

SEEKING THE GOD OF DEAF PEOPLE A DEAF/HEARING DIALOGUE

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By Mercedes Iannone and Mary Ann Barth
St. Thomas University
Miami Gardens, Florida

ABSTRACT

Using the methodology of practical theology, the Deaf and hearing authors document the oppression of the Deaf community within the church. Seeing access to religious education as response, they describe their collaboration in developing a graduate program in ministry with the Deaf. Deaf culture, language, community, images of self and of God are explored. The need to raise cultural awareness of hearing religious educators is demonstrated

INTRODUCTION

It was on a sunny January day in Florida that I (Mercedes) had my Moses experience not on Mount Horeb but in Sunny Florida. I found myself on holy ground at a National Catholic Deaf Conference. Like Moses I had come reluctantly a hearing person with no knowledge of the Deaf. And like him what I experienced compelled me to act. I had been asked to fill in for a friend. The topic of the presentation was “Women in the Church.” The conference director greeted me warmly and led me to the stage. At that point the chasm between my audience and me prompted me to question my audacity in agreeing to this. “Just talk normally and the interpreters on either side of you will sign your message to the participants” she whispered. I looked out at a hundred Deaf persons and hearing pastoral workers with the Deaf, said a prayer and started off. After a brief time I became used to the interpreters and to the brief lag in recognition that registered on the faces of the participants. I felt a stirring within me that said I was on holy ground. When I finished I was surprised by the response. The audience raised their arms and began to shake them. They looked animated and pleased. The interpreter clarified. “They’re clapping. They liked what you said.”

In the discussion period I heard the Spirit through the voice of the interpreter. It was the same message echoed in different ways: You were talking about us. We are like women in the church. We have no influence. We have no control. Our needs are not being met. Until recently, we were not allowed to be ordained. We have not had access to theological education. I felt solidarity with this community and a need to struggle with them for freedom.

But, like Moses, I didn’t have the skills to act. What I did have was a University position in pastoral ministries. Enter Ian Robertson, a future student, who spoke American Sign Language (ASL) and had connections in the Deaf community. Together, we began to think of ways of responding to the oppression of the Deaf in our community. After some research we found that there were several training programs for Deaf ministers but none that carried graduate credit. Yet, credentials mean power. Could we offer a Master’s program in Pastoral Ministries with the Deaf? We knew we needed to listen to Deaf leaders or our effort would become another oppressive system. Thus began a journey of discovery.

We began by securing a generous grant (was it manna?) to assemble a group of Deaf experts to work with us. They included members of the National Catholic Office for the Deaf and the National Council of Churches Committee on Deaf Ministry. Together we discerned that higher education in pastoral ministry was indeed a key to access to the power needed to provide equal status for Deaf Christians. We spent the next two years struggling to create a curriculum for educating Deaf students in the Christian Tradition (a hearing tradition) while discovering and honoring their culture, their authentic images of God.

I (Maryann) had been active in Deaf Ministry for many years when I was asked to participate in this project. I was born hearing, then became hard of hearing and finally deaf. I have both Deaf and hearing in my family. Some Deaf family members are oral, meaning that they lip read and some sign. A product of Catholic education through college my earliest memories of church and religion were from hearing nuns in a Catholic School. Currently, I am an administrator at a Catholic Deaf school. I have a masters degree in counseling from Gallaudet University and also teach ASL, Linguistics and Deaf Studies at several universities.

DEAF CULTURE AND OPPRESSION

I have a burning desire to help the world understand Deaf culture. It encompasses rules, behaviors, traditions, the arts, politics, social protocol. It respects the hands and the eyes. At its core are American Sign Language and our history of oppression. I have chosen this to belong to this culture though I could exist in the “hearing” culture. For me, belonging is spirit-filled whereas existing is just surviving.

There are approximately 27 million Deaf (2006 statistic) and about 95% are unchurched. (The Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod, Reporter Online, June 2004). About 90% of disabled people are unchurched. Deaf people do not consider themselves to be disabled but to be a distinct minority culture. We live in a hearing centered culture characterized by sound, music, voices, stories, auditory stimulations. Most people with disabilities belong to this culture. The Deaf, however, have a different center: eyes, light, touch. Their language is sign, not just English words in sign but an authentic constructed language.

When I became hard of hearing it became quite clear to me that our Church was sorely lacking in being a universal church. The spiritual needs of the Deaf were not being met. I became angry. As church we need to change and become more inclusive of Deaf people. The invitation to participate in developing a Masters level program for Deaf ministers was a godsend.

