Conclusions and Reflections," in Ann Taket et al., eds., *Theorising Social Exclusion* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 187-192.

[10] See Katherine B. Starzyk et al., "The Personal Acquaintance Measure: A Tool for Appraising One's Acquaintance with Any Person," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology,* 90 (2006), 833-847.

(e) self-disclosure with the other person, and (f) social network familiarity—how familiar is one person with another person's social circle.

These components of social connectedness along with one's choice of language are often influenced by the cultural worldviews and social locations of the involved parties. Through the conscious understanding of one's role in culture as well as one's view of oneself and others, religious leaders' efforts toward social connectedness can be enhanced.

Characteristics of the Deaf Culture

"Culture" here describes shared behaviors and beliefs that are characteristic of a particular social, ethnic, or age group.[11] For many ethnic groups, cultures are usually associated with a specific country. For the Deaf community, however, associations and special places provide the relationships and common ground in place of a particular country.[12] American Sign Language, also known as ASL, contains the essence of Deaf culture as a visual and gestural form of language.[13] Thus, Deaf culture refers to those who adopt American Sign Language as a primary means of communication and who share a distinguishable set of beliefs.[14]

Hearing acuity can be viewed on a continuum, ranging from perfect hearing threshold sensitivity to a complete inability to perceive any sound. Hearing ability falls somewhere between these two extremes for most

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[11] John F. Longres, *Human Behavior in the Social Environment,* 3rd edition (Belmont, CA: Brooks/Cole, 2000), 95.

[12] Definitions of culture were defined based on three books. See Harlan Lane, Robert Hoffmeister, and Ben Bahan, *A Journey into the Deaf-World* (San Diego: DawnSign Press, 1996); Carol Padden and Thomas Humphries, *Deaf in America: Voices from a Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988); and John F. Longres (2000).

[13] Gill Valentine and Tracie Skelton, "Changing Spaces: The Role of the Internet in Shaping Deaf Geographies," *Social & Cultural Geography*, vol 9, no. 5 (2008), 469-485.

[14] See Charlotte Baker and Carol Padden, *American Sign Language: A Look at its Story Structure and Community* (Silver Springs, MD: T. J. Publishers Inc, 1978).

people. While there is a tendency to classify all people with hearing loss as hearing impaired, some object to the implication of this term suggesting disability or defectiveness. Others claim this expression is an accurate portrayal of one's audiological status, which serves to distinguish individuals with normal hearing acuity from those who have a demonstrated physical hearing loss.[15]

As stated previously, the Deaf community's identity does not stem from a medical or a disabled point of view, which focuses on the need to correct or augment hearing loss. Defective social constructions of Deaf persons have been the focus of professional debate for centuries. Instead, the American Deaf communities favor the affirming cultural constructionist model.[16] Their perspective consists of a cultural understanding of being-in-the-world.[17]

Within the cultural model, the various identities within the Deaf community are complex.[18] Elements of Deaf identities are not limited to the physical actuality of a hearing loss; rather, they include ethnic, sexual, generational, social, educational, and political constructs that are incorporated in varying degrees from both the Deaf and hearing communities. The term Deafhood was coined to capture and represent the process where Deaf people attempt to understand and explain their place in the world. Through continual inner and outer dialogue, Deaf people become involved in the dynamic process of acknowledging, maintaining, and becoming Deaf and, more importantly, of discovering what this means for them.[19] For some, Deafhood has also come to represent the foundational aspect of their spirituality. The

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[15] Nancy A. Delich, "Leadership by the Deaf community for Social Change" in *Religious Leadership: The SAGE Reference Series on Leadership,* ed. Sharon H. Callahan (Los Angeles, CA: SAGE), 510-520.

[16] See Padden and Humphries, 1988.

[17] See Paddy Ladd, *Understanding Deaf Culture: In Search of Deafhood* (Buffalo, NY: Multilingual Matters, 2007).

[18] See Irene Leigh, *A Lens on Deaf Identities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

[19] Ladd, 3.

multifaceted and reciprocal interaction between the experience of deafness and their spiritual worldview can be likened to a dance executed by two partners moving together in rhythm across the ballroom floor.[20]

Spirituality of Persons who are Deaf

Defining the term "spirituality" is useful to study the spirituality of those who are Deaf. Spirituality is understood as the gestalt of the total process of human life and development, encompassing the biological, mental, social, and spiritual aspects. More specifically, spirituality is the wholeness of what it is to be human and is not reducible to any of the listed components. It is distinguished from the term religion in that a religion involves patterns of spiritual beliefs and practices formed in social institutions and traditions that are maintained by a community over time.[21]

