

COLLABORATIVE MINISTRY IN THE DEAF VINEYARD

Peter McDonough, ICF Conference, Mexico City, August 2003

Introduction

If you are expecting to hear something new or revolutionary from this paper, you will be disappointed. This paper will endeavour to highlight a few important points that the Church has always taught, and reflect anew on the principles behind the Church's teachings, and how we can apply them whilst working in the Deaf vineyard. The term 'Deaf vineyard' is really a misnomer because though we are many distinct Deaf catholic communities, we are all part of a wider, universal, and one Catholic Church. However, at least in countries where English is the dominant language, many of us sign 'Deaf Church'. I have chosen the parable of the vineyard because it reflects the situation within the Deaf community today.

In the parable of the vineyard (Mt 20:1-7), the evangelist was really attempting to convey the generosity of God; furthermore, the issue of unemployment is not about laziness but that working is more honourable than doing nothing. However, as I have done in the past, I am re-creating the parable of the vineyard by wording it in a slightly different way so as to give it a slant:

Now the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner going out at daybreak to hire workers for his vineyard. He made an agreement with the workers and said that he would reward them generously, and sent them into his vineyard. Going out at about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the market place, *they were hard of hearing*. The landowner said to them, "You go to my vineyard too and I will give you a fair reward". So they went. At about the sixth hour and again at about the ninth hour, he went out and found some more people who were doing nothing. *They were partially deaf*, and the landowner made a deal with them and gave them work. Then at about the eleventh hour he went out and found more people standing round, and he said to them, "Why have you been standing here idle all day?" They explained "*Because we are profoundly deaf, no one wants us.*" He said to them, "You go into my vineyard too and I will give you a fair reward".... (*my adaptation*)

Because of ignorance, oppression and discrimination, Deaf people have been treated as objects of charity rather than citizens who play a full part in the Church and society, they have often been forgotten and left out. My re-creation of Jesus' parable shows an interesting decreasing linear corresponding to the hard of hearing who were left idle doing nothing but who were the first to be given the task of working in the vineyard and the profoundly deaf people who were the last to be discovered. The needs and rights of the hard of hearing people are often quite easy to understand and catered for whereas the needs and rights of profoundly deaf people are often harder to acknowledge and to be properly addressed.

We are all individuals and unique creations, but at the same time we all belong to different groups or communities, such as Photography club, football team, or a Bible Study group. We also belong to the universal Roman Catholic community, and locally we belong to our parish or Deaf Centre.

Baptism makes us members of the Body of Christ: 'Therefore... we are members of one another.' Baptism incorporates us *into the Church*. From the baptismal fonts is born the one people of God of the New Covenant, which transcend all the natural or human limits of nations, cultures, races and sexes: 'For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body.' [CCC 1267]

Deafness is not a bar to the life of the Church, nor should it stop us from drinking the living water at the well:

Just as Baptism is the source of responsibilities and duties, the baptized person also enjoys rights within the Church: to receive the sacraments, to be nourished with the Word of God and to be sustained by the other spiritual helps of the Church. [CCC 1269]

As baptised persons, we have the task of proclaiming the Gospel, sharing in the kingly, prophetic and priestly work of Christ. The Church needs all the different gifts that God has given to all. In the 21st century, we are faced with a plethora of faiths and cultures, and we are constantly made aware of the dichotomy between Jesus' stories and examples in the gospels, and our own lives. Is it really possible to undertake the mission among Deaf people? Before we attempt to undertake this task, I cannot over-emphasize the importance of support and networking.

Jesus called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. He said to them, "Where you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them." So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them. [Mk 6:7-13]

In this gospel story we see that Jesus was already preparing his disciples for missionary work. The longer passage in the gospel of Luke is a little different (Luke 10:1-20) but both were clear in the fact that Jesus sent his disciples two by two or in pairs, not individually. It seemed that Jesus was concerned they should get support from each other. They came back rejoicing to tell their tales, their successes and difficulties; Jesus listened to them and gave them more instructions. However, in Mark's gospel, the story of the sending out was followed fairly soon by Jesus' instruction: 'Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.' (Mk 6:30). Jesus was slowly and gradually forming them to be the vineyard workers, preachers, healers, and messengers of the Good News of the gospel. They were ordinary men.

Today, no less true than in Jesus' time, our baptism calls us to serve and to proclaim the Good News of the gospel.

By reason of their special vocation it belongs to the laity to seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and directing them according to God's will. [CCC 898]

Since, like all the faithful, lay Christians are entrusted by God with the apostolate by virtue of their Baptism and Confirmation, they have the right and duty, individually or grouped in associations, to work so that the divine message of salvation may be known and accepted by all men throughout the earth. This duty is all the more pressing when it is only through them that men can hear the Gospel and know Christ. Their activity in ecclesial communities is so necessary that, for the most part, the apostolate of the pastors cannot be fully effective without it. [CCC 900]

The proclamation of the Good News of the gospel, is to enable all to develop a relationship with Jesus Christ, and with each other. It begins with our own words or signs, our thoughts and our actions.

The contents of the Good News is important. Basically, the Good News comes from God, it is about God and his love for us, it is a message of how God involves himself with us in our world. It is a story of the life and work of Jesus Christ who is the manifestation of God's love for all. It is not restricted to certain people or certain groups. God created all and he loves us all without exception.

When we see something beautiful, or when we see someone or certain people who do wonderful things, naturally we want to respond, we offer praise, we congratulate people, and we delight in the good. When we truly realise that God loves us, we want to respond by offering him praise and thanksgiving, and share it with others. There is no one right way to do this; our diverse personalities and the different situations influence the way we respond. Ministry with Deaf people is a very specialised task requiring specialised skills and training, understanding and experience. Teaching, preaching, evangelizing, healing depends on culture, time and place.

