

Shattering the Silence

Deaf and Hard - of - Hearing
Christians Speak Out
About the Church

A Publication of
Silent Blessings Deaf Ministries

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Introduction

What you hold in your hands is a rare document for several reasons. First, it is a collection of personal reflections by a number of Christians in the d/Deaf and hard-of-hearing community. This is unusual because only about two percent of d/Deaf people claim to know Christ as Savior. Second, several of the writers in this book enjoyed a nurturing relationship with their parents. This is not a common experience in the d/Deaf community because the vast majority of deaf people have hearing parents who cannot effectively communicate with their deaf children. Third, this book is rare because it gives you an opportunity to view the church from a very different perspective which you have probably never considered in any depth. Because these writers represent a cross section of the d/Deaf and hard-of-hearing community, there is great diversity in their viewpoints. But taken as a whole one thing becomes clear: The church must find more effective ways to minister to these people and their families. We cannot fulfill the Great Commission if we forget about the d/Deaf.

In this book the word deaf (small “d”) refers to a person who does not hear. The word Deaf (large “D”) refers to a person who sees himself/herself as part of a unique linguistic/cultural group. Therefore, when we wish to refer to both groups, we will use the term d/Deaf. Hard-of-hearing refers to those who have some form of hearing loss but still rely primarily on English as their native language. ASL refers to American Sign Language, the native language of the Deaf in the United States.

Finally, a word about the term “cochlear implant.” This is a medical device which is implanted in the skull and is designed to stimulate the auditory nerve in order to produce the sensation of sound. It is an emerging technology, it is very expensive, it is not 100 percent effective, and it does not reproduce “normal” hearing. For these reasons, and others, it is a very controversial procedure. However, for many people this device has been a great blessing. We take no position on this procedure except to celebrate the right of each person to make the decision which is best for himself/herself.

It's ALL in Your Perspective

Elizabeth Beldon (Deaf)

*Director, ASL/Interpreting Department, Bethel College,
Mishawaka, IN, and d/Deaf Church Planter*

“Do you feel that all d/Deaf people should be “healed” so they can hear?” several people have asked me. They usually are referring to the passage in Scripture (Mark 7:31-37) where a d/Deaf and mute man is brought to Jesus. He puts His fingers in the man’s ears, and His spit touches the man’s tongue, thus enabling the man to hear and speak. However, they seem to forget about Exodus 4:11 when God declares, “Who gave man his mouth? Who makes him d/Deaf or mute?...Is it not I, the Lord?” God Himself determines the state of man...if he is blind or has sight, is sick or healthy, is deaf or can hear.

Although the majority of hearing people consider deafness as a disability or abnormality, most d/Deaf people don’t. If a deaf person wants to be healed, one shouldn’t assume the deaf person means that he/she wants to hear.

There was a deaf man from our d/Deaf church who attended a Sunday night healing service at a hearing church. When the altar call was made, the deaf man stepped forward, and many hearing congregants gathered around him to pray for his healing. After many minutes of fervent prayer, the deaf man began rejoicing, exclaiming that he had been healed.

The hearing people asked him in amazement, “You mean, you can hear now? We were praying for your ears to be opened!”

The deaf man looked puzzled and replied, “No, I was praying for healing for my back. The terrible pain is now gone!”

When I was younger my great aunt took me to a healing service and prayed intently that I would be able to hear. Miraculously, God answered her prayer and allowed me to hear for one day. When my deafness returned, my great aunt was angry, but God was revealing that it was His will that I remain deaf. Since then He has used me to reach countless other Deaf people, which wouldn’t have happened had I “become hearing.”

God Really Is My God, Too!

Greg Sassounian (Deaf)

Layperson, Inter-Community Church of God, Covina CA

I was born hearing and became deaf around the age of three due to an illness. I remember one instance at the age of five when a woman and her daughter came up to me and asked me if I believed in God. I was playing with a toy and had little in the way of a response. So she said again, "Do you believe in GOD?" I nodded my head a little, but she said, "No, say Yes!" So I shook my head really big copying their nodding heads. They were thrilled; I was indifferent, but it's something I've never forgotten.

Later when I was about thirteen or fourteen, I remember being in school and our teacher talked about God. She said that it doesn't matter what language you use. God can understand. So that night I went home, and as I was in bed I started talking to the Lord. The Holy Spirit touched me, and I was overwhelmed with joy!

After this experience, I had a burning desire to find a d/Deaf church. For a couple of years I looked but didn't find one until I was seventeen. The church I found had an interpreter. It was an independent church. Every Friday night I would go, but it still wasn't what I wanted because I had limited communication. I wanted to be with deaf people.

Finally I found First Baptist Church of Lakewood and fell in love with the Lord. I was so excited! Later I did fall away from the Lord but came back because I knew how wonderful it was to have Him in my life and that without Jesus I would be dead.

Because of my deafness, when I went to the hearing church, I never understood anything. Most of the hearing people would say, "If you just go to church, you will understand—God is with you!" I thought, "Well, okay." But when I went to church, I couldn't hear, so I didn't understand anything. Nothing! But when I started going to the d/Deaf church, it was wonderful! I could see to understand and learn so much more by seeing the communication.

About three years ago, I came back to the Lord, and many wonderful things happened. I repented and began serving the Lord again. I decided to be baptized though I had no idea what baptism really entailed. The whole process only took about twenty seconds, but when I came up out of the water, I wept tears of joy for almost twenty

minutes! There was just no stopping my crying. At that point, I knew that God and Jesus were protecting me from everything. It was wonderful!