Spiritual direction, as a form of spiritual guidance, is operationally defined as "whenever one person helps another to see and respond to spiritual truth."[22] People are motivated by various reasons to seek a spiritual director who provides spiritual direction. Some of their goals may be to integrate spirituality in their everyday lives, practice discernment in difficult decisions, nurture a sensitivity for social justice and concern for the poor, live their spiritual or religious affiliation with integrity, or identify and trust their experiences of God, Divine, or

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[20] The concept of weaving various aspects of oneself through dance is borrowed from Boni Boswell, in Boni Boswell et al., "Dance of Disability and Spirituality," *Journal of Rehabilitation,* vol. 73, no. 4 (2007).
[21] See Edward R. Canda, "Religion and Spirituality" in T. Mizrahi and L. E. Davis, eds., *Encyclopedia of Social Work*, vol. 2 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 413-418; Edward R. Canda and Leola D. Furman, *Spiritual Diversity in Social Work Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).
[22] Gerald G. May, *Care of Mind, Care of Spirit* (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 1992), 1.

the Holy.[23]

There is a dearth of research studies exploring the spirituality of persons who are Deaf. Two studies that focus specifically on this topic are presented: (a) The De Sales Project and (b) my dissertation research study.

The De Sales Project

The De Sales Project, funded by the National Catholic Office for the Deaf (NCOD), examined the spirituality of American Deaf people in 1987 and 1988.[24] Several goals of the study were identified. The first goal of the study was to explore the possible existence of a deaf spirituality, how it is developed and nurtured, and how to communicate Deaf spirituality's main features. The second goal was to explore the implications for pastoral workers in Deaf ministry and how to companion Deaf people on their spiritual journey. The third goal was to develop models of spiritual direction, and the last goal was to present the study and its results at a workshop.

The research study's findings have important and practical implications to better understand Deaf spirituality and create a spiritually, culturally, and linguistically appropriate Deaf ministry. Eight elements common to Deaf life experience were observed during the interviews and identified as potential effects on the life and development of a Deaf person and may include any number of the following elements: (a) visual attentiveness, (b) natural bonding, (c) God approves conditionally, (d) God as outside of self, (e) "strangers in a foreign land"—Deaf persons in a hearing church, (f) loneliness, (g) alienation from self, and (h) alienation

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[23] Spiritual Directors International's (SDI) website states that SDI is "a global learning community of people from many faiths and many nations who share a common passion and commitment to the art and contemplative practice of spiritual direction, known as spiritual companionship or spiritual guidance." http://www.sdiworld.org (accessed June 1, 2013).

[24] See William Key, *Eye Centered: A Study on the Spirituality of Deaf People with Implications for Pastoral Ministry* (Silver Spring, MD: National Catholic Office of the Deaf, 1992).

from family.[25] For each of these elements, biblical quotations were suggested, spiritual and pastoral implications outlined, and practical applications for spiritual formation and development recommended.

The summary of the findings highlighted topics such as the importance of the Deaf church, and the Deaf person's relationship to the Church and church involvement. In addition to disseminating research study findings, a pragmatic handbook for pastoral workers in Deaf ministry was produced based on their research findings in addition to their observations and ministry experience.

Dissertation Research on Spirituality of Deaf Persons

A mixed-method dissertation research study investigated the experience of spiritual direction utilizing videophone technology between a spiritual director and spiritual directees, all of whom are Deaf.[26] The interview questionnaire used in the study was designed with four major sections: (a) spirituality and the world of worship, (b) spiritual direction, (c) information and communication technology, and (d) hearing loss/deafness. Twelve experts consented to participate in the content validity analysis of the questionnaire. The content validity index (CVI) was employed to evaluate the content validity of the questionnaire. As a result, the questionnaire was reduced from 81 to 77 items, resulting in a CVI of .99, suggesting a high level of content validity.

Queries regarding social inclusion, social exclusion, and social connectedness were present throughout the questionnaire. Following is a sample of open-ended questions from the first section—Spirituality and the

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[25] Key, 1992.

[26] Nancy A. Delich, "Utilizing Communication Technology in Spiritual Direction: The Deaf Experience" (Doctoral dissertation, 2011), *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Database* (Order No. 3515936).

World of Worship—where experiences of inclusion, social connectedness, and exclusion were probed.

<u>Spirituality and the World of Worship</u>

Q8. Tell me about your experiences when you have felt a closeness/intimacy with God.

Q9. Tell me about your experiences when you felt God was absent in your life.

Q10. Tell me about your experiences with people who have helped you in your spirituality and/or relationship with God.

