

Excerpts from *Deaf Diaspora: The Third Wave of Deaf Ministry*
by Bob Ayres (iUniverse, 2004)

Defining Traits of The Third Wave (Chapter 7)

3rd Wave

2000s and 2010s

1. **Individual and team leadership**
2. **Gifts—diversity and unity**
3. **Large geographical regions**
4. **Importance of missions**
5. **Outreach and relational ministry**
6. **Technology, Drama, Deaf-music, Basic Gospel**
7. **Inclusive and unique programming**
8. **Equal access to the Gospel**
9. **ASL with acceptance of other communications styles**
10. **Priority on personal relationships**

Individual and team leadership – Jesus modeled it for us this blend of individual and team leadership. Some have a gift for leadership and called to lead. All are called to use their gifts for ministry. A team needs leadership; a leader needs a team. Excellence occurs when someone, *who has a servant's heart*, leads a team of people who are diverse and unified by the spirit of Jesus Christ. God has created us to work as part of a body of believers. Read the advice given to Moses by his father-in-law in Exodus 15. Study carefully the 12th Chapters of both Romans and 1st Corinthians. Read the final chapters of John. Read the whole New Testament. We are foolish to ignore the importance of ministry based on gifts from God.

The scripture says it best.

1 Corinthians 12:14-27. *"Now the body is not made up of one part but of many. If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do*

not belong to the body," it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!" On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it."

Sustainable ministry uses both individual and team decision-making process. One must lead a team with full recognition that Christ is the true "head" of the "body" (Ephesians 1:22-23). The leader must follow Jesus' example of washing the feet of the disciples and sending them out to serve God (John 13:1-17). In the past, ministries would "pop-up/pop-down;" they would exist for only a short period of time and would disappear when the leader moved or burned-out. Teenagers need to have dependable influences in their lives. Using a team creates stability. A team has insights that no one person could possibly have; we are smarter than any *one* of us.

For Third Wave ministries to be effective, someone must steer the boat with great sensitivity to those in the boat, including those with a gift for navigation. It is ideal when this person is also Deaf because of the role model this provides for Deaf youth. The key qualifier is to have a gift for leadership and a call from God.

Gifts—diversity and unity – It is vital for a ministry team to be diverse and unified. Unity *without* diversity will not reach the variety of Deaf teens in today’s world; diversity *without* unity is a formula for disaster. The team must be built upon the gifts of the Body, not whether someone is Deaf or not, or signs in only ASL or not. The ideal team is a blend of people who love Jesus and each other; who are black, brown, white; young, middle, old; Deaf, Hard-of-Hearing, Hearing; and come from a variety of denominational backgrounds. This is one of the areas where Third Wave ministries distinguish themselves from the Second Wave; they pursue diversity that includes hearing people. The two vital words to remember for successful Third Wave ministries are *diversity* and *unity*. We need as diverse a ministry team as possible who love each other deeply and sincerely.

The team must develop a sense of commitment to each other and respect for differences in perspectives, skills, denominations, and personal gifts. Young Deaf people need to see Deaf adults working side-by-side with hearing adults as Christians. These young Deaf people will be interacting with hearing people throughout their lives as brothers and sisters in Christ. Most are from hearing families. They need to see Deaf and hearing adults working as co-laborers for the Kingdom of God. This prepares these young people for their rightful place as full participants in service to Christ as peers and equals to hearing people. The Bible says the world will recognize we are followers of Christ in how we love each other. We are the Body of Christ. We are one in the Spirit. The strength of the team is with Christ at the head and an attitude of love and acceptance of each other and the different gifts of the body.

Large geographic regions – There are still a significant number of Deaf students attending residential schools. Due to the changing demographics, the numbers have decreased over the past three decades and a significantly higher percentage of the students at the schools for the Deaf have physical and/or emotional problems. Third Wave ministries must now think in terms of ministry to teenagers in residential schools but primarily in large geographic regions and across denominations. We even have to work across para-church organizations. No one can do it alone but we can reach Deaf teenagers by working together. Part of the ministry is finding ways to overcoming the problems created by distance and differences. It is important to maintain and strength the natural supports in their lives such as the family, church, and neighborhood. The teens gather together to learn and grow but return to their own worlds to apply what they have experienced.