Now I go to the Inter-Community Church in Covina, California, and I'm learning so much. I'm always longing for more because my desire for God is never completely satisfied. I know that will never happen until I am with God in heaven, and I am anxiously anticipating that day!

Growing Up Hearing in a Deaf Family

Lester H. Belt (Child of Deaf)

Director of Deaf Family Ministries, Springfield, VA

When I became old enough to realize that there was a deaf world and a hearing world, I began to wonder where I fit. You see, I can hear but my parents could not. Early in my childhood I began to consider the differences and came to the conclusion that hearing people were the bad guys and deaf people were the good guys. That came about for several reasons. One was that my parents expressed a deep bitterness about hearing people and their attitudes toward the deaf. They built in me a respect for deaf people and their opinions, yet at the same time inadvertently fostered a deep distrust in hearing people. It was easy, at the time, to even believe that the deaf were superior to the hearing, but that they could not attain positions of power in the world merely because they were outnumbered!

But there were other specific incidents which helped me to draw my own conclusions. Like the time the father of my hearing friend across the street offered me a sip of beer. My parents never drank, at least in the house, and so this "refreshment" that tasted so foul was immedi-

ately associated with the hearing world. It simply added fuel to my perception of hearing people being callous and obnoxious.

Once my dad and I went to visit a deaf friend who had a sparkling black Ford in his driveway. We didn't own a car and always went on buses or streetcars. He offered to take us for a ride, and as I watched him capably shifting the gears and maneuvering through the neighborhood, I thought: *Wow, deaf people must be really smart. We poor hearing people just must not have the brains to drive.* That idea changed about a year later when we took a cab while on vacation. The taxi driver was hearing, and I realized that they could drive, too. (I also learned that my father didn't drive because he couldn't read English well enough to pass the test, not because he was too poor, as I thought.)

So here I was in an isolated world—coming from a deaf world, but living in a hearing world, yet not trusting the hearing. Surely, God must have made a mistake. I should have been deaf, too, just like my parents. But after receiving Christ at the age of ten, I felt that I now had a hearing Father in addition to my deaf one. That made me feel special. However, I also tended to place on Him those feelings of distrust and doubt that I had for hearing people. And I told Him so one night, at the age of fifteen. The Holy Spirit assured me that I needn't worry; I would understand eventually.

In the summer of 1960, during a youth rally in Garden City, Michigan, God called me to lifelong service for Him. I didn't understand why he would want me, but I answered His call affirmatively.

At times I still have trouble relating to hearing people; this is a result, I suppose of my early conditioning. But God has clearly led me to be a hearing person in a world of deaf and hearing people and to proclaim the unsearchable riches of Jesus Christ. He needed me just as I was. I couldn't be serving Him as effectively in my ministry today if He had made me any differently.

Being Hard-of-Hearing Came Gradually

Linda Loftus (Hard-of-Hearing)
Teacher of Special Needs Students, Elkhart, IN

I was born with normal hearing. My hearing loss was detected when I was in third grade, but at that time the specialists told our family that my mother's hearing loss would not be hereditary in me. But I should have known differently, since my older sister and my younger brother both had some degree of hearing loss. In my naivete, I never expected to lose my hearing to the degree that my mother had.

My loss during my school years only affected the higher frequencies, so it didn't affect my communication abilities. I participated in choir and swing choir. I loved music. My love for music was so great that I wanted to be a singer or a performer of some type. My mother, going for the practical side, however, talked me into getting a teaching degree. I went to college and did earn a degree in teaching special education. I have never regretted it, but the urge to perform is still in me today.

While I was in college my hearing continued to deteriorate. My friends were aware of it, but I continued to function without the use of a hearing aid. At one time, I was almost prohibited from going on for my teaching degree by the university I was attending. But since I was over halfway through the program, I was allowed to continue.

Time has moved on, though, and things have changed. There is a grieving process that people experience every time they lose more hearing. I have been experiencing a lot of that lately. I can still hear the phone ring if I am in bed and my ear is right next to the phone. However, I may or may not understand who is calling, even with my hearing aids in. I know the voices of my family and friends, and they are usually patient with me. (It is convenient for me when telemarketers call, though, since I just tell them I can't hear them.) I have stopped singing in the choir at church because I can no longer hear the parts. I told this to one music director, and he told me to come anyway and sing the melody. He doesn't know how much that meant to me!

I believe God led me to learn sign language. I have taken several classes over the years. The more classes I took, though, I learned how

difficult this language is. This was especially difficult because the more I learned I struggled with how hard it would be to keep the promise I had made to myself when I was growing up. I had told myself after watching my mother sit in silence during family meals, that I would learn sign language so I wouldn't have that same experience. As my hearing deteriorated the reality of the situation hit very close to home. I did finish an associates degree in interpreting and have made several friends of people who are deaf. I want to be able to move between the hearing world and the Deaf world, but sometimes this is not possible. Hearing impaired people are not accepted into the Deaf world because of their partial hearing. And hearing people find it is hard work to communicate with someone with a hearing loss, sometimes finding the extra effort too much.

The end result for me will be getting a cochlear implant. I realized the other day that other people have waited through the silence and isolation to get their hearing back. I just have to make the best of the situation, ask God to stay with me, and trust that things will work out for the best.

Effort Counts!

Chad P. Entinger (Deaf)

Ministries Coordinator at Deaf Missions in Council Bluffs, IA

Up to the age of sixteen months, I had been a healthy, happy, hearing child. But things took a sudden turn when I got spinal meningitis and was in the hospital for almost two full weeks. The doctors warned my parents that I might become deaf. That warning became a reality. I lost all of my hearing in my left ear and about 70 percent in my right ear. My parents were advised to enroll me in speech classes. They also were encouraged to take sign language classes. The fact that they did just that was the greatest blessing in my life growing up.

