

Alternate Reality: Envisioning Preaching and Ministry with the Deaf

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When my father died, I asked his pastor not to say or imply in any way that my father—who was deaf all of his life—was now “healed” of his deafness and hearing the angels sing. The pastor probably wondered why I did not want my father now to be hearing. Most hearing people would probably think my request was rather strange; indeed, many people of the hearing world have the misconception that deaf people would want to hear, and that to be able to hear would be good news.

This perspective of the hearing world has contributed to the church’s failure in reaching the deaf. Common knowledge among those who minister with the deaf is that less than ten percent of the deaf are churched. This is a minority group that has been overlooked by the church. Although my parents and four uncles and aunts were deaf, and I continue to be involved with the deaf community, I do not claim to be a spokesperson for that community. What I do claim and attempt to share here is a perspective that has been shaped by my experience of growing up and being involved in the deaf world.

Two perspectives or models of deafness dominate thinking today. The first, the pathological or medical model, sees deafness as “abnormal.” Those who hold this perspective believe deaf people should live as “normal” (hearing) as possible; thus, they should be trained in oralism (speech reading and speaking) and should be prohibited from signing. Hearing “experts” advise parents of deaf children not to teach their children sign language for two reasons: that it will become a crutch and that the children will not learn to lip-read or speak. Proponents of this model argue that deaf children should be mainstreamed with hearing children, not segregated in a residential school for the deaf. These advocates do not recognize American Sign Language (ASL) as a legitimate language, and some even contend that the deaf culture is nothing more than a deaf ghetto.

One well-known proponent of this perspective was Alexander Graham Bell, whose mother and wife were deaf. They were oralists and shunned the use of sign language and the deaf culture. He founded the Volta Bureau, now the Alexander Graham Bell Association for the Deaf, an organization that supports oralism and lobbies against the use of ASL. Bell expressed his views in a paper entitled, “Memoir upon the Formation of a Deaf Variety of the Human Race.” His thesis was that if the deaf socialize among their own kind, they would marry, and create a “defective variety” of people. (Actually, only about ten percent of deaf couples have deaf children, and ninety percent of deaf children have hearing parents.)

The other perspective is the cultural or holistic model. Among proponents of this model, it has become common practice to use the upper case D, as in Deaf, to designate those deaf people who see themselves as culturally deaf persons. Culturally Deaf persons regard themselves as members of a cultural and language minority group rather than as individuals with an audiological disability. This definition assumes that the Deaf are “a group of persons who share a common language (ASL) and a common

culture.”¹ “We do not view deafness as a sickness or handicap. We view it as a gift from God, which has led to the creation of a unique language and culture, worthy of respect and affirmation.”² Members of Deaf culture see themselves as a cultural, linguistic minority group, similar to Korean Americans or Hispanic Americans. They refuse to identify themselves as disabled:

Individuals who identify themselves as a part of this group would deny audiological deafness as the primary characteristic in defining who they are. For these individuals, “I’m deaf” does not mean “I can’t hear.” It means “I *don’t* hear.” This is a subtle but telling difference. If you can’t hear, you make auditory adjustments, using hearing aids and other assistive listening devices, to enhance your diminished hearing. Visual accommodations, while important, are secondary to the auditory. If you do not hear, you make visual adjustments to communication. ASL is a visual/gestural language. The signs convey meaning visually just as words convey meaning when we speak them.³

In the church, the Deaf experience the hearing world’s ethnocentrism, the belief that one’s culture, one’s race, or ethnicity is superior to all others. The missionary movement, roughly from 1792 to well into the twentieth century,⁴ was fraught with an ethnocentrism that determined that Western culture was far superior to the culture of the natives. “If such people were to be won to Christ, they would first need to be ‘civilized’ in order to be evangelized.”⁵ The gospel became equated with the Western world’s way of living. Not only was the church to convert people to Christianity, the church saw the need to convert the native people to a “more civilized” culture, Western culture. Charles Kraft shares a conversation he had with a young Liberian man who “told me that his understanding of John 3:16 was something as follows: ‘God so loved Europeans that he accepts as Christian any African who turns his back on his own customs and becomes converted to a western culture.’”⁶

