“Outsiders” in a hearing church

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How shall we minister to deaf individuals?

I've worshiped in Adventist churches from Cape Town to Cairo, from Addis to Ile. I've enjoyed old brick churches and new grass churches. As a missionary child and later as a wife, I’ve always felt a part of the church—until I lost my hearing. Now I struggle with feeling apart from church.

An estimated 95 percent of the deaf community are unchurched. And yet they are souls to be won, persons to be reached with the good news. But the church has failed in its responsibility. Deaf people have become outsiders in a world controlled and conducted by those who can hear. “Deaf people, though, are not alone in their status as outsiders. Many groups of people have had to contend with a world that was largely created, and now is controlled, by someone else. . . . Therefore understanding the deaf as outsiders in a hearing world increases our understanding of other outsiders as well. Further, drawing on the experiences and situations of other outsiders is likely to help us understand the deaf.”

The way it was

Aristotle believed that those “born deaf” become senseless and incapable of reason.” Socrates, fortunately, had a different vision: “If we had neither voice nor tongue, and yet wished to manifest things to one another, should we not, like those which are at present mute, endeavor to signify our meaning by the hands, head, and other parts of the body?”

For hundreds of years it was believed that anyone who could not speak had no soul. There were even separate cemeteries for “soulless” deaf persons.

When Cardan, the sixteenth-century philosopher-physician, suggested that the understanding of ideas was not dependent upon the hearing of words, the idea struck his peers as revolutionary. It took almost 200 years more for Cardan’s insight to be put into practice, when Abbé de l’Épée, a Frenchman, took upon himself the task of teaching deaf people.

De l’Épée met deaf-mute twins and could not bear the thought that they would live and die without ever knowing the Word of God. He “paid minute attention to his pupils . . . acquired their language . . . and by associating with pictures and written words, he taught them to read, and . . . opened to them the world’s learning and culture. . . . For the first time, it enabled ordinary deaf pupils to read and write French, and thus acquire an education.”

Schools patterned after his method spread throughout Europe. In the early 1800s Laurent Clerc, himself deaf but well trained in teaching deaf pupils, left Europe for the United States to join Thomas Gallaudet in his work. In 1817 they established the first school for deaf children in America at Hartford, Connecticut. By the middle of the century, schools multiplied all over the country, and more than 40 percent of the teachers were deaf themselves.

For decades the goal of deaf education was to teach the students how to speak. Samuel Gridley Howe and Horace Mann wanted to do away with sign language schools. Alexander Graham Bell, whose deaf wife did not want to identify with others who were deaf, also advocated oralism. The
remain unidentified and those who lose their hearing after language acquisition and those whose hearing loss is moderate.

**Lack of opportunities.** Many deaf people have grown up with little or no participation in the decisions affecting their lives and thus have not learned to take responsibility for themselves. They face unemployment at a rate three and one half times that of the general population. One of their frustrations is that they are not hired, promoted, or fired solely on the basis of their ability and job skills. Potential employers fear possible communication problems and often conclude that something other than deafness is wrong.

Not many deaf individuals speak well enough to be understood by most people. One deaf man who could speak said, “You can never relax when you don’t hear what you say.” Besides, “lipreading is a precarious and cruel art which rewards a few who have mastered it and tortures the many who have tried and failed.” It is actually a combination of observation, inference, and inspired guessing. At most 30 percent of speech is on the lips. So outside of the deaf community a deaf person often receives only fragmentary information or one-way communication.

**Additional pressures.** The deaf community has three additional pressures that other cultural minority groups do not have. They need to overcome the negative stereotype that goes with a label of medical pathology. They need cultural reinforcement because a majority belong to a different cultural group than their hearing parents. They have to overcome the challenges of learning a sign language.

**Christian Record Services.** Our church has come a long way in meeting these challenges. In 1980 the church began Deaf Services at the Christian Record Braille Foundation, which in 1989 was reorganized as Christian Record Services (CRS). Unfortunately many in our church, clergy and laity alike, are amazed to learn CRS has anything to do with deaf ministry. The deaf branch in Lincoln, Nebraska, is very active, but there are only four workers with a worldwide task. CRS is a good resource center in which materials are prepared and printed for deaf individuals, but there is not adequate personnel to plan and implement evangelism for those with hearing loss.