After moving to a new town when I was four years old, my parents became more involved in the Howard Lake Christian Church. My dad took responsibility for teaching a Sunday School class. Among his stu-

dents were another deaf boy with limited vision and me. My dad would teach us about Jesus through sign language. He cared so much for the class that he wanted to learn more about teaching us. When I was five years old, I remember going with my mom and younger brother to the airport to pick up my dad. He was flying back from a weekend conference sponsored by Deaf Missions that taught him and others how to teach deaf people about Jesus.

My dad was also a song leader and piano player during the worship service at our church. Often, when he was not playing the piano and leading the worship, he would turn around on the piano bench and face me. Whenever possible he would interpret the communion meditation, offering meditation, and sermon as best as he could. In fact, my family became known for sitting up near the front where I could watch him interpret.

I did not always understand everything that happened in church and Sunday School. But, what I did understand was just enough for me. How do I know? Because I accepted Jesus when I was eight years old. And it was my dad who baptized me. My very own dad did the best thing a father of a deaf child could ever do—share Jesus with his child through sign language.

While growing up at home, my parents would often sign and talk at the same time when talking to me. I was often reassured that my parents loved me and wanted me to follow Jesus. During times of backsliding in my faith, God would remind me of the upbringing I experienced with my parents' love and faith. I would remember what my parents taught me about Jesus.

My parents were not the best signers in the world, but it was their efforts that counted the most to me. Their attempts and ability to communicate with me clearly show just how much they truly love me.

No One Really Understands

Rev. Randal Huber (Father of Deaf)

Pastor, Chapel Hill Church of God, York Springs, PA

When our son, Aaron, arrived in our home from Korea at fourteen months he didn't make a sound. He didn't babble. He didn't laugh. He rarely cried. He was silent as a winter night. I first heard him laugh when we were loudly singing hymns at the dinner table. Aaron could actually hear his preacher father's loud voice.

Aaron was born with a moderate-severe conductive hearing loss. Loud sounds like doors banging or people yelling are like a whisper to him. With the help of hearing aids, in ideal conditions, Aaron can hear "within normal limits". After years of speech therapy and special education, Aaron, now thirteen, speaks clearly.

Behind this undersized teenager with a great sense of humor is a boy few people understand. They have no idea how difficult it is for Aaron to cope in a hearing world. Hearing with a bone conduction hearing aid is like listening through cotton stuffed in a tin can. Sounds are muted; one consonant blends into another. Aaron can't easily distinguish between background noise and sounds he wants to hear, and he can't determine the direction of a sound. If you call his name and he can't see you, he looks in every direction until he finds you. Conversation in a loud room like a restaurant or a classroom with blower fans is exhausting.

To be polite and to feel accepted, Aaron has learned to pretend he is following a conversation. He may be getting only half of what is said but he appears to be getting all of it. This creates constant problems at school. Teachers say, "We went over this in class. Aaron took notes on it." We examine Aaron's notes. They are full of gaps; his page is covered with doodling. It takes every ounce of his strength to pay attention. His mind wanders. He fidgets. Teachers sometimes treat him as though he is unruly and disobedient. No child is always angelic, but most often he is merely exhausted from trying to understand words and concepts he struggles to hear.

Aaron does not pick up incidental knowledge. Background conversation is background noise. He misses inside jokes, playful bantering, and most classroom discussions. If two persons talk at a time, their voices become noise which seems to come all from the same place. Aaron's friends and teachers don't realize that even though Aaron is present he is not picking up what the others are hearing. Only direct conversation in a reasonably quiet room makes sense.

Young people like Aaron wonder if they're stupid. They wonder if anyone will ever want to marry them. They want to be liked. They want to fit in. They know they're different but they don't want to be treated condescendingly. Aaron needs special care. He needs to see your lips when you talk. He needs a quiet environment for meaningful conversation. He also needs to feel like he is not receiving special care. He needs to feel normal. Like everyone else he needs love, acceptance and respect. And he is not alone. His story is repeated time and time again in the lives of deaf people across the country.

Would Losing My Hearing Mean Losing My Pastorate?

Bob Williams (Hard-of-Hearing)

Pastor Emeritus, Oakview Community Church, Scio, OR

“Im sorry, ma'am, but I do not have time for telephone solicitations. If what you have to sell is something I need, please send me information and I will look it over at my convenience.”

The lady on the other end refused to take no for an answer. I finally hung up in disgust, only to find out later that the lady in question was one of the men in the church whose wife had been rushed to the hospital. I had been so certain the call was yet another telephone solicitor. Can you imagine the humiliation and shame I felt when I discovered the truth?

I was pastoring a small country church in Western Oregon during those days and this was one of many awkward situations for me. Time and time again, when I visited newcomers in their homes they bluntly told me, “We like your church and really enjoy your preaching, but we want a pastor who can hear us.”

There were so many dreaded hospital visits—dreaded because I knew that those on their deathbeds would attempt to share their last words this side of eternity with me, words forever lost because they were trying to communicate with a deaf man.

Then I found out about telephone relay service machines (TTYs). The Public Utilities Commission made these miracle instruments available to those who were severely to profoundly deaf. That was me. I was so excited to be able to use the phone once again, even though the person speaking to me had to wait after each sentence for the relay operator to type his/her words so I could read them on an LED screen or a small printer.

Time after time, when I called people they hung up on me because they thought the relay operator was a telephone solicitor. I soon discovered just how rude Christian people can be. Even though I had announced this new service in a variety of ways and even though we had printed the information in the bulletin and the newsletter, people still hung up on me. Others were so intimidated by it they simply refused to call.