Quite often the church’s ethnocentrism toward the Deaf community is unconscious. Neil Glickman captures this attitude well in his retelling of a Deaf woman’s experience at a funeral:

During the eulogy, the preacher remarked that this man was now in Heaven with his Lord and he was now “communicating with his hands in his pockets.” He no longer needs to sign, the preacher continued. He can now speak. He can now hear. He is now healed. The preacher’s bias was caught by an astute deaf woman who wondered why he assumed that deaf people go to Heaven and learn speech, but not that hearing people go to Heaven and learn sign. “Does he think that when French people die, they go to Heaven and learn English?” she asked, annoyed also by his assumption that deaf people are defective and that when they die they are “healed” and become hearing people. This deaf woman, who had been a close friend of the deceased man, asked to say a few words at the gravesite. Speaking through an interpreter, she remarked that this man had signed all his life and that signing was his preferred mode of communication. She even suspected he

was already at work...developing yet another kind of sign, Heaven Sign Language (HSL).⁷

When, like the preacher above, we declare that the Deaf can be healed only when they are physically and literally able to hear, that they will have perfection in heaven, i.e. be hearing in heaven, are we actually advocating that they give up their culture and language and live as members of the hearing world? Perhaps, to them, we seem to do so when, for instance, we ask them to include in their worship elements they may see as meaningful only for the hearing, such as music.

A pathological understanding of deafness, such as the one described in the excerpt above, denies the Deaf of their culture, a culture in which they find meaning and purpose. Because they define themselves as Deaf, and see their deafness as a gift from God, we may, through actions that ignore their culture or language, seem to deny the Deaf of their personhood, their full humanity. As a church, we need to seek ways that not only respect, but affirm, the culture of Deafness.

In our seeking, we need to be consciously aware of “audism,” a term created by Harlan Lane to describe how the pathological perspective has been oppressive for the Deaf. Lane defines audism as “the corporate institution for dealing with deaf people, dealing with them by making statements about them, authorizing views of them, describing them, teaching about them, governing where they go to school and, in some cases, where they live; in short, audism is the hearing way of dominating, restructuring, and exercising authority over the deaf community.”⁸

For many years, the audist powers have been oppressive for the Deaf. In 1880, delegates at the Milan Conference in Milan, Italy, decided that oralism should be the exclusive means of educating the deaf. What makes this decision so ludicrous is that there was only one deaf delegate at this conference! And so for decades, deaf education in the U. S. was limited to that of oralism. Some states went so far as to pass laws prohibiting the use of sign language in the education of the deaf. Nebraska passed such a law in 1911. Other schools made it a school policy. But oralism is not the panacea the oralists want us to think it is. One study has indicated that children in oral programs fall far behind deaf children who learn ASL as a first language.⁹ Another study has discovered that “normally hearing teen-agers with no training lip-read as well as pre-lingually deaf youngsters of the same age who had taken ten years of lessons.”¹⁰

Another practice of the audist establishment is mainstreaming, in which deaf children are educated with their hearing peers, rather than in segregated schools or classes. On the surface this may appear to be the solution, for one can make the argument that deaf children need to learn to live in a hearing world. However, successful mainstreaming requires a critical mass of deaf students so that social interaction will take place and expensive support services will be more cost effective. Often deaf students feel very isolated; according to a study by Claire Ramsey, over fifty percent of the schools that reported having a deaf and hard of hearing program served only one hearing impaired student:

It is simply not possible for an individual child to develop and learn without access to and membership in groups, both local social groups (like classrooms) and cultural groups with histories and practices....From a theoretical

point of view, this means that deaf children in mainstreaming settings have little or no access to the power of social interaction to make learning possible.¹¹

Many studies have indicated different academic achievements for deaf children, and most of the studies indicate we are failing. The average deaf student leaves school with an academic achievement equivalent to the third grade level for a hearing person. Mainstreaming is a civil rights issue, not an educational issue. It may be politically correct, but can be educationally devastating.

