

Discipleship in My Community

Discipleship comes in different ways, in this context it is from taken personal understanding of what does discipleship means to different individuals. The interviews I had with deaf adults speaks on their understanding of who God is for them, what does spirituality means for them and what they would like from the chaplaincy in their lives? This is seen as another way for deaf people taking an ownership of making choices of being discipleship in community.

Aims

- To obtain information on their lifelong experience as deaf adults in Ireland
- To explore their views on the effects of their upbringing from home, school and peers.
- To investigate their views on the changes of the Church's influences on their life.
- To seek new ways of serving their spiritual welfare.

The questions given to the participants were to explore how did Deafness have effects on their life. Did this have any impact on their sense of belonging within a family and hearing community in general? What kind of influences regarding their school life, and their involvements within their community? Upon leaving school, did any of their lifelong learning make any impact on them. How did their experience and the choices they had made affect them in later years.

In their spiritual formation throughout their early life, what did they come away with in their later years/?

Communication at home

All of deaf experienced difficulties in part taking and felt frustrated in not being able to be one of the participants within the family situation. This is quite common. This continued into adulthood for some of them. For others, some were more able to hold discussions with their parents on one to one basis.

It is possible that they were not exposed to language and they struggled to use language as youngsters within their home environments. With time and age on their side, many deaf would come to grasp a better understanding of language through social interaction and learning from their peer friends and with their families.

The life of Deaf People during formal schooling

When it came to education, there may have been little support or network provided for hearing families to gain better understanding and greater awareness of access in communication with their deaf child. Factor for the delay in the comprehension of language development in their younger years where there may have been poor

access to understanding language or acquiring language in their communication among families and friends within their home,

Acknowledge that schooling is an important element of their life. Where they meet up socially, interact and are enabled to learn for themselves. This is also a place where they have a lived experience of embracing life and culture.

Not every candidate was articulate with words when they were asked to describe or explain. Perhaps they lacked self-esteem or didn't see the importance of probing further for themselves.

Policy of the education at that time, pupils were taught through oralism and therefore were discouraged from using Sign Language within the school environment.

Religious Education in Class

Teachers' role is to explain abstract ideas of God, to share the 'Good News' of Jesus and to promote the Christian Values through the use of Catechism. Throughout the interviews that were carried out. With deaf interviewees, a high percentage have found the experience of learning catechism as a religious subject in preparation for First communion or confirmation had made little impact, as many have not recalled any lasting memory of the preparation itself. A smaller percentage of 25% gained from religion classes that were beneficial to

them. And another 25% saw this as a duty and fulfilled what was asked of them rather than a personal involvement of development their relationship with Jesus.

Understanding the difference between ‘sin’ and ‘wrong’

One interviewee believed he knew the difference between sin and wrong. An example of this occurred when this person was told that it was wrong to use Sign Language and he interpreted this to be ‘sin’ as something he did wrong. A few years later, he went to confession and told that school chaplain his sins and to his surprise his confessor told him that using sign language was not a sin. This was a learning curve for him.

Experience of God as lifelong learning

50% recalled their experience of realising their sense of understanding about God through debates that took place in Class and had grown as they entered into their mid-teenage years. Yet, there is a sense of hunger and a spiritual appetite among deaf people.

24% questioned who is ‘God’ for them and are not convinced of God’s presence in the world. 13% do acknowledge there is God out there, but for them, they have no personal need for God in their present lives, and another 13% have belief of God and see this as duty. They see God as an authoritative figure.

One interviewee had a distant memory of going to mass and he felt good afterwards. Years later, he has no sense of connection with God

and does not recognise what spirituality is for him. This seems not to have enhanced the person's faith and spirituality and therefore the value of faith holds less meaning for him. Instead, this impacted on this interviewee, in making a personal decision not to impart 'Catholic upbringing' to his children. For him personally, he saw this as an infliction in passing on the faith to his children and at the same time he does not intend to force disbeliefs onto them either and had the preference for the child to discover his own beliefs as he grows older.

Understanding Spirituality

Interviewees had greater awareness understanding Spirituality after they had left school due to variety of life experiences presented to them. Due to experience of death of someone they knew in life which enabled them to question the meaning of spirituality. Thirst for better understanding and a wish for personal growth in their relationship with God and be in touch with their own personal searching for God in their lives.

Influence of Religion

50% indicate that it is important to pass on the faith to the people around them or to their own children. They see the value of having faith in their lives, which sustains them in their daily living.

Faith development among deaf people seems to have been ‘caught’ and this carried them through their adulthood. One of the candidates pointed out, there is living proof of God around them through the actions of people, through the virtues of respect that are in his family, in the deaf community and through various people.