During the church services, I asked people to write out their prayer requests. We provided communication cards for this and other communiqués as well. But when someone made an announcement that was not in the bulletin, I had no idea what was being said. I would give opportunity for testimonies but I could not understand a word. Fortunately, to the best of my knowledge, nothing ever happened that was out of place or that needed corrective attention from me. But how would I know?

I attempted to resign the church due to my hearing loss, but they voted for me to stay the course. I tried. Oh, how I tried! But a year later it had become obvious to everyone that my days as a pastor were over. I retired in 1997, but continued to worship with the church right up to the present time. They honored me with the title of Pastor Emeritus.

The new pastor never shared manuscript or sermon notes. No transparencies were used for the hymns and praise choruses. I couldn't hear what people were saying to me one-on-one, even with an FM Assistive Listening Device. I tried carrying dry-eraser boards with me everywhere I went so people could write their words to me. But how can you worship, when you cannot hear?

Today, I can hear every word of the message because I have a cochlear implant, but that's another story...and a miracle beyond words. Praise God! This deaf man can hear once again!

What Is Normal?

Marshall Lawrence (Father of Deaf)

Executive Director, Silent Blessings Deaf Ministries, Elkhart, IN

“Normal” is an interesting concept. We use the term a great deal. Ninety percent of deaf children have parents with “normal” hearing. Most of those parents want their child to grow up in a “normal” way. There is a stigma attached to being “different,” so we seek for “normalcy.” But “normal” is a relative term. What is unusual in one culture or situation is perfectly “normal” in another culture.

Our deaf daughter attends a deaf school in Indianapolis, about three hours from home. She boards there through the week and comes home on the weekends and vacations. Living in a dorm is not a “normal” experience for most kids her age here in the United States, and, believe me, we hate to have her so far away from us. Every chance I get I go down to the school for visits, and we work hard to keep our relationships close and rich.

One night I was staying at the school and there was a tornado warning. All the kids were gathered into the large bowling alley in the basement of the dorm, and as we all waited out the storm I looked around at the various clusters of kids scattered throughout the room. In one area were the “jocks” and near them were the “cheerleaders.” Over in the corner were the shy ones and over in another corner were the “brainy” ones, with calculators out doing their homework. Suddenly I was struck with how typical all these kids were—how perfectly “normal” they all were. They could move freely within this society for they all shared a common form of communication, and they had access to all the resources of this place where they lived. I could not help but wonder how differently each of these young people would act and feel if they had been sent to mainstream programs or hearing schools where they clearly would have been the unusual one in the classroom.

There are all kinds of difficult decisions we must make as parents of deaf children. Many parents who love their kids just as much as we love ours make much different educational choices than we did. But it is good to remember that what was a “normal” environment for us, such as attending our neighborhood school or church, might be a dramatically unnatural experience for our deaf child. What is “normal” for a cheetah is abnormal for a race horse,

but both are fast and strong, each is breathtakingly beautiful, and, in their own environments, each can excel.

That Very First Day...

Chad P. Entinger (Deaf)

Ministries Coordinator at Deaf Missions in Council Bluffs, IA

I grew up feeling I was “different” throughout my elementary and junior high years of school. I was the only “hearing impaired” student mainstreamed in a public school. I had to wear a special type of hearing aid that had a box I would attach to my belt with a wire that ran under my shirt up to the mold in my right ear. There was a microphone the teacher would wear. An interpreter was provided for all of my classes. And I would be placed at a desk in the very front of the classroom where the teacher thought it was best for me to see the interpreter. Often, I would ask my hearing peers to repeat what they just said. And they would respond by teasing me for asking, “What?!” I sometimes struggled to communicate with my peers so that I could feel like I “fit in.” All of these things made me feel different.

It all changed one day, a day I will never forget. It was the day my supportive and loving parents brought me to the Minnesota State Academy for the Deaf, a residential school for the deaf, for the start of football practice and my freshman year of high school.

That very first day, little did I know the future was brighter than I imagined, for it was a place of opportunity and endless dreams. That very first day, little did I know that more success was yet to come. That very first day, little did I realize this was a place with no boundaries nor limits nor barriers.

I met new friends who were just like me. I felt accepted. I could communicate easily with my friends using sign language. All of the teachers knew sign language. Math, Social Studies, Science, English, and other classes were all taught through direct communication. I did not have to listen through an interpreter. I did not have to wear a special hearing aid. I only used my behind-the-ear hearing aid. I played on the football

and basketball teams all four years of high school. I could take off my hearing aid and not worry about it breaking while playing because my coaches signed and communicated encouragement clearly. We were the best eight-man deaf football team in the country my senior year. I could fully participate in theatre productions. I was given opportunities to participate in "oratorical" contests where I performed my speech in sign language. Eventually, after graduation from high school, I headed to Gallaudet University and earned my Bachelors and Masters Degrees in Education. But all the blessings still didn't end.

An even greater blessing was that some of my friends at MSAD knew Jesus. We would pray before our football and basketball games. We would pray together in the dorms. There was a deaf pastor at an Assembly of God church near the campus. My friends and I would go and benefit from learning God's Word through sign language. I spiritually grew more after getting involved with the Campus Crusade for Christ ministry at Gallaudet University during my junior year. After Gallaudet came a new ministry job with Deaf Missions in Council Bluffs, Iowa. I am now given the opportunity to minister and tell deaf people about Jesus through sign language. Oh, yes, the blessings go on and on.

As my parents drove away from the campus that very first day, they saw a big smile on my face. They knew their deaf son was truly happy for he was now in a world where he longer had to feel "different." What a blessing that very first day was!