Until I met MaryAnn and other team members in the project, I was unaware of the existence of Deaf Culture or that the touchstone of the oppression of Deaf people was sign language. In our research, we visited Gallaudet University and I began to understand. On the wall of the library is a large mosaic depicting the 1988 march on Washington by Deaf people. Their slogan was, Deaf President Now. It was the moment when they demanded that they be governed by a Deaf person. For them it was equivalent to Martin Luther King’s challenge twenty years before.

The history of oppression began to be recorded in the 19th century, Margalit Fox in her book, Talking Hands, recounts that Alexander Graham Bell suggested that the Deaf should not have children. She references the famous conference in Milan, Italy, in 1880 where one of the conference members said,

Oral speech is the sole power that can rekindle the light God breathed into man when, giving him a soul in a corporal body, he gave him also a means of understanding, of conceiving and of expressing himself. . . . While, on the one hand, mimic signs are not sufficient to express the fullness of thought, on the other they enhance and glorify fantasy and all the faculties of the sense of imagination. . . . The fantastic language of signs exalts the senses and foments the passions, whereas speech elevates the mind much more naturally, with calm, prudence and truth and avoids the danger of exaggerating the sentiment expressed and provoking harmful mental impressions (87)

She argues that the campaign against sign language over the next hundred years profoundly affected the Deaf and was internalized by them. They were persuaded that the language they used every day was substandard. She equates the self loathing engendered by white people's claims of superiority to blacks to the situation of the Deaf as late at the 1960's (108).

Peter McDonough, a Deaf Roman Catholic priest in England, says that it is the whole system in our society that is geared to the hearing. Therefore, the deaf experience oppression in subtle, ordinary ways each day. He suggests that if the whole world were deaf from the Pope down to the tiniest baby all societies would be geared to the Deaf (Eye People Ministering, 38).

I can attest that our oppression is still very real. Cochlear implants, double cochlear implants, oralism are all factors that say to Deaf people: You as a Deaf person are inferior. You are broken and have to be fixed.

Does God not accept me for what God made? Did God make a mistake? How can I be whole if many people are telling me that I must speak, that I cannot use ASL, that I must get a cochlear implant. When I pray to God, does God understand my signs? Does Jesus act as my interpreter? Do people who know sign and who have died act as Jesus and God's interpreter? Our lessons in religious education and ministry say: Answer the call. They ask, "Did you hear his voice?" I don't hear the call and I don't hear a voice. Does that mean Deaf people are not God's people?

As I listened to my new friends and began to read I was struck by how many deaf children in deaf schools who are taught by hearing teachers have internalized the image of themselves as inferior to hearing people. Sister Marie Robb in an address at the International Catholic Foundation for the Service of Deaf Persons illustrates this point. She tells this story. Faced with the sudden death of Ben, one of their peers, Deaf middle schoolers in England wrote notes. "Now Ben is free. Ben can hear. Ben's heart is perfectly fine," one wrote. Another sees Ben "...with no heart problems, with no deafness. A new body, a new life"(On Eagles Wings, 54). It is clear that they see deafness as negative. God is obviously hearing and when they die and go to heaven, they will hear. Sister Marie, a hearing teacher, however, is apparently not aware of this as a problem. How to change the situation? We believe that raising the historical consciousness of the hearing teachers as well as teaching Deaf centered images and preparing Deaf teachers are steps in the right direction

STEPS TO CHANGE

This continues to be the crux of our educational challenge. How to draw out from Deaf students what has many times been left unnamed while at the same time teaching the Bible, Christology, Sacraments, etc. so that Deaf educators can pass on the faith to their

community and offer their insights to enrich the hearing community. We struggle to find ways for the Deaf to go to their deep story and to articulate their experience of the holy in metaphors that reflect their culture. In short, we want our students to develop the confidence of competence so that they can sit at the ecclesial table and communicate as equals. If teaching is “showing how” as Gabriel Moran asserts, we walk a fine line in respecting Deaf language and culture and in translating classical Christian texts.

Language

The first issue that we faced was language. ASL is a language that has its own syntax, grammar, etc.. It is NOT English on the hands. Thus, some of the words, concepts and specifically, theological concepts are very difficult to translate effectively. We have dealt with this problem in several ways.

First, we teach a method of interpretation rather than translation to the students in the scripture courses so that they can master the process of moving from English to ASL from words to pictures. Next, we introduce the students to theological language by preparing a video of Evelyn and James Whitehead’s book, Method in Ministry (1994) in ASL. I worked with Deacon Patrick Graybill, a Deaf Deacon who is also an English Professor and actor. It was a huge learning experience for me. The task of taking this required text and making it visual, respectful of Deaf Culture while being true to the text and message, was a daunting task. It is a symbol of the program. All students are given a copy when they matriculate and they watch it multiple times during the course of their studies.