Deaf people are capable of grasping abstract ideas and understanding spirituality through good teaching. This good teaching would encourage deaf participants to value their own faith and to have a better understanding of spirituality that surrounds them. This could also give them the opportunity to build a new relationship with God in their lives. Another interviewee’s sense of God deepened when she went through a crisis in her married life and in that situation she never felt abandoned by God in times of crisis. She had opportunities to ask questions that she would never have thought of asking before and gained better insight as a result.

The joys of Deaf Ministry in terms of Discipleship

Value of Education

The interviewees do acknowledge the importance of passing on the knowledge and information. They observed that in the life within school, and in this fast changing world, there are several pupils coming from different multi-cultural communities. This requires of them to have better understanding and respect for the different cultures and their way of life. Need to make connections and to understand their faith through interrelation with other religious

denominations that are within their school environments to prepare them for leaving school.

Role of Chaplaincy

The role of chaplain for adult deaf people came into existence in 1930's and this work has no geographical boundaries. By 1977, the Chaplaincy became known as the National Chaplaincy for Deaf People, (NCDP) which was approved by the Irish Bishop's Conference. Great efforts were made over the years to co-ordinate the work being done and involve other priests to be part of a countrywide service. A Pastoral Care service was initiated and preparation for baptism, confirmation, weddings, Care of the sick and funerals became part of the service for deaf people around the country. They also helped those in need of social services such as housing, employment, interpreting in various situations when no other services were available. Nowadays, there are services made available to them with social networking which now can provide Interpreters in different situations.

During the 70's and 80's weddings, funerals, house masses, prayer groups and pre-marriage preparation courses with the help of ACCORD were developed. These provide opportunities for the gathering of deaf people. They came together to pray and to socialise.

Language enables all people, including deaf people, to communicate and relate. This includes the ability to listen, think and converse about the beliefs that are passed on from families and from society. It

is particularly true when they try to converse about God. This is done through prayer through which they can involve their whole life. Thus they can become more alive and involved with their communities. But if deaf people have not been given the same access to knowledge about God they have missed an important part of their lives. A support network for spiritual education is in place. It is imperative that deaf people have a say in belonging in their own education and spiritual development. Deaf people are not handicapped, and it is too easy to patronise them: they belong to a linguistic minority in a hearing society.

Chaplains have tried to be understanding and in deaf ministry they have become more aware of deaf culture, have tried to learn and use their unique language and to understand the implications of this whilst providing spiritual welfare for deaf people. Ministry work has changed enormously over the years and especially in this rapidly changing world.

Majority of the interviewees have had contact with the chaplaincy at different stages in their lives. Others felt they have no personal need for the chaplaincy but do acknowledge that chaplaincy is there for people who need it.

Vital for a chaplain to gain knowledge of linguistics in Irish Sign Language and Deaf Culture, this gives them the opportunity to be educated in an understanding of deafness and its complexity, in how language is acquired by deaf children, in the culture of Deaf Culture

and to become skilled in the Sign Language. Knowledge of Sign Language alone is never sufficient but it is essential to have the competency to the chaplaincy work with deaf people.

The challenges of Deaf Ministry

Faith Development of working with adults.

Deaf friendly course for adults. Visual Faith Course. Catholic Certificate Religious Studies. This course was implemented in England by Fr Peter Mc Donough and he had given several courses in various parts of England and Ireland. This would enable deaf participants to raise their consciousness to make them aware of the wider issues, in church and society and how they might respond.

This could give them opportunity to build a new relationship with God in their lives. Encouraged to understand better their own faith and to hold discussions where their minds are constantly being challenged and stretched. Spiritual development can only take place where there is a good religious education curriculum in place. Dublin Diocese is aiming to give people opportunity to understand the Gospel of Luke through Bible study groups. Within the NCDP, is to host a pastoral Conference in Ireland. This can create awareness and to inform people of the ways of enlightening people for better

understanding of Spirituality and how they can be part of a discipleship in community.

Closing comments.

Oralism had put Deaf people at a disadvantage in their education and in their faith as well. There has been a noticeable change in the attitude regarding the use of Sign Language, in recent years; a better understanding of linguistics and Deaf culture had emerged. As a result, people have come to recognise that there is a more balance view in using Sign Language with deaf people whether they are at school, at home and at work places.

There were many struggles going on in families when it came down to use of communication. Throughout their formal education, they found it hard to grasp what was being said and had to rely on their fellow pupils for clarification. When it came to faith development, many of them had no personal lasting recollections whilst at school.

Not all interviewees felt able to verbalise their thoughts. However, they gained better understanding and self-knowledge through life experiences. For some, their faith was life giving and this helped them throughout life. In this way, the interviewees are keen to learn for themselves what it means to grasp abstract ideas and understanding of spirituality. For others, this has enabled them to

become critical thinkers and become their own persons in their own rights.

It is seen essential for the NCDP to develop a faith development course. This would be a Deaf friendly course, to enable them to be participants and active members of the faith filled community. This would be beneficial for sign language users as well as for the Deaf people.