The audist establishment's denigration of the language of the deaf, American Sign Language, further demonstrates the oppressive power of the dominant culture, the hearing community. The oralists' case against ASL was that it was not a rich and full language; it could not communicate abstract thoughts, and was too "iconic." One sign language dictionary had only about 2,000 words—proof, according to the oralists, that ASL was not a full and rich language. Many unknowingly accused sign language of not differentiating between nouns and verbs, or lacking in adjectives, adverbs, plurals, and tenses.

Dominant cultures have had a history of viewing the language of a minority group as inferior, and often have refused to recognize the language of the minority group. One is reminded of what official American policy did to the American Indians when Indian children were forced to "mainstream" by attending white schools away from the reservations and were punished for using their native language.

The work of Dr. William Stokoe dramatically changed the perception of ASL beginning in the 1950s. Stokoe's research was innovative and significant in that he broke ASL into its components, much like a spoken language can be broken into morphemes. His research demonstrated that ASL was a rich and complex language and led to new recognition of the Deaf community as a legitimate culture.

But audism continues to oppress the Deaf, and is a power the church as an institution must confront. As Walter Wink claims, the powers "are at one and the same time visible *and* invisible, earthly *and* heavenly, spiritual *and* institutional."¹² And in *The Word before the Powers*, Charles Campbell reminds us that Dietrich Bonhoeffer challenged us to see the demonic powers in the world, the principalities and powers of Ephesians 6. "The intransigence of other 'isms,' from classism to sexism to heterosexism," he says, "has likewise called attention to the legion of powers that oppress people and hold them captive."¹³ To Campbell's list of "isms" that oppress, I add audism.

I have seen several of what Campbell calls "strategies of the powers"¹⁴ used by the audist establishment. One such strategy is that of negative sanctions, which include school policies and state laws that prohibit the use of sign language in the education of the deaf, and professional advice to parents not to use sign language with their deaf children. Another strategy, isolation and division, may be seen in mainstreaming, which isolates deaf children and their parents. Demoralization has also been a very effective strategy. Parents who want their deaf children placed in residential schools for the deaf often have to fight the bureaucracy of local schools for their proper placement. The Individualized Education Plan (IEP), required for special education students, can be an overwhelming and intimidating process, especially when parents sit in a room filled with school professionals. Facing this wall of bureaucracy, one

family in Nebraska went to a lawyer to file a suit to have their child attend a residential school for the deaf, only to be told they needed to pay him \$20,000 up front! The strategy of rewards and promises includes the promises of educators that deaf children can be “normal” by lip-reading and speech, and restricting the use of ASL.

In my home is a concrete example of another strategy of the powers—a door that came from a classroom at the Iowa School for the Deaf, in Council Bluffs, Iowa. The door contains nine panes of opaque glass, three rows and three columns, at eye level. However, the center pane was later replaced with clear glass. This was to enable the school principal to observe the teachers, and any teacher using sign language was summarily fired!

Against these kinds of strategies, the church must look for ways to bring wholeness to the Deaf and challenge and resist the powers of “audism.” Campbell makes a very strong case for preaching as an effective and appropriate form of non-violent resistance against the power of audism.¹⁵ He suggests “a twofold movement: exposing the deadly ways of the powers and envisioning God’s new creation.”¹⁶ This parallels Brueggemann’s prophetic criticizing and offering an alternative perception of reality.¹⁷

Having exposed and criticized the audist powers, we now can envision God’s new creation. Such a vision for the deaf is found in Isaiah 35:

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.

Written when Israel was in its Babylonian exile and the people were in need of hope, this powerful poetry paints a picture of the return of Israel to their homeland and the full participation of all of God’s people in the kingdom of God. Healing of the deaf comes when they are provided full participation in all that society provides. This is the vision, the alternate perception of reality that God provides God’s people.