The term *post-denominational* is used to mean that we still treasure our traditions and differences but recognize that a Deaf teenager who has no knowledge of Jesus Christ is not interested in theological discourse. They are separate from God by sin and need to know of God's great provision of grace and forgiveness through Jesus Christ. Deaf teenagers are so scattered that no one denomination, no one church, no one para-church ministry (such as Young Life or Youth For Christ), no one Deaf ministry can reach them all. We must be willing to maintain our unique identities while recognizing that this is a post-denominational generation in need of a relationship with Jesus Christ.

Missions – Involvement of Deaf teenagers in *mission* opportunities is the one of the most vital characteristic of Third Wave ministry. *Missions* incorporate both evangelism and discipleship. Involving Deaf teens in missions is a critical part of reaching teens for Christ, instructing them towards maturity of faith and creating a permanent connection with Christianity for a lifetime.

In the residential setting, there are many opportunities for students to develop leadership skills. This is seldom the case in mainstreamed setting. The bulk of mainstreamed Deaf students have few options for planning, implementing and leading activities and events. The competition with other hearing students is stiff and the size of public schools makes developing leadership skills difficult if not impossible. Deaf teenagers need a place to practice leadership and Deaf ministries should make this a priority. Mission opportunities provide active participation in the learning process and development of important planning and implementation skills. The Christian faith teaches leadership in its proper perspective; one must first become a servant as Christ served the Apostles.ⁱ This is an important perspective that is missed in most of the secular leadership training programs.

Outreach and relational ministry – Relational ministry is the only viable means of reaching this next generation of Deaf children and youth with the gospel of Jesus Christ. There are three basic parts of programming to this generation: *outreach*, *discipleship*, and *missions*. Outreach is how we reach the scattered population of unchurched Deaf young people. Make your activities fun and on-the-

edge. Teenagers want to have fun! God has begun a revival in our land to reach the Deaf of the Diaspora and it is a spiritual and relational experience.

Third Wave ministries must be able to relate to young people who are unchurched in every sense of the word. They will likely have dirty minds, hands, and habits. The love of the leaders must be stronger than the pain of the youth. We must have great tolerance of individuals without compromising the gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus reached out to the leper, the prostitute, the drunk, the greedy tax collector, and the demon possessed. He also railed against the self-righteous, religious leaders who made these very people feel lowly and despised. Jesus accepts you wherever you are but He doesn't leave you there. He takes your hand and leads you out of sin. We must have ministries that do likewise.

Technology, DraMuSign, Deaf-Music, Basic Gospel – Third Wave ministries must use the tried and true traditions of games, activities and social times but it is important to be intentional in creative programming. It is tempting to just toss out some snacks and let the young people chat. This is a huge mistake. Nature abhors a vacuum and so do young people. If you do not have a plan, they will develop their own plan and it may not be one of which you approve. Be intentional in preparing for active participation; make the time productive. We do not have the luxury of just creating a junior Deaf club. We have so little time with young people now that programming should include socialization activities as well as drama, music (loud and with lots of bass), DraMuSign (a phrase coined by Chad Entinger that combines drama, music and sign language), and a clear presentation of the gospel from the New Testament focused on Jesus Christ.

It is important to focus on the uncluttered basics of the gospel with this generation of Deaf young people. Personally, I prefer the uncluttered gospel, period; but here I am referring to the importance of *sequence, simplicity, and sincerity*. Do not hopscotch around the Bible with a devotional story here and inspirational thought there. This makes sense to people who have a foundational understanding of the flow of history but most Deaf teenagers have no knowledge base of the Bible. It is difficult to make sense out of these seemingly disconnected messages. Jesus Christ is the “visible image of the invisible God”ⁱⁱ and is our best and clearest picture of God.