There has been very research and study on the subject of Deaf people within Church. The wider Catholic Church community is still quite ignorant of Deaf people and how to include them in all its spheres of evangelizing, catechesizing and praying. This paper does not set out to rectify this but, I hope to bring to the fore the Deaf dimension - our understanding and experience of Deaf culture, and see how we can improve the way we work together, and enhance the understanding of our relationships. It is impossible to cover everything, one would need to write a book but I hope this paper will trigger off discussions, give hope to the tiring and frustrated workers, offer direction and insights, and generally enable all to see ministry with Deaf people in a new light and give us a sense of renewal.

They have a story to tell

When we try to serve Deaf people, and enable them to develop their spirituality, it is essential that we get rid of the common misconceptions or myths that Deaf people's lives are impoverished, that they have limited language or understanding of the world, are unable to grasp complex ideas or abstract notions, and that they are unspiritual. The first thing we have to do is to recognise and affirm that Deaf people already have *their* own language, it is usually ourselves who are unable to communicate with them using their language. It is a stark fact that nothing short of becoming fluent in sign language will do. This is one of the reasons why the best ministers to minister to other Deaf people are Deaf people themselves. We must acknowledge their wealth of life experience, and even spiritual experience. We must utilise this as a starting point.

The concept of Kenosis of St. Paul, that Jesus although he was God, he was fully human, is not theoretical: God is truly in the world; God is within us and is in our hearts. The Bible is full of the stories of the lives of people who had all kinds of religious experience and who communicated with God as if God were another person.

‘They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden.’ [Gen 3:8]

The Genesis story reveals a theological truth that sin separates us from God. The whole of our life is searching and journeying towards the One who created us. We are trying to discover how to relate with God in our daily living.

I will now recount a story from a Deaf lady who is a level-headed person not given to exaggeration:

In 1956 I left the Royal School for the Deaf in Preston. During the summer I went to the local parish Church. I had not made my first Holy Communion and the Parish Priest kindly gave me instructions to prepare for it. It was very difficult trying to follow and understand what he was saying. I persevered for eight weeks but I was learning nothing really. One afternoon I was walking up a country lane and I was praying to God. I said, "God, you know I'm deaf, this priest is impossible to lipread or understand. I want a priest who knows and can use sign language. Why don't you send me a priest who can sign." At this time, I had no idea that there was a priest who knew sign language, never mind the fact there was a Club/Centre or Service for Deaf people in the diocese. I remember clearly I was talking with God and having a conversation with Him just like talking to another person. Then I arrived home. Later, my mother came to me and said, "You have a visitor." I went to see who it was, it turned out to be a priest who was actually a Chaplain for Deaf people. He began signing to me and I was astounded! He then invited me to go to the Deaf Club where there were services available in sign language. I remember being amazed at how quickly God literally answered my prayer! Soon I received instructions and I made my first Holy Communion. Since then I have been a regular member at St. Joseph's and wouldn't miss Mass in sign language.

We are like Elijah who needed to be fed with bread and water so as to be strengthened for the journey to Horeb, the mountain of God (1 Kings 19:4-8). For us Deaf people, we need to be fed with the Word of God in *sign language*. Our prayer must be based on Sacred Scripture, it is the ultimate source of our religious experience, whether conscious or unconscious, so that we can proclaim with Paul: "I live now not with my own life but with the life of Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:20). But the Eucharist and the Word of God will have no effect on us if we do not ponder in our hearts the messages God has for us. We need to ponder on the direction of life that we have taken, and on all the things that have happened to us. We need to be like Mary who 'treasured these things and pondered them in her heart' (Lk 2:19). Active consciousness of God, or 'awareness' is important if we are to respond to God's invitation to be in communion with the Trinity.

However, for Deaf people, the Word of God is not so readily available due to limited access. Even if the Word of God is conveyed to Deaf people in a way that is suitable, what they really need is not only access to information, they need instructions and discussions - education in general - so that their minds are constantly being challenged and stretched. They need input that is sensitive to their culture and language, input that is visual and meaningful. If they see the Good News and understand it, they have faith, and what is preached comes from the Word of Christ through the sign language of a preacher. Then once they have received something, it would then be natural for them to wonder, reflect and share deeply on the mystery of God. Their consciousness of what is happening around them will be enhanced, and they will naturally want to respond to what they have received.

We find God through human experience. Our task is to enable the person to discover where God is in their lives and what God is saying to that person. Unfortunately, very few are willing to share their religious experience because they are afraid of being laughed at or ridiculed. Of course, listening to others sharing their experiences, we need to be careful, and be empathetic and respectful, we need to acknowledge their experience instead of appearing to analyse it. We must encourage them to tell their story carefully and accurately and we need to ascertain whether the religious experience is real and valid, and not imagined. We need to know their background, their upbringing, their schooling and what they are involved in at the moment. We need to be sensitive or we could appear to arouse suspicion in that person's mind leading them to think that we are looking for psychological reasons and trying to explain it away, or even put it down to neurosis or fantasy.

It is always difficult to ascertain or judge what is a religious experience? God is a mystery. It is up to God to work directly with the person, inviting, challenging, loving, consoling, responding, revealing etc. We cannot control, we cannot predict, we cannot even understand but we can encourage the person to explore their own experience and find God. One way is to ensure we meet with them regularly and to explore the experience together. Even though God is a mystery, the story of the Deaf lady shows that God does indeed communicate with us just like the stories we read in the Bible. Even if a person has very little language, it should not stop him/her from experiencing God's presence. There was a Deaf woman who was a practising Muslim. She immigrated to England from Kenya and has very little English and sign language. She asked a Social Worker to go with her to the hospital to prepare for the birth of her child. At nearly every visit to the hospital, she took the opportunity to go into the Chapel and spent a few minutes there. Why did she go there? As a practising Muslim, she would know the difference in the building and structure between a Mosque and an Christian Ecumenical chapel. Yet all that mattered to her was sensing the presence of God.