We have also established ASL as the language of the program. All students needed to have proficiency at the moderate level established by a test before admission. All classes are taught in ASL or fully interpreted. We developed an order of preference for selecting professors, beginning with those who were Deaf and academically qualified, then those who were hearing and proficient in ASL and qualified, next those who were hearing and in need of an interrupter. In these cases, team teaching is preferred.

Curriculum

We used a process of correlation in developing the course of study for the program. We put the current Master of Arts in Pastoral Ministries in conversation with the peculiar needs of the Deaf. We critiqued each established course syllabi and texts with Deaf students needs in mind. Next, we determined that there were four areas for which we needed specialized courses: Deaf Culture, Pastoral Ministry in the Deaf Community, Prayer and Spirituality in the Deaf Community, and Religious Education and Evangelization and we commissioned the Deaf members to develop those courses.

Identity and Community

When the curriculum team came together it was clear that we were in a partnership. Deaf and hearing team members each had an expertise to contribute. But more than that, the amount of faith that we had and still have, to design, develop, implement and ‘tweak’ this program is telling. For myself, it was a very humbling and enriching experience that was life changing. Not only did we work on developing a curriculum, but we grew together as a community that transcended the communication differences. As a Deaf person I felt respected and productive. We wanted the students to have Maryann’s experience of a community of scholars in which each is respected but we realized that this needed to be done in a safe space. Whereas the development team had been composed of established leaders, we were now challenged to provide the context where leaders could develop.

Hannah Lewis, a Deaf Anglican priest, in her wonderful doctoral dissertation, *A Critical Examination of the Church and Deaf People: Toward a Deaf Liberation Theology*. (2002) states at the outset: I will look at theological issues of biblical interpretation, of Christology and worship and argue that d/Deaf people need a strong, segregated church to provide us with a secure base from which we can challenge the oppressive structures for the church and the world not as supplicants, but as equals. (108, emphasis mine) We agreed that the students needed time to consolidate their self esteem and cultural identity in a setting where they constituted the majority. Special emphasis in encouraging critical thinking and developing a hermeneutic of suspicion in reading texts from the hearing center is more possible in this setting.

My experience of Deaf culture and my counseling background tell me that Deaf people have deep feelings of isolation coming as they do from a small minority who speak another language. Added to this is the fact that 90% of Deaf children are born to hearing parents most of whom do not speak sign language. In the 19th century schools for the Deaf rose and many of the older Deaf are products of these. They provided a built in community. Some of our older students speak about the tension of going home for holidays where no one could converse with them versus staying at school with a community with whom they could communicate.

In response to Maryann's insight, we have made a university commitment to provide separate classes for the Deaf as a way to encourage community. Practically, we have sought to provide full tuition waivers for Deaf students so that they can join the group. In addition we have scheduled classes so that there are intensive weeks in January and June where the students from all over the country can be together for an intense residential experience where they shared food, friendship and prayer in their own language. They, continue learning at home through on-line programs. They often comment that when they go home they have no one to talk with about what they are learning. They really look forward to internet conversations and to being together. Thus, identity and community are strengthened by the structures of the program. We see this as an intermediate step in the process of achieving full and equal status.

THE CONTINUING JOURNEY

Deaf people develop our metaphors for God out of our experience just as the dominant culture does. We must be sensitive to Deaf experience. For example, God as Father is a common hearing metaphor. But for the Deaf this might be a foreign idea since most Deaf people's fathers never learned to communicate with them. The Deaf are Eye People. In pastoral work with my community the teacher needs to remove everything that is hearing and make it visual. One of the gifts that we can give to the hearing community is our appreciation for and use of ritual. Thus, sin and forgiveness might be shown by using a glass bowl with a light under it. Each person puts in a piece of cloth which obscures the light. When they ask forgiveness they remove the cloths and the light shines brightly. God is always light for us but we block the light with sin. For the Deaf showing it is much more important than saying it..

Bernard Lee in his book, *Jesus and the Metaphors of God* (1993) describes the difficulty in understanding that arises when we are not aware of the influence of our own deep story or cultural lens. He cites the fact that Jesus' deep story was Jewish. In the Christian experience the Greek story has been dominant and has tended to swallow up the Jewish.

Consequently we have lost much of the Jewishness that belonged to the immediate world of Jesus and his followers—hence, it has been a very difficult to know the life of Jesus on its own ground. (30) Similarly, the Deaf faith story has been obfuscated by the hearing story in which the metaphor of hearing is ubiquitous. The time has come to examine the depths of Deaf people’s faith using the lens of their own deep story.

Deaf scholars who are pastoral will be the ones who will be best able to do this arduous work. The program we have developed at Saint Thomas University is one effort toward producing such scholars. Our hope is that they will be the Joshuas to lead their people into a land of promise.

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