Inclusion and unique programming (both) – Effective Deaf ministry with young people involves “*fun, friendship, fellowship, and faith.*” Fun and friendship can happen in the hearing world. Fellowship and faith are best developed in a uniquely Deaf setting. Discipleship is most effective as unique programming setting where Deaf teenagers process the information in a Deaf cultural model with sign language and pacing that fits Deaf learning styles and preferences. Missions can be either in inclusive or exclusive settings so long as there is an identifiable Deaf group where the young person is able to process the experience. This means that effective Third Wave ministries will occasionally participate in both interpreted hearing settings and consistently provide separate Deaf-Focused settings. The key is to be intentional; your Deaf teenagers are the priority and only do what makes sense for them. Join in with the large group of hearing teens when there is a great opportunity for fun and new friendships; have separate events for deeper spiritual and emotional interactions.

Equal access to the Gospel –Third Wave ministries will take a third road that recognizing both the distinctiveness of being Deaf and the similarity of experiences of life shared with the hearing majority. “Equal access to the gospel” translates into *I am just like any other person who has the right to experience God in a personal way that makes sense to me as a Deaf individual.*

Although the Deaf person’s experience with God is uniquely Deaf, it is also unified with other sincere Christians. A Deaf Christian and a hearing Christian have more in common with each other than either does with other unbelievers of their same cultures. Christ unites us as His followers. An old saying holds true; *the ground at the foot of the cross is level.* Though we experience life differently, our fundamental spiritual, emotional, and relational needs are the same.

ASL with acceptance of other communication styles –Third Wave ministries must adapt to the communication needs of the individual. A Deaf/Oral person also needs to understand the gospel and may be limited due to the inability to sign. Many Deaf/Oral people experience exclusion in the hearing world yet cannot find acceptance in the Deaf-World. This must change. We must make every possible accommodation to connect all Deaf people with their Creator regardless of their preferred style of communication. This is part of accepting people as they are and loving them into the Kingdom of God. Christ calls us to share with the world his message of hope and reflect it in our love for each other.

Many times, people who sign in American Sign Language have a difficult time communicating in signed English. People who think in English word order

and structures may have little or no understanding of American Sign Language. Those who do not sign at all may be even more isolated when participating in a Deaf ministry event than in a hearing ministry. So, how does a Third Wave ministry bridge these gaps? The answer is in having a diverse group of leaders from a variety of backgrounds. No one is excluded. All are welcomed into the kingdom of God. ASL should be the primary mode of communication with tolerance for all other preferences and accommodations made.

Priority on personal relationships – The key characteristic of Third Wave ministries that makes everything else work is a priority on personal relationships. Working with teenagers can be intoxicating. Many adults find that they are much more popular than they ever were when they were in middle or high school. This is a cautionary note and another reason it is vital to minister as part of a team with accountability and support. A leader may begin to feel responsible for personal ministry with dozens of teenagers. *A messiah complex* is a fast track to ministerial burnout that ultimately hurts those with whom you minister. Young people need stability and dependability in relationships. Leaders need to have their own emotional needs met in church and through relationships with other adults. A leader should only have one to three significant relationships with teenagers to be able to sustain those friendships. He or she can be friendly with more people but in terms of really investing time in consistent ministry relationships, there are limits. A team of ten Christian adults can have a huge impact on the lives of twenty to thirty young people in a community. Imagine the impact of this many strong Christian Deaf teenagers in your community as they

learn to minister to their friends. Faith is much more *caught* than *taught*. You are also modeling for them a balanced and faithful life. Jesus tells us in John 13:35 that the world will know we are His disciples by how we love each other. Ministry will ultimately be judged by how we love Deaf teenagers.

Relational ministry requires a ministry team. One person can only build and maintain two or three deep relationships with teenagers; more than this will lead to burn-out and the inability to fulfill relational commitments. Each person on the team is an important part of the relational, outreach ministry to Deaf teenagers. Effective Third Wave ministries will help each member of the team develop the necessary skills for fulfilling God's call in his or her life for relational ministry.

Someone once said *every teenager in the world needs to know there is some caring adult who is just crazy about them!* Youth ministry is not a burden; it is an honor to share one's life with young people. God's revival in the Deaf community is coming through the Deaf children and youth who are born during the last half of the Second Wave. They are the hope of the future of the Christian faith within the Deaf community. Effective Third Wave ministry will help them find the spiritual center of deafness and emerge as the cultural core of Deaf-World.

ⁱ John 13:1-17

ⁱⁱ Colossians 1:15