One of our deceased Deaf residents, Klaus (who used to live at Henesy House), was a Jew. During World War II, he along with other Deaf children, escaped from Germany to avoid the Concentration Camps. All his family were executed in the gas chamber. Klaus was a highly intelligent man, and because of his mental health - his nerves weren't too good probably because of his childhood experience during the war - his marriage to a Deaf lady failed. He was very sociable but had an obsessive ordered life in which certain things must be done in a certain way. One summer he turned up at the synagogue and asked to see to the Rabbi. Later the Rabbi contacted the matron of Henesy House, and from that moment, arrangements were made for further visits with a sign language interpreter, and the Rabbi got to know Klaus a bit better. The Rabbi asked Klaus why he did not attend the synagogue, Klaus replied by shrugging his shoulders and pointed to his heart. Klaus began to attend the synagogue every Saturday. Three months later he died. Jews, Christians, and people of other faiths, do respond to God's mysterious promptings.

There was a retreatant who was going deaf. He told me that for a few years he had been very depressed, as a result of losing his hearing, he also suffered from tinnitus, he lost his friends and eventually lost his job. He lost his confidence and his social life plummeted. One day sitting at home, doing nothing in particular, he suddenly heard beautiful singing and heard a clear beautiful voice, 'Do not be afraid, I understand.' He often wondered about this experience and asked if what he heard came from God. After asking a few questions and getting to know him a bit better after a few days I saw nothing which suggested that it didn't come from God. The God is the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob. He is also the God of Deaf people, the God of deafened people, the God of hard of hearing people, and the God of hearing people; God communicates with everybody.

Power and Language

Language is a tool through which we relate with ourselves, with other people and the world. Interaction between people, and influxes of thoughts and beliefs that are passed and shared, create for a kind of tower of Babel, or maybe thousands of towers of Babel; and because of the many different cultures, it is important to be able to listen, to be aware and to accept the difference.

People are living beings who make some kind of responses. We all have relationships which develop over a period of time. This is also true of our relationship with God although at times our responses to God are not always apparent or even transparent to ourselves. Spiritual directors often encourage us to be conscious of our feelings and emotions. They are the signposts to self-knowledge which leads to self acceptance. As we unfold our experiences and become aware of our

blessedness and brokenness, we begin to become more aware of the God who alone can fill all of our life with blessings.

Communicating with God will involve all of ourselves: feelings, moods, thoughts, desires, hopes, will, gestures, attitudes and activities. Prayer includes all of these. As prayer deepens, we become more alive, earthy, alert to what surrounds us, vibrant. Prayer does not take place in isolation or in a vacuum, and our life, work, experience will influence our prayer. Responsibilities of our jobs or life commitments will shape our prayer life.

The Anglican chaplain with Deaf people (Rev John Clarke, 'Deafness', July 1993) wrote an article titled *The Church and the Deaf Community*: 'the reason for the dwindling number of Deaf people in the Church, was due to power and language.' As power was exercised by the old-style chaplains who worked for a good cause 'for' the Deaf, and the language was in Sign Supported English which was based on the language of hearing people. A lot of water has gone under the bridge since then, and great strides have been made; the key word now is 'empowerment' which is the quintessence upon which present day ministries are developed. Rev. John Clarke also pointed out that the language BSL would separate Deaf people from hearing people but it would not separate Deaf people from the worship of the whole church.

Ministry with Deaf people will only be truly effective if it takes into account the experience and culture of Deaf people. To attempt to integrate Deaf people into the majority or dominant hearing Church will often be futile, fruitless and unproductive. However, integration is too general a word; Deaf people will always be happy to share with hearing people as long as they are not expected to fit into the way and experience of hearing people. Neither do they expect all hearing people to fit into the way and experience of Deaf people themselves. They have to meet half way, negotiate and make compromises, and build bridges. If hearing people have sign language skills and have the right attitude, integration will occur almost naturally.

There is more talk now about access for Deaf people today but we must acknowledge that the past histories of Deaf people's lives are also an issue. Deaf people, whilst growing up as children, were generally left behind and did not receive enough encouragement to learn to reflect on their faith and the mystery of God's love. Throughout their lives, they have had little access to conversations where people actually talked about God and their experiences; they missed out on conversing with their parents and sharing their faith journey. In schools they had to concentrate so hard on listening, lipreading and speaking, never mind about understanding and asking questions; in Church, they rarely hear priests' sermons; and in general there is just not enough people around with natural skills in sign language. For many, the methodology of communication just wasn't appropriate or intelligible, so anything that can be remotely described as religious was a dead bore, a turn-off. It is true that the same applies to all things, English, Maths, Sciences etc, but they all deal with tangible ideas or things, whereas religion concerns something that is invisible, untouchable, inaccessible.

To simplify the contents of the Good News message to Deaf people doesn't really address the underlying issue. When Deaf people share conversation with hearing people, what invariably happens is a 'switch' (or 'code-switching' as it is linguistically called) in the way they sign to each other. This is done to enable Deaf and hearing persons to communicate. But each Deaf person's background history is so diverse, and their personality is intertwined with the social world in which they live. Generally, the less access Deaf people had in their early formative education, the less opportunity they have of developing the art of thinking and reflecting on their life journey, and especially the various events that have happened to them in their lives and how they related them to God. The majority of Deaf people do not seem to reflect on the meaning of living their lives in this world, their purpose and place in this world or the mystery of God's presence in the world. Often they do not see or reflect on the connection between various things that happened in their lives, or in their relationship with God. If some of them have a poor sense of consciousness or awareness of

what's happening around them, they will not be able to respond in a Christian way to the needs of people whether near or far.