God's Blessing of Deafness

Joel Hutchinson (Father of Deaf)

*Director of Church Development,
Central California Churches of God*

One of the most difficult experiences that a parent can face in life is when one of our children is afflicted with a disability. Most of us reject the idea that the disability may be permanent, and we will go to great lengths searching for solutions.

My wife, Sharon, and I sat in disbelief as the doctor explained that meningitis had permanently damaged the audio nerves of our first-born at the age of nine months. We would later learn through testing that Shawn's deafness was profound to the degree that hearing aids were ineffective.

Refusing to believe that medical technology was limited, we set out on a quest to find a cure. After a series of disappointments, we made an appointment with a world renowned ear specialist, thinking, "Now we will finally get results."

The doctor's counsel was not what we expected. After a thorough examination he said, "My advice is for you to stop taking him from doctor to doctor and realize that God has a plan for his life." Reality set in and, for the first time since his illness, we felt totally helpless to protect our child from life's pain.

This, however, became a turning point in our lives. Never before had we considered our need for God or that pain and suffering could serve any good purpose. God had our attention.

The truth is that while we had been searching for solutions to avoid life's pain, God wanted to use our struggles to reveal His plans to us. As we turned to Him for answers, He not only healed our pain, but set us on an incredible journey fulfilling the purposes He had designed us for. Ultimately, our son's deafness became a catalyst for launching a new church that touched the lives of many who were dealing with the pain of deafness. The Scriptures ring true, "...God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to His purpose for them" (Romans 8:28, NLT).

Hands Across the World

from the video "Hands Across the World"

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I was born in America and I am deaf. For 23 years I felt isolated. I just spoke and read lips. I didn't sign at all, and I didn't get to spend time with other deaf people. My life was very frustrating and lonely. I felt so limited and left out.

Finally, I met some deaf people. I started spending time with them and began to learn sign language. I realized that I belonged. We shared similar experiences and used the same language, sign language. We could truly understand each other, and I was really happy.

Then I went to deaf church. They had a deaf pastor, deaf members, deaf leaders, and a deaf choir. The deaf pastor preached about Jesus. At first I didn't understand, but I kept learning and eventually I understood who Jesus is. Hands across the world reached ME.

-- Ginny Redden (Deaf)

I'm deaf and I come from a deaf family. Our heritage goes back to Spain. In the deaf world I enjoyed communication, interaction, sign language, opportunities, community, and belonging. But my attempts to enter the hearing world only brought frustration. The hearing world thought that because I was deaf I couldn't work or go to college or drive a car. They had a whole list of things I couldn't do. After years of hearing the same things over and over, I eventually came to believe them. I saw my deafness as a limitation and really believed I couldn't do much at all. For years and years I sat back and passively watched or followed while hearing people always took the lead.

One day someone met me and challenged this life-style of mine. But I was afraid to change, not confident in my ability to do anything. This person showed me a verse in the Bible, Philippians 4:13, which said, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." I was still unsure and hesitant, but this person continued to explain to me about Jesus. I decided to follow Jesus and that brought a great joy. Still I had to change

that old belief that I couldn't do anything. I kept reminding myself of that verse that with Jesus I could do all things—take responsibility, lead, teach, be proactive. The hearing world and the deaf world might stay the same, but I could change and move ahead.

I realized that there are many deaf people all over the world who don't know Jesus. Who could best reach them? A deaf person like me—a deaf person with Jesus, that is. I am so grateful to that person who shared Jesus with me years ago using sign language—hands across the world reached me. Now I serve as a missionary telling deaf people all over the world about Jesus.

-- Severa Trevino (Deaf)

I was born deaf and have been deaf all my life. I went to a hearing church, but I couldn't understand the preacher and the music had no meaning to me. And even if there was an interpreter, it still wasn't clear. I tried to read the Bible, but all those words just didn't make sense to me. One day a deaf person met me and signed to me about Jesus. That communicated straight to my heart, and I understood clearly. More hands extended to the deaf world. Signing with life reached me, too!

-- Leroy Bell (Deaf)

God Provided a Church

James Beldon, Sr. (Deaf)

Layperson, Deaf Michiana Missionary Center, Mishawaka, IN

I want to tell you about my experiences growing up. Many deaf children with hearing parents share the experience of going to a hearing church. Now I will share with you some of my experiences.

When I was growing up there weren't any interpreters. Often I would sit in the balcony of the church. We did things like writing back and forth to each other. We would play many games of tic-tac-toe. We talked about things like the residential school and girls. The pastor would talk but we couldn't understand anything.

When I was thirteen my mom wanted me to receive Holy Communion. At the time I was at the state school, and I tried to look in books to figure out what Holy Communion was. What did confirmation mean? When I was confirmed I received lots of money. It was great! At the state school they had an Episcopal church and I enjoyed that.

In my married years I had my first experience with an interpreter. (Remember, when I was growing up there were no interpreters in my church.) The message was in English and the interpreter put it into sign language. I kept falling asleep. It was so boring. The other Deaf people were falling asleep, too. But when the service was finished I enjoyed the socializing with the other Deaf people.

Then I went to a deaf church with a hearing pastor. Some of it was English signing but I enjoyed it. It was better than the church with the interpreter. Then I found a completely deaf church. It was all in Sign; it was so easy to understand. I grew in the Lord. Thank God! Then we moved to Indiana. I didn't want to go to a hearing church. I could have gone to a hearing church, but I always want to stay with the deaf church. Thank God, He has provided just such a church. Praise the Lord!