Q11. Tell me about your experiences with people who have hindered you in your spirituality and/or relationship with God.

Q12. Tell me of events in your life that have helped you in your spirituality and/or relationship with God.

Q13. Tell me of events in your life that have hindered your spirituality and/or relationship with God.

The spiritual and technological experiences of the spiritual directees and the spiritual director were examined utilizing the content-valid questionnaire. Serving as a preliminary investigation for future research studies involving larger numbers of subjects, the dissertation's four participants ranged in age from 37 to 91 years, were Caucasian, had a severe-to-profound hearing loss, and were raised in the Christian faith. The interviews were conducted via direct videophone to videophone where each of the participants was interviewed in his or her own home. The interviews were recorded with a capture card and images were downloaded into the computer. Each interview was transcribed from sign language into written English, and portraitures were developed for each participant. The questionnaire also guided the heuristic inquiry and development of the spiritual director's portraiture.

Three different qualitative analyses were used in the study: (a) an analytic inductive process, (b) a computer-assisted analysis, and (c) collaborative analysis. Relationship, spirituality, spiritual direction, and communication were four common thematic categories that emerged from the three analyses. All four thematic

categories relate to the concept of social connectedness. Salient themes from the analyses were consolidated into eight major themes under the four thematic categories, supporting the four propositions inherent in the study's theoretical framework.

Findings

The spiritual experiences of the spiritual director and the spiritual directees who are Deaf were as diverse as their communication modalities, choice of communication technologies, and personal life histories. They shared the common challenge of accessing knowledge, information, and language impacting all areas of their lives including their spirituality due to their deafness. The experience of communication as well as

Table 1: *Integrated Thematic Categories and Overarching Themes Across Four Spiritual Directees and Spiritual Director (Delich, 2011)*

Thematic Category	Theme Number and Description
Spirituality	1. Accepting Deafness reflects relationships and communication with God
	2. Nurturing a deeper relationship with God through age and maturity
	3. Reconnecting with God through challenges and crises
Spiritual Direction	4. Rediscovering and awakening of self and relationship with God through spiritual direction
Deafness and Connectivity	5. Welcoming greater inclusion through communication technology, access, and support
	6. Discovery autonomy with advances in communication technology
Deafness and Relationship	7. Acknowledging role of others in participants' relationships with God
	8. Recognizing deafness in relationship with others

communication technology was considered highly central to their sense of social connectedness. Though all of the themes relate to the desire for social connection at various levels, space here allows discussion of only a few of them. Table 1 above summarizes the four thematic categories and the corresponding eight themes.

Theme 1: Accepting Deafness Reflects Relationship with God

Challenges, changes, and transformation towards acceptance and integration of their deafness into their identities marked the participants' spiritual journeys. Theological challenges during spiritual direction sessions to various concepts or demands—perfection, normalcy, virtuous suffering, sinfulness, the pressure to triumph over having less than five senses in order to prove oneself worthy or whole as a human being in the eyes of God and others—can assist the Deaf person in moving toward increased self-acceptance. Additionally, removing the medical model of Deaf people from theology to formulate a liberation theology that allows for full personhood is compatible with the cultural experience of deafness. With such modifications, liberation theology can make room for Deaf and disabled people within their unique life situations.[27] In another study, the acceptance of disability and its influence on identity and self-image was expressed as an essential step leading to spiritual progress.[28] Thus, the potential for social connectedness exists where acceptance is present.

Theme 3: Reconnecting with God Through Challenges and Crises

The decision to reconnect with God through challenges and crises served as fodder for transformation and growth in the participants' spiritual journeys. People

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[27] Both Nancy L. Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994) and Hannah Lewis, *Deaf Liberation Theology* (Cornwall, UK: Ashgate, 2007) propose a redefinition of liberation theology in order to address the marginalization of disabled and Deaf individuals.

[28] Boni Boswell et al., "Dance of Disability and Spirituality," *Journal of Rehabilitation,* vol. 73, no. 4 (2007), 33-40.

commonly experience some challenges and crises that affect their lives. For those who live with differences, whether it is skin color or the absence of one or more of the five senses, distinctive and perhaps greater challenges present themselves regularly. The study participants' social isolation in the world around them due to communication barriers served as catalysts to propel them on the spiritual path. The potentiality for transformation from the effect of trauma and human existence on the spiritual journey served to reconnect the participants' to God despite society's social exclusion and the resulting lack of social connectedness.[29]

Theme 5: Welcoming Greater Inclusion via Communication Technology, Access, and Support

Today's interactive technology provides unprecedented access, allowing for increased interaction of Deaf people with each other and their world. For the first time, sign language entered cyberspace through broadband and video technologies where Deaf people can communicate using their own language instead of relying on a third party or the written word.[30] The high level of enthusiasm generated by the participants of the interview questions revealed the highly crucial role of communication in their lives as well as the significant benefits of communication technology. Reflecting on her inability to visit with her grandparents on the telephone as a child, one participant stated that yesterday's insurmountable chasm of communication has been miraculously bridged by today's communication technology. Geographical and communication boundaries have been expanded through communication technology, increasing their sense of social connectedness with other Deaf people as well as the hearing community.