The education of the conscience is a life-long task. From the earliest years, it awakens the child to the knowledge and practice of the interior law recognized by conscience. Prudent education teaches virtue; it prevents or cures fear, selfishness and pride, resentment arising from guilt, and feelings of complacency, born of human weakness and faults. The education of the conscience guarantees freedom and engenders peace of heart. [CCC 1784]

Creating conversations

One of our responsibilities is to bring God into Deaf people's consciousness, to enable them to become receptive to the gift of God's self-revelation.

J Whitehead & E Whitehead (Method in Ministry, 1999) said that we do not have a conversation about football, what we did last weekend, or dreaming about our new house, in order to settle the matter once and for all so that we do not need to discuss it again. We have a conversation because it is a way of sharing; it is usually a result of the interaction from our coming together. The conversation is our life together.

Conversation is an opportunity to meet together, not to compete but to share. We are all so diverse but there is one thing that is common to us all, we are all human beings. It is in this respect, therefore, whatever our roles, whatever our status, whether we are Deaf or hearing, we need to acknowledge each other as equals and that we need each other. No matter how much knowledge we may have acquired it is never enough; and the way I see the world is different from the way you see the world.

Each human being brings a wealth of experience. With humility we open ourselves to the richness of life-experience in other people; and if we are truthful about our own experience, other people will not merely be interested in us but will want to offer us encouragement.

They were still talking about all this when he himself stood among them and said to them, 'Peace be with you!' In a state of alarm and fright, they thought they were seeing a ghost. But he said, 'Why are you so agitated, and why are these doubts rising in your hearts? Look at my hands and feet; yes, it is I indeed. Touch me and see for yourselves; a ghost has no flesh and bones as you can see I have.' And as he said this he showed them his hands and feet. Their joy was so great that they still could not believe it, and they stood there dumbfounded; so he said to them, 'Have you anything here to eat?' And they offered him a piece of grilled fish, which he took and ate before their eyes. [Luke 24:36-43]

I do not believe that after his resurrection Jesus appeared and disappeared on a whim his disciples. To see someone come back from the dead must have been an absolute shock for the disciples; it is no exaggeration that Luke wrote 'their joy was so great that they still could not believe it, and they stood there dumbfounded.' Jesus was one of the most caring persons the world had ever known, it would have been so unlike him and so insensitive, if he were just to disappear again so soon! To help his disciples get over the shock, he asked if they had anything to eat. They gave him a piece of grilled fish. In our lives, meals are one of the natural focal or gathering points for families and friends. Meal times are not just for eating but for sharing together, having a chat, and enjoying each other's company. Jesus did just that and I'm sure he spent hours just chatting and trying to answer his disciples' numerous questions. Even if the disciples knew and accepted the crucifixion and

resurrection, Jesus would still have stayed on talking, enjoying their company, and their conversations.

I have been to many celebrations of the Eucharist with the Deaf communities, throughout England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland. One of the positive aspects about them is that they always stay on for refreshments, even if only for a cup of tea. No one told them to stay, it just happens naturally; it is part of Deaf culture but one has to remember the isolation for the best part of the week so it is natural for them to socialise with each other after Mass, they are hungry not just for news but companionship. Unfortunately, as soon as Mass is over, many chaplains disappear. Often this is because they have other responsibilities, and in these days of dwindling numbers of priest, it means that their time is limited.

Lately I have become more conscious of this. I am busier than I was years ago; I am acutely more aware of the importance of just being there. I always think about the words of the Renewal of Commitment to priestly service that I make every year at the Chrism Mass with the Bishop and with all the priests of the diocese:

Are you resolved to be faithful ministers of the mysteries of God, to celebrate the Eucharist and the other liturgical services with sincere devotion? Are you resolved to imitate Jesus Christ, the head and shepherd of the Church, by teaching the Christian faith without thinking of your won profit, solely for the well-being of the people you were sent to serve?

One of the important aspects of Deaf culture is that they can be very forthright and direct. Sometimes outsiders or people who are not familiar with Deaf culture would think they are telling us off. But if we allow conversation to happen, by this I mean, being honest and sincere with each other, we will find that they can help us a lot. On Sundays I usually have two Masses, the first one is at St. Joseph's in Manchester, and the second one in the outlying towns which means I have to travel there by car. Previously I have been anxious about having my dinner before hitting the road. I would be busy from the moment I finished my breakfast and would not normally get back home till about 5.30 or 6.00 pm, a long day to work on an empty stomach. When the Deaf members realised that I needed to eat, they offered me bacon sandwiches or cheese sandwiches (sometimes both!), and a steaming cup of tea so that I can sit down, relax, eat and drink. It means that I am in the Club for a bit longer, and I am able to chat with other members, or simply just to be there. They may be forthright but they are always caring and supportive. If need be, they are not afraid to tell me off. I am a priest and they respect me. By spending time with them in a very ordinary way, we create human interactions in which we no longer have to hide behind our masks. Then we find that the mundane often turns into something special and uplifting; this is because we allow conversations to begin, no matter how boring or trivial they seem to be, unexpectedly, praise, insight and inspiration occur. They will not happen if we do not make the effort simply to be there with them. Presence is often more than enough to begin with.

“Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things: there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her.” [Lk 10:41-41]

It does not only apply to priests who must try and find time to be with Deaf people. It also applies to everybody else: Pastoral Workers, Catechists, Volunteers and Deaf people themselves. Empowering Deaf people will only occur when we have developed a relationship with them; trust, mutual respect, confidence and friendship are essential ingredients in any ministry.

I was interested to see that in pre-War times in Manchester, it wasn't religious education or Church services that was the backbone of St. Joseph's Mission, but rather it was the hall, social events such as 'film nights' and lectures that were to be the foundations upon which the lives of Deaf people revolve. They were the infrastructures which provided opportunities not only for religious education but faith sharing since it must always occur within human experiences.