Knowing God Makes a Difference

Kevin Halliburton (Deaf)

Layperson, Inter-Community Church of God, Covina, CA

I am deaf, but I grew up hearing. At a very young age, I took some medications which caused me to lose my hearing. I learned signed language, but many other things had to be changed in my life. I changed from the hearing culture to the deaf culture. Now I communicate through sign language; that means I communicate with my hands. I can't depend on my ears anymore, so I have to depend on my hands.

When I lost my hearing, I thought I couldn't communicate as everybody else, that I couldn't be the same as hearing people. I thought that deaf and hearing people could not be friends. Everything had to change. It was very, very frustrating. In order to fill the void I started getting involved in things that were bad for me. I started to drink and do drugs and be promiscuous. But it didn't fill the void that I had.

I did know about the Lord. I grew up in a Jewish family. My family had tried to teach me about the Jewish culture and Old Testament and everything, but the problem was that I didn't understand. No one signed. They were teaching me in a way I couldn't understand, and I didn't get it.

One day I had noticed my mom seemed very depressed and concerned about the things I was doing, so I decided to go to a prayer group. At the group, people were praying for their needs and the Lord would just touch them. That morning when I walked in, I was touched by the Lord. I prayed that my life would be drastically changed, and it was. I stopped drinking, stopped doing drugs, and stopped doing the awful things that I was involved in before. That was five years ago, and I am still a changed man.

Many wonderful things have happened in my life. God showed me that everybody has an opportunity. It doesn't matter what your physical problems are. God loves everyone in the world. I went to a deaf Bible study. We spent time in the Bible. I started to learn and I was amazed that I had the same communication as everybody else. The pastor was deaf! He had my language. We all had the same communication—even the people in the church. It was wonderful that we could all interact. We could share. I didn't have that before, and it was so wonderful to be involved. It made me want more of God, and to be involved more in His work.

Deaf people have American Sign Language (ASL), hearing people have English. Our native language is different. ASL is an important part of the culture. If we were to take a hearing person and put them in a deaf church, they would just be flabbergasted. They couldn't understand anything. In the same way, if you put a deaf person in a hearing church, they are just as lost. It is possible for us to intermix and socialize but it is very hard. We need to be separate because of the language. God uses each of us in unique ways.

In the same way, you have that opportunity to be used by God. He has called you. God wants to show you many things that you can't explain about your life. Let the Lord touch you and show you what he can do in your life. He has many amazing things to show you, too

The past five years have been a wonderful experience, and I truly love the Lord and want to continue to serve Him. Thank God that I found Him.

I Am So Thankful for MY Church

Ramy Bustamante, III (Deaf)

Owner, PYRAM.COM, Walnut, CA

I remember as a child going with my grandma to her church. It was a hearing church and, even though I was deaf, I would sit in the congregation with everybody else and try to understand what was going on up front. It never seemed to work, so I would just end up looking at my Bible—at the pictures.

Later on I went to a deaf school, Riverside Deaf School, and they would come and pick up kids to go to various churches. We would go to Sunday school classes and I would learn some things. One time I went to a Deaf camp up in the mountains. We were all together and had great fun playing games and socializing. It was so much fun! I really learned things when I was at that camp because they used sign language to teach. I was able to understand some of these words and concepts that I had never been able to grasp before. I really learned a lot there.

I remember in school I had a math class where the boy who sat next to me would always bring his Bible and study verses. I would ask him different questions and I found out that he went to a Deaf Church near the school. He explained that they used sign language to teach and preach. I was very interested in this and decided to go. I found out it was true! This man there taught history and Bible in sign language. Fascinating!

When I was in college, my wife and I went to a hearing church with interpreted services. But the pastor would speak so fast and the interpreter was seated so far away that I had a hard time keeping track of what was going on. I would miss information. My friend told me about a Deaf church that was near where we lived. He was a member and he encouraged us to come and sit with him in a service.

The pastor was wonderful! He was so easy to understand. He used American Sign Language, which was our language, so of course we could understand it easily. Later, I encouraged my deaf parents to come because I knew that they would like it. I knew that this would be a different experience compared to their childhood experience. After some convincing they finally came and saw that the Bible was explained in ASL, in our language, and they really enjoyed it. They continued coming too.

I have realized the importance of having a Deaf church, but there aren't very many Deaf churches. They are few and far between. I am so glad that the hearing church accepts Deaf people, but they really need to encourage the Deaf to start their own churches because they have their own culture. It's the best way that they can learn. Even though these two communities, the hearing community and the Deaf community, can have separate churches and institutions, they can still find ways to build a bridge of communication between them. Things will run much more smoothly and they will have mutual respect for each other.

A Church Just for Us!

Holly Kalling (Deaf)

Instructor in American Sign Language, Bethel College, Mishawaka, IN

What a blessing it is to finally have a Deaf church! I can remember about ten years ago when my deaf sister and I talked about how neat it would be if we had a church for the deaf in our area. As much as we wanted that kind of a church, we both told each other that it probably never would happen. There were few deaf people in our area (Niles, Michigan), and we didn't know of anyone who'd be ideal to lead the church.

Well, miracles do happen after all! Several years later, a Deaf church was started by my deaf pastor, Elizabeth Beldon, who came from Ohio to Mishawaka, Indiana, to work for Bethel College's ASL/Interpreting Program.

My sister Amy and I grew up oral. That means we attended a school which relied only on speech and lip reading and used no Sign Language. During our junior high and high school years we were mainstreamed into hearing schools. We grew up in a Christian family without knowing sign language. Our parents worked hard to help us succeed in school and in life. We attended church every Sunday, going to Sunday School and various church activities. Though Amy and I knew about Jesus Christ and about Christianity through our parents' examples, we often missed out on the sermons and Sunday school teachings. Our mother would interpret for us many times, sitting next to us and writing or mouthing the words to the sermons. While we are indebted to her for selfless service, it still wasn't the same. We didn't get everything out of the sermons, so we still missed out.