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[29] See Robert Grant, *The Way of the Wound: A Spirituality of Trauma and Transformation* (Oakland: Robert Grant, 1996).
[30] See Irene Leigh's chapter on technology, quoting Bernstein, 146-155.

Theme 7: Acknowledging Role of Others in Participants'
Relationships with God

Human development and faith in a relational and
cultural context impacts how the individual participates
in and creates his or her world of close relationships,
culture, class, and society.[31] The De Sales study indicated
that the relationship itself with pastoral workers who
could communicate with the Deaf members was most
helpful in providing support and acceptance. For the
dissertation participants, the role of others exerted both a
positive and negative influence on how they viewed and
related to God. Recognizing the vital role of human
relational experiences with significant others through
various stories shared by the participants shed light on
the role of others on their faith development and
relationship with God. Numerous examples of social
exclusion and social connectedness were documented in
the participants' portraitures.

Theme 8: Recognizing Deaf Consciousness in Relationship
with Others

The term Deafhood describes the day-to-day
endeavors of Deaf people by means of continual inner
and outer external dialogue to understand the process of
who they are and who they are becoming.[32] The
understanding of Deafhood and what it means to be a
Deaf person in a Deaf community varies from person to
person. The participants' evolving recognition of a Deaf
consciousness inevitably began with the onset of their
hearing loss. The diverse social, cultural, historical, and
political constructs, created by both the deaf and hearing

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[31] See Pamela Cooper-White, *Shared Wisdom: Use of the Self in Pastoral Care and
Counseling* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2004).

[32] Ladd, 3. Inspired by Ladd's book, a grassroots movement developed
around the concept of Deafhood. Its mission is "to celebrate our unique sign
languages and richly diverse culture, one that is easily understood through an
ongoing shared exchange of thoughts, feelings, and experiences distinctive to
ourselves…" Its website, "Deafhood Discussions," presents sections of
Ladd's book in American Sign Language for viewing by the Deaf community.
See http://www.deafhood.us/wp/ (accessed August 31, 2013)

communities, had critical bearing on their social and communication life experiences.[33] One participant's fears of communicating with hearing people contrasted with another participant's openness to including hearing people in her social circle, which provides insight into how the time period, location, and self-concept is reflected in their experience of social exclusion and social connectedness. Bridging between the deaf and hearing worlds reflected yet another distinctive quality and nature of another participant's relationships, affecting her conscious sense of belonging as one who belongs to neither the deaf nor the hearing communities. As with any healthy construct of consciousness, so with Deaf consciousness: there is a continuum of expression for varying levels of integration of individual, social, and communication life experiences.

Summary of the Two Studies

Language and culture are two relational features of spirituality that were found among Deaf people.[34] It has been observed that Deaf people generally ignore the denominational tradition of their Christian churches and instead are brought together by linguistic and cultural needs.[35] For example, a Roman Catholic Deaf person may attend a Baptist, Episcopalian, or Methodist church where other Deaf people are present. Deaf people may also be members of more than one church and attend the churches in the area where they live. These studies

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[33] Leigh, 2009.

[34] Charlotte Baker-Shenk, "Breaking the Shackles: Liberation Theology and the Deaf Community," *Sojourner,* vol. 14, no. 3 (1985), 30-32; Frederick C. Schreiber, "What a Deaf Jewish Leader Expects of a Rabbi" in *Deaf World: A Historical Reader and Primary Sourcebook,* ed. Lois Bragg (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2001), 33-27; Broesterhuizen, 2005; Ladd, 2007; Lane, Hoffmeister, and Bahan, 1996; Lewis, 2007; Morris, 2008; and Ian Robertson, *Ephphata: Be Opened. The Sacred Narratives of Deaf People—Cross Cultural Opportunities in Religious Education and Praxis* (September 21, 2007), whose paper was presented at St. Thomas University, Miami, Florida. He is in agreement that language and culture distinguishes the Deaf community from other communities and is reflected in its spirituality.

