

DIVERSITY



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# MINISTRY WITH DEAF TEENS

by Bob Ayres

"What? IMPOSSIBLE!" The puzzlement was real.

Here is a bright, 16-year-old, deaf since his early years and totally baffled by my comment that God is fluent in American Sign Language.

Signing emphatically, he says, "God doesn't know sign language. God is hearing. He cannot understand signs!"

Can you imagine believing God cannot understand your language?

Like 90 percent of deaf teenagers, he was born to hearing parents. Only about 10 percent of hearing parents ever become fluent in sign language. This means about 80 percent of deaf teenagers grow up with parents who cannot communicate with them on the deepest levels.

Although his parents dragged him to church for his entire life, there was no interpreter, and he had little understanding of the gospel. I assured him God signs and reads sign language with incredible skill. God knows his thoughts, feelings and experiences; and He loves him completely. He began the process of making sense out of a "hearing" God who knew his language and understood his heart. "God created all languages and cultures," I explained in sign language. "God made you in His image; God cherishes you and wants a relationship with you." For most of his life, this teenager has seen himself as a "broken" hearing person. Now, he is beginning the process of re-framing his identity in Christ as a deaf person.



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## Cultural Crisis

Approximately 80 percent of deaf and hard-of-hearing students are mainstreamed. This has created a social *diaspora* (scattering), loss of deaf role models and a dramatic reduction of students with access to social settings for the hearing-impaired.

Because of communication barriers and isolation, it is incredibly difficult for young deaf people to make sense of the grace and truth of Jesus Christ. Deaf people have the same rights as those who hear to pray, worship, serve, discuss, celebrate and meditate on God's Word. It is in Christ that one finds his or her true identity. The ultimate answer to the deaf cultural crisis is found in addressing the spiritual crisis. The hope for a scattered community in knowing there is a God who knows us, loves us and will see us through this era of struggle.

## Faith and Hope

The rich Christian heritage in the deaf community has become almost completely erased from the deaf experience. This crisis went virtually unrecognized by the larger Christian body. There is a general assumption in churches that because there are "no deaf people in our church," then "they must be going somewhere else." This is not true. There is a widespread disconnect among spiritual things within the deaf community for those below the age of 50. In many deaf schools and mainstreamed settings, there is a subtle (and sometimes aggressive) antagonism toward the Christian faith. In the course of one generation, the Christian faith had become almost extinguished from the deaf experience.

Now, here is the good news: God wants His people back, and they are responding. There is a growing revival in the deaf community that is spreading across the country, much of this centered in ministry with deaf young people. In 2000, DeafYouth Ministries was established to "bring together the best in youth and deaf ministry." The direct ministry is called DeafTeen Quest (DTQuest®), which is now an official ministry of Youth for Christ/USA in partnership with DeafYouth Ministries.

Those of us in deaf ministry have struggled for years as outsiders who

minister in isolation. Burnout is very high. Finances are incredibly difficult. Coordination of a single event is complex and costly.

## A Room and a Place

So, what is the basic request of those in deaf ministry? What do we need for effective and sustainable ministry? How can you open the doors to your church or youth ministry? It is relatively simple. We want to be welcomed in; we need to be cherished as an important part of the family. *We need a room in the house and a place at the table.*

For deaf ministry to be effective, we must have our own identity. So, we need a "room"; not a physical room but *awareness* on the part of hearing people that deaf ministry, by its very nature, must be separate at times. In Mark 7, when Jesus is interacting with the deaf man, verse 33 begins, "After Jesus took him aside, away from the crowd..." Jesus reaches into the uniqueness of the individual needs. When deaf teenagers really come face-to-face with Jesus, it is usually "away from the crowd." Our "deaf" room should be filled with a distinct sense of humor, general cultural preferences and have barrier-free communication. We cannot just "plug in" to hearing ministries with an interpreter. To reach into the heart of a deaf teenager on a spiritual level, we need our own "room."

To be sustainable, deaf teen ministry needs to be connected to the larger Christian body. Deaf ministry with teenagers cannot, and should not, exist separately from some network of a greater ministry. This connection is what makes deaf ministry sustainable. This only works if you recognize deaf ministry *must* be approached as a cultural ministry, NOT a disability group. Hearing people who do not sign are "signing-impaired." Deaf people need to be welcomed to the table of fellowship with the whole family; we need a *place* at

the table. We want to be part of the family. We want to contribute, share, pray and feel valued. If deaf ministry is isolated from other teens, we cannot sustain our outreach, which will be one more painful loss in the life of a deaf teen.

## Welcome to the Family

My wife and I chose to build our family through adoption of older children. We have five children from three distinct cultural backgrounds. One son is African-American, our three oldest children are Caucasian and were born into rural poverty, and our youngest daughter is deaf and from Ecuador. However, we are one family. We love each other and share many meals together. When all our children still lived at home, each had separate rooms, and all were expected to be at the dinner table, ready to interact. There were fusses, fights and inconveniences that come with living in big families; but everyone is equally important, and each person carries responsibilities. Each one is a cherished part of the family. When one member is missing, our family is incomplete.

This is why the basic concept of effective and sustainable deaf teen ministry makes so much sense to us; we live daily with cultural diversity and family unity (though stressed at times). Every one of our children has a *room in the house and a place at the table*. Effort is required, but we are able to make things work. In fact, we must, if we are going to help bring the light of Christ into the lives of deaf and hard of hearing teenagers who need to realize God knows their heart language and celebrates their culture. 🙏

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