As my sister and I got older and attended college, we started picking up sign language. Amy attended NTID (National Technical Institute for the Deaf) in Rochester, New York, and then went to DIBC (Deaf International Bible College) in Minneapolis, Minnesota, where she became fluent in Sign. I went to Bethel College when the ASL program was started. My fiancè and I became involved in a Deaf Bible study group that was started by Pastor Beldon and other Deaf people in the community. A couple of years later, in December of 1996, Deaf Michiana Missionary Center was "born."

My sister Amy met her husband Randy at DIBC, and now they co-pastor a church for the Deaf in Milwaukee. So both Amy and I are thrilled to see our “dream” come true for both of us! It is a dream that we live each Sunday as we go to a church where we can understand everything that takes place without an interpreter. God is good and faithful to meet the needs of His children!

The Church and Deaf Culture

Elizabeth Beldon (Deaf)

*Director, ASL/Interpreting Department, Bethel College,
Mishawaka, IN, and c/Deaf Church Planter/Pastor*

Do you know that God created all people—a variety of people and a variety of cultures? It's truly beautiful that people can serve God and praise him and thank him. But the vast majority of churches are established by hearing people. Where are the deaf people able to go? We have found that most of these churches do not have qualified sign language interpreters. Some have *signers*, but they don't have qualified *interpreters* for the services. These people might learn a few signs and then try to interpret in the church and try to interpret about God, but it is not enough. Even if you can find a hearing church with a skilled interpreter there are still many issues. Many of these issues pertain to culture.

For example:

1. When Deaf people attend a Hearing church and are told to “close your eyes and bow your heads” to pray, it's as if a hearing person was told to “plug your ears and close your eyes.” We can't see what's going on!

2. Many Deaf people feel that a Hearing church is like a “prison.” Because hearing people are so sensitive to noise, one can't make any noise because it would distract others. If we attend a Hearing church, we're almost afraid to move for fear of making noise (which we can't hear) and bothering others. But we Deaf people aren't sensitive to noise; it's not part of our culture.

3. Even though worship songs in a Hearing church are interpreted, we Deaf people still prefer our own style of songs. They have a distinct beat (1-2,1-2-3) and the words, signed in time with the beat, do not follow English word order.

So we have the two aspects, both language and culture, that are issues for deaf people that attend hearing churches.

In order to reach deaf people for Christ it's important to start with what deaf people need, and one essential need they have is the separation of the deaf church from the hearing church. It wouldn't matter if the separated church for the deaf people was in the same vicinity or further away from hearing churches. The point is that the deaf people have their own place for freedom of worship, some place where their own language is used, where they can socialize and they can experience church from their own culture. In that way they are able to find out who God is and become saved.

For deaf people who have gone to a deaf church that has been established based on their own culture and using their own language, the difference is immense. They have a much deeper understanding and they tend to grow better in the Lord.

I believe we need more deaf churches—churches planted and designed specifically for deaf people. We've tried going to churches established by hearing people, but it hasn't been successful. But the deaf church HAS been successful and we praise the Lord for all those blessings.

Helping Others Understand

Linda Loftus (Hard-of-Hearing)

Teacher of Special Needs Students, Elkhart, IN

My parents attended church almost every Sunday when I was growing up. They instilled in me the importance of attending church to worship God. My mother, who was hard of hearing, had the opportunity to have a minister who understood her needs. He would write out his sermons and give her a copy on Sunday mornings. My mother really appreciated this and so did I. I would read along, too, when I attended church with her.

As my own hearing worsened I asked my minister to print out his sermons for me, but he didn't even use notes when he preached. When this minister left, we had an interim who would print his sermons on a computer and have them available on a table before we entered the sanctuary. Because I had the "script," I no longer missed punch lines or any other part of the message.

When the church hired a new permanent minister, our interim informed us not to expect printed copies of the sermon anymore, since this was not the new pastor's "thing." I was so upset and hurt that I cried. I went to talk with the new minister about my feelings, but I felt he viewed the printed copies of the sermon as a luxury. I explained that I used those to help me "hear." The copies of the sermon were not a luxury but a necessity! I also mentioned that we had several members who were hard-of-hearing, and they probably appreciated the written copies as much as I.

The minister listened intently. Then I asked if I could attend a staff meeting. At the meeting I reminded them of the number of hard of hearing members in our church who did not know sign language. I asked the staff to wear ear plugs while I played a tape of a previous service and waited for their responses. The minister said, "It was like I was doing all the work." He felt that he was only understanding one word out of every three or four. Another person said it was like she was not part of the service. I asked if anyone felt frustration or anger. One woman said if she had to listen to something at that volume for an hour or so she would become very upset.

A person who is hard of hearing spends their *entire day* "working" to hear. People who have a hearing loss are usually exhausted by the end of the day. Most people are tired from work alone. Hard-of-hearing

people have the added stress of working to listen to their co-workers or family members.

The church staff is a little more sensitive now to the needs of hard-of-hearing persons; however, we still have a long way to go. The new minister does not type out his sermons, but the church is investing in assistive listening devices. In the next two to five years I hope to see TV screens with captioning during the sermon. In the meantime, I keep advocating for the rights of those who are hard-of-hearing.

Coping With Progressive Deafness in the Church

Bob Williams (Hard-of-Hearing)

Pastor Emeritus, Oakview Community Church, Scio, OR

I can certainly understand why so many Hard-of-Hearing (HOH) and late-deafened people drop out of church. I have dropped out of a lot of activities, and I quit trying to visit in homes or in hospitals. I can no longer join the folks who go caroling because I can't sing on key anymore. Even church workdays are something I have avoided because I have found myself in harm's way on more than one occasion because I could not hear in dangerous areas.