Thursday nights were very popular because it was 'pictures night.' Father Hayward was very proficient as a photographer and before the silent-movie films (Charlie Chaplin, Charlie Chase, Harold Lloyd etc), he would show a film of himself giving a sermon in sign language. The Mission prospered and they moved from Ancoats to Old Trafford. The first Mass was celebrated in the chapel on the Feast of SS Peter & Paul, 29th June 1936. It has continued to flourish and develop and next year (2004) we will be celebrating the 75th anniversary of the establishment of St. Joseph's Service to Deaf people.

Revelation is God unveiling himself to us. Revelation occurs in different ways and the experience of it is always concrete, belonging to a particular person, at a particular place, in a particular situation, employing particular symbols. Scriptures originated in people's experience, in a certain place, at a certain time. The texts in our Scriptures were cultural words imbedded in and carrying the limits of a particular culture. Therefore, meeting and experiencing God's presence should be a common phenomena that occurs daily; just like everybody else, Deaf people need to be guided and encouraged to follow their own baptismal calling.

Lumen Gentium (n. 12) says that the Holy Spirit distributes special graces among the faithful of every rank; by these gifts he makes them fit, equipped and ready to undertake various tasks and offices for the renewal and building up of the Church. The manifestation of the Spirit is given to everyone for the common good. That means the Christian life is to be ordinarily supernatural. In baptism we receive the Spirit and his gifts and charisms, and we are strengthened in them through the sacraments and celebrations of confirmation; reconciliation, the Eucharist, and in his Word; the Spirit keeps coming, again and again, to strengthen our foundation in him, to help us experience more of his gifts, and become more proficient in the exercise of those gifts. We must *never* allow the excuse that deafness is a problem that limit charisms. The gifts of the Holy Spirit are not reserved to holy people or to saintly people. The gifts do not necessarily refer to healing or prophecy; they are listed in (in 1 Cor 12-14 and Rom 12:6-8). God endows our ordinary gifts with supernatural grace, transforming them, and using them to build up the kingdom of God on earth.

Sharing our gifts

At St. Joseph's Centre for Deaf People, we have an quite an active community; the peak is always the celebration of the Eucharist in sign language every Sunday morning at 11.30 am. Average weekly attendance is sixty-five people, the majority are Deaf people. We try to make it clear that we are open to all people and people of other religions have been known to visit us, even Deaf Muslims. We know we have over three hundred names and addresses of those who are Deaf in our diocese which is relatively quite small compared to other dioceses but with a high intensity of people clustered around the city of Manchester; and I am sure there are others who are not even listed in our database. My estimate is there must be about four hundred or even five hundred. It is always one of our main concerns to try and reach out, make ourselves known, inform them that weekly Mass is available in sign language, etc. I, and the other priests and Sisters at Henesy House, are proud of our core group of Deaf people who are really active in the ministry, especially welcoming people and making them feel at home in our Centre. Not long ago, I was talking with a Deaf member who said he met another Deaf Catholic who was quite open about not having been to Church for ages but for some time had been thinking of coming back to Church, but had so far not been able to push himself to make the effort. One morning he decided that he would come, in fact,

as he approached our Centre and the Church, this person felt rather nervous. Unfortunately, as he arrived the first Deaf person to greet him said, “Oh, why have you not been here for ages?” This tactless thoughtless person said the wrong thing. Sadly the other person who took a lot of courage to make the effort to come back, turned round and went back home and nobody knew about it.

Hospitality is a very important gift but it can be very hard to exercise because we have to be constantly available to people, we have to remind ourselves to meet their needs first and ours last, and it often requires a lot of sacrifice. Hospitality does not require great learning or training, all we need is to be ready early, stand around the entrance, and greet at people as they come in. Even a smile is often a sufficient start. Hospitality, a mundane and ordinary gift, can seemingly and miraculously turn the occasion into a special moment, and it has a far greater impact on the psychology and the way other people think and feel as they come in. Hospitality, one of the humble gifts, yet with grace, can be turned into supernatural means for evangelising and bringing the touch of Christ into people’s lives. People do not need to wait for authorisation from the clergy or from those in authority to take leadership and to serve the community; theirs is the initiative, not ours.

Many Deaf people fail to make use of their charisms because of fear. When we were small children learning to walk or ride a bicycle, we often fell and make mistakes but they are part and parcel of our lives. Either we try to exercise our charisms despite our mistakes or we cease to use them for fear of appearing foolish. Anyone reading the gospels cannot fail to notice that Peter made a lot of mistakes, yet he was willing to continue to speak out his mind or to propel himself into action. It was Peter, the fisherman, who was handed the keys.

The best resource are the people themselves. Better resources, better use of technology, encouraging volunteers to use innovation and imagination. For instance, a Deaf woman, who is an Assistant Teacher working in a school for Deaf children found a good way to catechise young Deaf children. She discovered how we can use powerpoint presentation *using* the children themselves. The materials and resources for teaching the faith to both Deaf children and adults are very limited. In fact, for Deaf children there is virtually nothing that is really suitable. We have tried to look at some material as used by the Religious Education curriculum. Once a week during her lunch hour, for thirty minutes this Deaf Assistant Teacher spends time with a group of 6 or 7 Catholic children, and offers simple catechetical lesson. It is often difficult to find a balance to suit the children when their academic levels range from good to poor. The Assistant Teacher first tells them a story such as the Prodigal Son. Then she gets them to dramatise the story themselves. Using a digital camera, the Assistant Teacher takes several photographs of the children. Later, she downloads the photographs and prepares a presentation on the computer for the follow-up work at the next session. She tells me that it works very well. All we need is imagination, technology and people themselves.

Model of Jesus’ teaching

We tend to do things the hard way round and plunge ourselves into endless, and even the seemingly thankless, task of bringing the Word of God to Deaf people. Yet the situation cannot be too different from the situation Jesus found himself in. His apprentices and neophytes were no better off than many people today, and opportunities for them were perhaps even more restricted. Yet, Jesus managed to instill faith within them, and a sense of responsibility and consciousness so much so that they all had become mature apostolates within a short time which was unimaginable a few years before. Today the Church which was founded on the rock-faith of Peter still survives, so whatever methods or techniques Jesus used were astoundingly successful considering the bunch of unruly men he had under his wing and the length of time afforded to him.