This vision of the full participation of the deaf is especially pertinent when we consider the ancient Mediterranean understanding of healing. One can make a distinction between our modern day concept of curing and the ancient world’s concept of healing. Curing is the elimination of the symptoms, if not the disease itself, whereas healing is the “elimination of the psychological, sensory, and experiential oppressiveness engendered by one’s medical circumstances.”¹⁸

For the deaf, curing would be gaining the ability to hear, but healing would be the ability to fully participate in hearing society. Such healing would include an appropriate education, with an option for segregated schools or classes for the deaf, full communication by the use of their language and interpreters, telephone devices and relay services, employment at their level of qualifications, and celebrating their history and culture.

Perhaps the one place where the deaf came the closest to this alternate reality of an inclusive community was Martha’s Vineyard. The rate of deafness on this small island of about one hundred square miles was much higher than that of the mainland. Nora Ellen Groce describes a unique feature of the community: “In the nineteenth century, and presumably earlier, one American in every 5,728 was born deaf, but on

the Vineyard the figure was one in every 155.”¹⁹ Immigrants from the Kentish Weald in England settled Martha’s Vineyard. The majority of the Wealds’ marriage partners were chosen from a six- to eight-mile radius in England, creating a very small gene pool. When they migrated to Martha’s Vineyard, the gene pool remained small because of the island’s isolation. Groce believes that a recessive gene causing deafness came from an ancestor of some of the Vineyard’s settlers. Thus, the limited gene pool created a high incidence of deafness once the recessive gene appeared. As the Vineyard became less isolated because of increased mobility, the rate of deafness decreased until the last of its deaf citizens died in the mid-twentieth century.

Unlike individuals similarly handicapped on the mainland, deaf Vineyarders were included in all of the community’s work and play situations. They were free to marry either hearing or deaf persons. According to tax records, they generally earned an average or above average income...and they were active in church affairs....This situation existed...for more than three centuries. This implies that the social attitude was fully accepting of deaf individuals and that it was firmly in place from the time that the first deaf man settled in Tisbury in the 1690s.²⁰

Many of the Vineyarders were bilingual, knowing both English and sign language. They learned it in their childhood, it was used in all situations, the deaf were full participants in all kinds of conversations, and “hearing members of the community were so accustomed to using signs that the language found its way into discussions even when no deaf people were present.”²¹ Thus the social isolation of the deaf created by the inability to hear spoken language did not exist on the island. The social isolation was eliminated by the fact that everyone spoke sign language.

So why was life so good on the island, compared to the mainland and today? Because “they were just like everyone else.” Groce says, “Perhaps the best description of the status of deaf individuals on the Vineyard was given to me by an island woman in her eighties, when I asked about those who were handicapped by deafness when she was a girl. ‘Oh,’ she said emphatically, ‘those people weren’t handicapped. They were just deaf.’”²² Because deafness was not seen as a handicap by the non-deaf, the deaf were seen and treated as full members of the community.

It is within the church’s preaching and worship that prophetic imagination can come alive and where the church can “practice what it preaches.” In sermons, the powers can be named and the injustices can be revealed. In preaching, the alternate reality can be envisioned. And in its worship, the church can practice the inclusion of deaf people.²³

In worship at Heritage Presbyterian Church, we include the deaf by use of interpreter. One member of the worship team is a highly qualified ASL interpreter. The skill of the interpreter can “make or break” a church’s deaf ministry. The interpreter is provided with the entire liturgy, including the sermon and words of the choir’s music, by the Thursday before worship. Religious, musical, and liturgical terms can be quite challenging, and getting the materials to the interpreter ahead of time is very valuable. Everything is interpreted, except for instrumental music. Since good sightlines are necessary for the language mode of the deaf, a place is reserved in the front of the sanctuary for them. The deaf participate in the liturgy, such as the hymns

and the people's responses, by "copying" the signs of the interpreter. We are constantly fine-tuning our worship to make it as accessible as we can for the deaf.