[35] Morris, 123.

suggest that the Deaf community be viewed through a cultural and linguistic lens where for them, social connectedness is more important than denominational boundaries. In order for religious leaders to provide spiritually-sensitive ministry with Deaf people, recognizing and understanding the potential cultural and linguistic underpinnings of their spirituality is essential for Deaf ministry to be relevant to its members.

Recommendations for Developing Deaf Ministry

The geographic location, the needs and abilities of the local Deaf community, their particular interests, and the availability of trained staff will be reflected in the structure and unique characteristics of the Deaf ministry at any given church. Obstacles include limited seminary training for potential deaf and hard of hearing religious leaders as well as financial resources for hard-to-find qualified sign language interpreters. For hearing religious leaders who aspire to connect with Deaf members, there are three potential models of Deaf ministries. They are interpreted ministries, Deaf congregations within a larger hearing church, and Deaf churches.[36]

Interpreted Ministries

Sign language interpreters may be employed to interpret the worship service and other church activities for Deaf individuals. This first model may or may not include a designated Deaf ministry, which is dependent on the size, needs and abilities of the Deaf population within that region.

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[36] Published by the National Committee on Ministries with Deaf, Late-Deafened, Hard of Hearing, and Deaf-Blind People and the Health and Welfare Ministries Unit of the General Board of Global Ministries of The United Methodist Church, their manual provides education and detailed guidance in establishing Deaf ministries. [N. Kingsley (ed.)] To obtain the manual titled, "Signs of Solidarity: Ministries with People who are Deaf, Late-Deafened, Hard of Hearing, and Deaf-Blind," see the website for further information at http://gbgm-umc.org/disc/deafministries.stm (accessed August 31, 2013).

There are several challenges in this model of interpreted ministries. First, finding the right interpreters is often an arduous task, especially in the religious domain. It is crucial that interpreters be knowledgeable about the religious ideas expressed in the scriptures, hymns, sermons, and other parts of the worship service. They also must know the range of religious signs by the particular denomination and local church. Second, budgetary restrictions may limit the church's ability to hire a qualified interpreter should one be found. As such, a church may choose a volunteer with some signing ability without consulting the Deaf members. Such a decision sends a message to Deaf members that their input and involvement are not encouraged in decision-making. Additionally, the signing volunteer may not provide them with full participation in the life of the church. It is not unusual for Deaf people to follow an interpreter from church to church, because it is often harder to find a qualified interpreter than a church that they enjoy attending.

The Deaf Congregation within a Larger Hearing Church

A director of Deaf ministry who is fluent in sign language and paid a part-time salary by the church serving the Deaf congregation within a larger hearing church is the second model of forming a Deaf ministry. Although there are various ways to organize the Deaf ministry within this model, a typical structure includes conducting the worship service in both voice and sign language at the hearing church. The director plans a variety of services for its members such as religious education, fellowship activities, childcare for Deaf children, and committees for continued operation of the Deaf ministry.

The Deaf Church

Members of the Deaf community often prefer a Deaf church to a Deaf congregation within a larger hearing church. Thus, the third model involves the establishment of a Deaf church. In a Deaf church, Deaf members can assume leadership and design their own worship style based on visual needs as well as the cultural values and

abilities of their local Deaf community. They can act as chairpersons of the various committees and decide what educational programs and outreach ministries the church will provide. The language of the Deaf church tends to reflect the knowledge and skills of the pastor as well as the needs of the Deaf community. Of the three models outlined, the Deaf Church is most associated with social connectedness among members of the Deaf community.[37]

Conclusion

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus singles out the deaf man, takes him aside, and affirms his worthiness as a child of God. Jesus did more than include this man in his ministry. He socially and physically connected with him through love, acceptance, opportunity, justice, equity, and validation as he privately took him aside. The act of social connectedness became a source of healing. Social connectedness can enable leaders of spiritual communities to consciously practice these principles in relation to all those in their congregation, including Deaf members. Jesus understood the deaf man's communication needs through vision and touch and responded accordingly. In the midst of a community devoted to the social connectedness of all people, perhaps this is one of the ultimate challenges of being Church—of being community. What we do as Church signifies everything about our community. It is not just about talking. It is not just about signing. It is about being, doing, and living the values espoused by our faith.

Be opened.

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[37] Another resource for establishing Deaf ministries can be found at the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A policy website: No barriers for deaf people in churches at http://www.ncccusa.org/assembly/deaf.htm (accessed June 2012). An article guiding spiritual leaders with families who have deaf children within their congregation is highly recommended and can be found through Teresa B. Blankmeyer et al., "Language Needs of Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Infants and Children: Information for Spiritual Leaders and Communities." *Journal of Religion, Disability & Health,* vol. 15, No. 3 (2011), 272-295.