We all know that faith found its expression first in stories and images, and then in rituals, symbols and sacraments. Jesus didn’t have to resort to discursive theological reflections, instead he used the

objects and images of the world, things that people of his time would understand: sheep (Jn 10:1-18); the vine (Jn 15:1-17); water (Jn 4:1-14); oil and wine (Lk 10:34); weed (Mt 13:24-30); mustard seed (Mt 13:31-32); the yeast (Mt 13:33); the pearl (Mt 13:44-46); the lost drachma (Lk 15:8-10). Jesus used the withered barren fig tree and explained the power of prayer and fasting (Mt 21:18-22); he used the story of the wicked tenants to point out the justice of God's judgement (Mt 21:33-42); Jesus entered into controversial arguments with the Pharisees about the picking of the corn in the field and quoted David from the Book of Samuel (1 S 21:2-7; Mk 2:23-28); in the story of the man with the withered hand, Jesus explained about the importance of doing good rather than following rules blindly (Mk 3:1-6). Jesus observed life and people and incorporated them in his explanation about the virtue of true generosity, ie. the widow's mite (Mk 12:41-44); and when Jesus encountered someone such as the blind man and the subsequent miracle of the restoration of sight, he used the occasion to talk about himself as the Light of the world (Jn 1:1-41). He used images in stories that people already knew, ie. Jonah in the belly of the sea-monster for three days and three nights (Mt 12:40). He used the local agricultural knowledge and related a story about the parable of the sower (Mt 13:4-9).

We can employ the same method and use the everyday ordinary things that people, both Deaf and hearing, understand today. The 'grass roots approach' will work much more effectively; rather than starting with a theological preposition or a doctrinal definition, we embark from the human experience and from there we eventually arrive at Church or doctrinal teaching.

We have been influenced by other people's faith and experience of life. We also influence others' faith. All our experiences are structured and the structures we use are the products of our past experiences. We cannot have a pure experience unaffected by the structures of our own personalities and minds.

As I have already explained, Jesus used the occurrence of daily life events to teach his apostles. He used the current images and ideas that they all understood. They came to believe in Jesus and to trust in him through their experience of him.

Deaf Spirituality

The disciples followed Jesus, they observed him, they asked him questions, they learnt from him, they realised he loved them in a real way and they loved him; they imitated him. If I am bad-tempered, if I arrive late for Mass and I am unprepared, if I sign the prayers of the Mass sloppily, people will not be keen to imitate me. Collaborative ministry with Deaf people will work if my own house is in order. No one needs training or qualifications to detect if I'm really trying to pray or not. And with Deaf people, it is our responsibility not just to *sign* the prayers but to *live out* our spiritual lives and to give witness.

“But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? (Rom 10:14-15)

Let me change the words: “... they will not believe in him unless they have *seen* the preacher sign about God, and they will not get to know and proclaim their faith in God unless they have someone who is fluent in sign language...”

Does Deaf spirituality exist? The sense of hearing, when it comes to Deaf spirituality, is not applicable or always relevant. The remaining four senses of sight, smell, taste and touch are accentuated. Deaf Spirituality tends to be more 'visual' and that whilst we cannot see the spirit as

such, we Deaf people often experience the effects through sight, smell, taste and touch. The spirituality of Deaf people need not be limited to only that which is visual, but extends to embrace the whole range of human life experience. I believe that spirituality is the same to Deaf or hearing people but Deaf culture plays a large part in influencing how Deaf people see God and how they relate to him. Our relationship with the Lord is relational, it is religious because we are talking about the relationship with God, and it is concrete because we want to talk about the experience of that relationship, not the idea of it. And if our remaining four senses are accentuated, our experience and our spirituality would differ from the spirituality of hearing people who mainly use the sense of hearing at liturgical celebrations.

Deafness does shape and colour Deaf people's spirituality. Our spirituality is obviously image-dependent, and, therefore, more visual. Shapes and sizes, textures, colours, smells, spatiality will feature large in our spiritual upbringing. These are the *external characteristics* which will be similar for hearing people except that in our case it will be more enhanced, more central and important. It is in the *internal characteristics*, that I believe we differ: how we perceive God and who he is for us, how we relate to him, and how we express our desires, intentions and prayers to him.

One of the basic definitions of Deaf culture is the following: 'in their usage, culture is distinct from community in that it includes the knowledge, belief, art, morals, and law as well as the practices of members of the community. These are mainly mediated by language, so deaf culture, like all cultures, is carried through the language (Kyle & Woll, 1985).

L Sofield & C Juliano, 1987, said that if ministers were to develop an apostolic spirituality to sustain and nourish them in the midst of a hectic life, they must be willing to learn from the laity who have developed a rich spirituality without the luxury of the prolonged prayer and contemplation times afforded many priests and Religious. Clergy and Religious, on the other hand, can offer the fruits of a spirituality developed through more structured formation. We must acknowledge that Deaf people's spirituality have treasures which they must be brought to realise that they possess and which they must learn to be encouraged to share with others. Deaf people lives have been be influenced, amongst all the positive effects, also by the kinds of oppression and discrimination that they experienced in the past, but they do not get here without their life experiences. Pastoral theologian Michael Cowan has something quite blunt to say: 'Those, including ministers and ministerial leaders, who do not understand the cultural worlds in which they act, act blindly and, even worse, disrespectfully.' (J Whitehead & E Whitehead, 1995).

Christ was born into a culture, he became a living part of it. Working and worshipping with Deaf people means we need to integrate ourselves with them and walk the Emmaus walk with them.