**Church fellowship.** According to a CRS list, between 40 and 50 Adventist churches in the United States make interpretation available. Myron Widmer wrote in the *Adventist Review*, June 20, 1991: “Lack of provision for the deaf in most churches is what is keeping many deaf persons from either joining the Adventist Church or attending once they become members.”

While I don’t believe that every church can or should have a deaf ministry, I am saddened that more are not ready to receive deaf worshipers with confidence and love. Most members don’t know what to do with us. Some time ago I visited a large church. My confidence that there would be an interpreter was misplaced. Later the gracious young receptionist shared her embarrassment with an older deaconess. “No one ever told me what to do if a deaf person came.” Can that church better accommodate other types of disabilities?

Working with the deaf constituency poses a unique mix of challenges. The North American Division probably has less than 1,000 deaf members. These members are scattered, with little chance for Christian fellowship that includes communication. It takes a very strong person to give up the social life available in the deaf society outside the church when there is nothing in the church to replace it.

Because of gaps in their educational background, many deaf persons are not able to pick up a book like *The Desire of Ages* and read with understanding. Fortunately CRS has translated it into easy English. They also translate Sabbath school quarters.

**New opportunities.** Despite these challenges, now is a favorable time to be deaf. Modern technology affords deaf persons telephone usage via
telecommunication devices (TTY). SDAs On-line helps deaf Adventists keep in touch with what’s going on in the church. Laptop computers can further improve communication. Closed captioning on television is another helpful tool.

The way it could be

The ministry to the deaf community can make a difference only as we on all levels become aware and concerned. Perhaps the following suggestions would help.

Structure. Leaders need to change the present denominational structure if the deaf work is to succeed. Such modification should receive input from the deaf, and should transcend local conference boundaries to cover larger areas such as a union conference.

Deaf Adventists are widely scattered, and the only time they get together in any number is at deaf camp meetings. Members who can afford to go, travel hundreds or even thousands of miles to attend. For many, it is the only time they hear the message directly from the preacher. Last year a deaf group from Arkansas totaled their car on the way to camp meeting at Milo Academy in Oregon. They were so eager for Adventist fellowship that, despite bruises and cuts, they boarded a bus for the rest of the trip.

A new structure could encourage deaf ministers to function as itinerant preachers, all answerable to one organization (such as CRS), instead of to different conferences, as now.

Better communication facilities. More conference offices should have TTYs. Where a competent interpreter is not available, a skilled typist with a laptop computer could type most of the sermon as it is being preached. If there is a large group of deaf worshippers, the computer could be hooked to a suitable monitor. One church transcribes the sermons for deaf members. Pastors could provide notes, outlines, or even typed sermons. Developing technology will open the way for further services for the deaf.


educating hearing members. Hearing members have a role to play in the ministry to deaf persons. They need to understand the needs of deaf individuals. They could read books on deafness, available in local libraries. They could learn sign language. Churches can become more user-friendly for the sake of deaf members and visitors.

Upon request, Thompson Kay from CRS conducts workshops to help churches set up ministries for the deaf community. These seminars can be adjusted to specific needs and include how to find deaf interests in your local area and how to conduct Bible studies.

Explore ways of communicating with deaf people even if you don’t know American Sign Language (ASL). Your desire and creativity are the only limiting factors. Learn the ASL alphabet and finger spell. Be willing to use pad and pen. Phone a deaf person on relay services available through your phone company. Better yet, buy a TTY for your church and call direct.

John Blake, a hearing minister in Canada who has two grown deaf children, has a dream that hearing and deaf members will join together and sponsor closed captioning for the Media Center programs—maybe making that a Global Mission project. In his conference a group of deaf believers are already saving for this.

The ministry to the deaf community is a challenge that can be met only when we all join forces to reach out to them. The church should never have any "outsiders."

3 Ibid., p. 17.