But this is no pity party. My cochlear implant, which I've just recently received, is already changing a lot of things. But with or without it, I have made myself available to do concerts and to do pulpit supply wherever I am requested to do so. I have collaborated with a drama coach and writer from Albany on a dramatic musical, which we have been working on for the past two years. We are hoping to put it on next year as a community-wide event in the Scio area. Along with the Apostle Paul, "I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."

What can the church do to help the hard of hearing in your congregation?

First of all, speak to them slowly and distinctly. Be aware of where the best acoustics are in the pews and reserve those areas for the hard-of-hearing. Make certain they are seated close enough to the front to read the lips of the leaders.

Provide either FM or infrared assistive listening devices and make certain that they are in good repair, that your engineers have a thorough understanding of them, and that someone is available to instruct people on how to use them. Always keep a fresh supply of batteries on hand.

Our church is now in the process of a pastoral change and I am a part of the Search Committee. Our associate pastor set up a computer, and my daughter typed the discussion so I could participate in the process. That was a big help to me.

Provide captioning for them. For people like myself, it was the only way I could understand what was being said. If captioning is important for secular TV, think of how much more important it is in sharing the message of salvation through Christ!

Finally, educate! Educate! Educate! Take what you've gleaned from this booklet and share it with your people. Organizations such as SHHH (Self Help for Hard of Hearing) will be happy to come and share with your congregations or support groups.

I pray that this will begin to open the doors of communication to this very large segment of society who need to "see" the Gospel.

Postscript

So there you have it: a collection of personal stories and testimonies from a small group of d/Deaf and hard-of-hearing Christians. What, if anything, do they teach us about bringing the "ministry of reconciliation" to those who live in silence? Now that we have met them and stepped into their lives for a moment, can we continue to carry out the mission of the church as we have in the past? Or must we consider

the ramifications of what it means to carry out the Great Commission to the d/Deaf and hard of hearing communities?

The first thing we can learn is that d/Deaf and hard-of-hearing people differ from each other in their perspectives and in their needs. People who lose their hearing after years of depending on the spoken word face different challenges than those who have used ASL (American Sign Language) as their primary language. Certainly there are some common experiences, but perspectives are quite different. That means that the tools for ministry must be different.

The second thing we can learn is that most churches and worship services are designed for the hearing, and those who do not hear are simply unable to participate fully. In many cases, they cannot participate at all. No wonder *only two percent of d/Deaf people in America claim to know Christ as Lord*. Clearly, we need to rethink our methods.

The third thing we can learn is that we must not only minister to d/Deaf and hard-of-hearing people but also to their families. These families face all the pressures and stresses your family has to face, but they also have the added issues surrounding the deafness. Educational choices, employment issues, access to public accommodations, and, of course, the difficulties of communication within the family unit—all of these are major considerations. Throw in a good dose of guilt, sometimes rage, frustration, and the sense of isolation these families often feel, and you see why we need to be more aware and responsive.

So what can be done?

First of all, pray. Pray that more d/Deaf and hard-of-hearing people will come to know Jesus. And pray that God will show you how you can be His instrument in this effort. That may take you in some challenging directions. It will almost certainly change the way you view missions and may well cause you to learn a new language or to lend your financial support to an outreach ministry you never considered before. *Most deaf people in this country have never even been presented with the plan of salvation in their own language*. Pray that God will raise up workers and leaders who will be able to communicate, and to live out, the Good News in the d/Deaf world.

Second, consider what your church can do to meet the needs of the hard of hearing in your midst. Install assistive listening devices. Consider a TTY for the church office. Be sure your staff knows how to use the relay service. Be sure hymnals, song sheets, or projections are used during the worship hour, and, if it is not possible to provide live captioning in the service, be sure that the pastor's sermon is available in some

printed form. If this is a hardship on your pastor, volunteer to help prepare such a manuscript. And find ways and times to socialize one-on-one with hard of hearing people. Feeling like a part of the group is vital.

Third, prayerfully consider if God may be calling your church to begin a specific ministry with d/Deaf people in your town, but do not enter such a commitment lightly. The most common approach hearing churches take is to try to find a Sign Language interpreter. This approach CAN be successful, but often they are ineffective in building a solid and long-lasting ministry with the d/Deaf. You are not likely to attend a congregation where almost no one else speaks your language. Why would the d/Deaf? Certainly it is far more costly, time consuming, and complicated to plant a d/Deaf church than it is to set up interpretive services, but there is no question that this approach is far more successful in "making disciples." Perhaps God may be leading your congregation to partner with other congregations in planting such a church. Ask your denominational leadership for assistance, or contact one of the d/Deaf outreach ministries which assist churches in this effort.

Fourth, and finally, consider supporting ministries like Silent Blessings, who are engaged in developing resources for ministry in the deaf world. We are currently working on a number of project designed to bring d/Deaf men, women and children into encounters with Christ. We are developing an ASL Worship Kit to enhance the worship experience in d/Deaf churches and those hearing churches who wish to incorporate ASL into their services. We are also engaged in awareness campaigns, leadership training, and advocacy on behalf of deaf ministries. For more information on how you can support us in our work, contact us at 877-FOR-DEAF, or on the web at www.silentblessings.org.

May your heart be open and receptive to do whatever God would call you to do to serve Him. Together through the grace of God we can work to *shatter the silence*.

Marshall Lawrence
Executive Director
Silent Blessings Deaf Ministries