Liturgically Deaf friendly-Visually friendly

I would like to share our experience with you regarding the Prayers of the Faithful. This has always been one of the problems in the celebration of liturgy in Church today: how do we go about it? Books have been published to help us but they are words written on paper and they often seem so divorced from the reality of our lives. They are so static, and the problem is further exacerbated by poor skills of reading and translating into sign language the prayers; you can see people's eyes, they are disinterested. We have tried to make the prayers more meaningful by asking members to write them out before the Mass, but still it remained unsatisfactory. A couple of years ago, as various people were buzzing around preparing the liturgy of the Mass, just as I was about to begin Mass, we discovered that the person responsible for organising the Prayers of the Faithful was absent, it was too late to do anything about it. I thought we could skip it and carry on with the offertory but when the time came, on the spur of a moment, I asked if the congregation would like to offer any prayers.

Tentatively, a handful of people put up their hands and signed their prayers to me which I then relayed to the whole congregation. Later I thought about it and I decided to try this method again. It very quickly became obvious that the prayers coming from the congregation were real, urgent, relevant, and in tune with what goes on within people's minds and feelings. We have since used this same method, it is really popular, prayers come from the People of God thick and fast, I am sure on two or three Sundays in the past year they were actually longer than my sermon! Asking someone to come to the sanctuary and sign the prayers themselves wasn't actually productive because our Church is quite large. As I finish relaying each prayer to the congregation, I sign 'This is our prayer,' the congregation respond by signing/saying 'We pray to the Lord.'

Prayer is about life now, what happened recently, what is happening now, and what will happen in the future. The congregation seems to sense this as a very important part of the celebration of the Mass, and I've called it the 'happy minute' (some pubs and restaurants have the 'happy hour') but it is important that they feel prayers are being offered up to God on their behalf. It is true that sometimes, I have to ask one or two people to repeat or clarify what they want to say but I think it is no harm; besides, life can be messy and uncertain and does not move forward smoothly, our prayer reflects that reality. I also realise that as presider it is my responsibility to facilitate and guide the Prayers of the Faithful. Ironically, this is where Deaf culture has a clear advantage over a normal parish Mass; in a large Church with hearing people, it would not be possible to use this form of bidding prayers because the priest would not be able to hear clearly.

In May 2003 I gave a short paper at a one Day conference held in Louvain University, Belgium. During the questions from the floor, I talked about the importance of using the visual dimensions of the liturgy. I explained that many older Deaf people told me they remembered, with fond affection, the pre Vatican II days of Latin Mass. I am not harping back to the days of Latin Mass but I recognise what Deaf people have been trying to tell me. They keenly sensed the mystery and the awe associated with the Latin Mass, and there were a lot of other elements to see and to smell, such as the incense, the numerous candles, the actions of bowing and kneeling, the solemnity, the marble statues or facade surrounding the tabernacle, the rich tapestry of vestments and capes etc. In those days one could say Deaf people were almost on a par with hearing people, except for those who knew and understood Latin.

Later, Archbishop Patrick Kelly, who was present at the conference, made the point that we do not utilise well the signs and symbols of the liturgy and instead we are bombarded by words. I would have to agree with him.

In the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, 1974 (n. 253), it says: The buildings and requisites for worship, as signs and symbols of heavenly things, should be worthy and beautiful.

Unfortunately, we have been guilty of the de-sensitisation to the role of the signs and symbols in the liturgy. Yet, the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* points out that we cannot overemphasize the importance of signs and symbols. In the old days, there were too many signs and symbols, many of them were unnecessary or over the top; unfortunately since Vatican II we may have gone to the other extreme and thrown out the 'baby with the dirty bathwater.'

Hearing people do not communicate using words only, they use other modes too. I recently read that more than 50% human communication is non-verbal. With Deaf people I suspect the percentage is even higher though I do not have statistics to prove this fact. Yet, I have observed priests in general saying Mass burying their noses in the missal, even when saying 'The Lord be with you' without any eye-contact at all! I remembered being quite horrified to see a certain priest who, at the end of a funeral service, made the sign of the cross but he did it really carelessly, it

wasn't even in the form of a cross but more of a horizontal wave as if to dismiss us altogether. Seeing such a careless gesture was truly sad, it cheapens and trivializes the liturgy. We pray not only with words, not only with our brains, but with our whole being -with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our mind and with all our strength (Mk 12:30).

I know it is difficult to really pray the liturgy, not simply to give voice (or sign!) to the common usual prayers with little attention or conviction, or to do it under the constant gaze and, sometimes, the scrutiny of the congregation.

Every Sunday apart from Lent I always use incense but without the pomp and ceremony usually associated with the High Mass. I always try to seek a moment to explain the meaning of the actions, symbols and words so that Deaf people understand what is going on, but one has to strike a balance and ensure we celebrate liturgy well and not resort to a running commentary which could spoil the spirit of the communal prayer.

Liturgy is and can be difficult to plan, prepare and execute; there is a fine line between allowing spontaneity and freedom of expression, and following the rubrics of the liturgy. It is our responsibility to offer good and correct liturgy bearing in mind the principle 'lex orandi, lex credendi' - namely, the law of prayer is the law of faith: the Church believes as she prays (cf. CCC 1125). In other words, it is through liturgy that we express what we believe. But I strongly believe we can comply with the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* and still allow for creativity and adaptability to tailor the liturgy to Deaf people. We need to learn to look at people, their needs, where they are, where they come from, then try to see how we can apply liturgical rubrics to enable all to participate and celebrate together. It is my experience that by paying careful attention to the needs and rights of Deaf people, it can enhance the celebration of the liturgy and will benefit all others. We do not drink the living water from the wells alone or individually but as a community; the act of receiving the water together enables all of us from diverse backgrounds and cultures to connect the daily events to the faith we try to profess in this life, and makes the liturgical celebration richer and more fruitful.