Worship does have power. Campbell reminds us that

what the powers desire most from human beings is our worship; they claim to be the divine regents of the world and to offer us life if we will only serve them. In this context, it is not surprising that the fundamental practice of the redeemed community in the book of Revelation is worship. There is no more subversive act where the powers are concerned than praising the God of Jesus Christ, who has exposed and overcome them.²⁴

I witnessed the power of worship on September 7, 2003. The Gospel reading for that Sunday included Jesus' healing the deaf man (Mark 7:31-37). A few months earlier, a deaf member of Heritage Church had been served legal papers by a Lancaster County deputy sheriff, and later was arrested by the Lincoln city police. Shortly after he was released from jail, the man was arrested again, based on a false witness. A sign language interpreter was not present during any of his three encounters with law enforcement. I was convinced that if a sign language interpreter had been provided when he was served the legal papers, he would have understood the nature of the papers and avoided the arrest. Many thought this man's civil rights were denied under the Americans with Disabilities Act. Thus, the focus of my sermon that Sunday was naming the powers of injustice, the local law enforcement agencies, and declaring that healing does not come to the deaf as long as they are oppressed. I also shared that the church would be hosting a meeting between the deaf community and the chief of police. Following that sermon, the session encouraged me to question the police's refusal to provide interpreters. A church member called a local television station, and another person called the local newspaper. Both the television station and the newspaper sent reporters to the meeting and interviewed the deaf man. Two members of the session also attended the meeting.

These responses in one small setting were not earthshaking. However, they represent the kinds of responses that take first steps toward working against the life-destroying powers of audism, first steps toward God's alternate perception of reality. As an institution that itself is captive to the powers, the church must seek ways to continue to name and expose those powers and to envision God's alternate reality of a community in which all are valued and all are full participants.

Notes

1. Charlotte Baker and Dennis Cokely, *American Sign Language: A Teacher's Resource Text on Grammar and Culture* (Silver Spring, Md.: T.J. Publishers, 1980), 54.
2. Charlotte Baker-Shenk, "Breaking the Shackles," *Sojourners*, March 1985: 30-32.
3. Loraine DiPietro, "Community, Contact, Communication: Perspective on Diversity," in *Deafness: Life & Culture II. A Deaf American Monograph*, ed. Mervin D. Garretson, 45 (1995): 29-35. Silver Spring, Md.: National Association of the Deaf, 33. While DiPietro's focus here is on Deaf culture, there are, of course, deaf people who do not see themselves as members of this culture. They have chosen to be a part of the hearing world, do not use ASL, and many of them manage very well with oralism. They do not socialize with Deaf persons. This is especially true for "late-deafened" people, people who have lost their hearing much later in life.
4. Andrew F. Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books,

- 2002), 28.
5. Charles H. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture: A Study in Dynamic Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1979), 81.
6. Kraft, 289.
7. Neil Glickman, "Cultural identity, deafness, and material health," *Journal of Rehabilitation of the Deaf* 20 (2): 1-10. Quoted in Jerome D. Schein, *At Home Among Strangers* (Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press), 39.
8. Harlan Lane, *The Mask of Benevolence: Disabling the Deaf Community* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 43.
9. Arden Neisser, *The Other side of Silence: Sign Language and the Deaf Community in America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983), 8.
10. Beryl Lief Benderly, *Dancing without Music: Deafness in America* (Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 1980), 99.
11. Claire L. Ramsey, *Deaf Children in Public Schools* (Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 1997), 32.
12. Walter Wink, *The Powers that Be: Theology for a New Millennium* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 24.
13. Charles L. Campbell, *The Word before the Powers: An Ethic of Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 6-7.
14. Campbell, 33-43.
15. Campbell, 68-88.
16. Campbell, 105.
17. Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001).
18. Arthur M. Kleinman, *Patients and Healers in the Context of Culture* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1980), 265. Quoted in John J. Pilch, *Healing in the New Testament: Insights from Medical and Mediterranean Anthropology*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 14.
19. Nora Ellen Groce, *Everyone Here Spoke Sign Language: Hereditary Deafness on Martha's Vineyard* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), 3.
20. Groce, 50.
21. Groce, 63.
22. Groce, 5.
23. Campbell, 141.
24. Campbell, 142.