I have a strong dislike for an altar that's cluttered with flowers, candles, crucifix, papers (ie a list of Mass intentions), chalice and vessel, cruets, etc (maybe it's my personality trait; anyone who comes to my room will see that it's tidy and spacious, not cluttered!) The most important act to take place on the altar is the enactment and the memorial of the Last Supper, hence only two symbols are important, namely the bread and the wine, and they should be clearly visible to the eyes. Candles can be placed on either side of the altar. It makes sense to have a decanter or a suitable crystal which allows for the the visibility of the red wine.

The Lectern needs to be at the right height - usually at waist height - many lecterns in Church are too high, they reach up almost to the neck, thus obliterating the congregation's view of the Reader apart from the face. The right height maximises the signer's signing space for signing and allows Deaf people in the congregation to see better. There is also the background to consider; it should help the congregation to focus on the person reading, signing, and proclaiming the Word of God. Even the clothes they (Signer and Voice-over) wear are important, as well as being smart, they need to be plain and not distracting (ie texture, colour, pattern), and without such things as ear-rings and dazzling jewellery. The positioning of the lectern is also important; in some churches the lectern seems to be almost tucked away in the corner which is a pity since the crucial liturgical actions that take place are at the Lectern (Word of God) and at the altar (Consecration of the bread and wine). Furthermore, if the lectern is so far off the centre, it means Deaf people, who use their eyes as the main channel for communication, have to strain their neck and turned at a certain angle which can be uncomfortable. There must be nothing that blocks the line of vision between the signer and the congregation. Finally, perhaps the single overriding aspect is the use of lighting in the Church,

especially the light on the signer and voice-over. Poor or insufficient lighting is akin to poor use of the P.A. system for hearing people. From experience, maintaining eye-contact with the congregation enables them to feel involved in the reception of the sacred Word. Hearing people do not realise that they subconsciously ‘lip-read’ the readers. Likewise, there are certain signs, movements, facial expressions and gestures that they can pick up on. We pray not only with our ears but with our whole body - it is a temple in which the spirit of God lives. If the lectern is structurally fixed in one place, it is surprising how careful forward planning, consultation with the Deaf congregation and flexibility can enhance the visual aspect of the liturgy and help to bring alive the Word of God.

As soon as the liturgy of the Word is over, it is time for priest to sit down (usually I am glad of this brief pause!); the People of God prepare different things, they take the collections, the selected people come and prepare to take the offertory. When all is ready, the people then give the bread and wine to the priest, as well as the gift of money. Unfortunately, some priests begin the prayer of offertory while people are still preparing or taking collections. Not only is it a bad liturgical practice, it is not respectful to Deaf people who only have two eyes and among the brief activity easily miss the important beginning of celebration of the liturgy of the Eucharist. We are often guilty of doing two or three things at the same time. We might get away with it because people can hear whilst doing the collection, but with Deaf people, we don't! Hence, their presence can actually help us to slow down a little the liturgical celebration, making it more meaningful.

The basic symbol of the Eucharist is one bread and one cup. So why have more than one chalice on the altar? Other chalices can be brought to the altar at the breaking of the bread.

When a priest quietly says the words, “Lord, wash away my iniquity; cleanse me from my sin” why have a very perfunctory cleansing of two or three fingertips using a very tiny purificator? More important is the visibility of the action of the washing hands in a bowl of water (which symbolises the renewal of the baptismal purification) and then drying with a largish towel.

The structure of the Eucharistic celebration is defined by four actions: *taking, blessing, breaking* and *sharing*. Each is a very important liturgical celebration and we need to qualify words with action. For instance, with *taking*, two people come up to the sanctuary and give the bread and wine to the priest. Why insist on more than three or four people being involved in the procession carrying cruets and purificators and other things?

With *blessing*, why consecrate a few hosts, and then before distribution, take more hosts from the tabernacle?

The breaking of the bread is an important and significant action and is verified by Luke's gospel and the Acts of the Apostles, it should not be done whilst the Kiss of Peace is in process; the action should be seen clearly by the congregation.

The distribution of Communion should be done under both kinds. It is a celebration of a shared meal, but this important action of gifts being received by the Lord is often unfortunately spoilt by the impersonal deadpan face of a priest and ministers of the Eucharist as a communicant comes up to receive Holy Communion. Imagine meeting someone important, someone special, and we greet them with a blank face! We should say ‘The Body of Christ/The Blood of Christ’ gently and with eye contact, with a personal gesture and touch, and treat the whole ceremony with importance and reverence to each and everyone and not as if we were merely distributing calling cards or adverts. I also believe that with a small group it is much better to distribute the hosts first, and then we all eat together, though I cannot guarantee if this is liturgically correct. If we are able to eat and drink together, the action is made more meaningful and respectful by the act of praying and receiving

together as one body, one Church. Also, for a small group, it does not make sense to have a very small amount of wine, we drink, we do not sip.

The purification of the chalice(s) should not be done at the altar, once Communion has been distributed, the memorial of the celebration of the Last Supper is over; what remains is for the priest and people to pray in silence before the concluding rite. It is not necessary for a priest to do everybody's job, we have People of God with us, let them do their part. The main responsibility of a priest is to lead the People of God in prayer.

Of great importance is the involvement of all people to prepare and celebrate the Eucharist with the priest. We have servers, ministers of the Eucharist, ministers of the Word of God, collectors, organisers for hymns and offertory etc. We also have a Responder which is important for the Deaf community so as to enable them to make the appropriate responses at the right time. Deaf people cannot hear and sometimes they are unfamiliar with the rite of the Mass. Having a Responder situated at a strategic point on the sanctuary has worked well. Regular training days for ministers of the Word of God and Eucharist are essential.

I cannot over-emphasize the importance of the awareness of how we present ourselves, I have already mentioned the importance of how the ministers dress; likewise for the priest. I remember meeting Fr. Joe Bruce way back, I think in 1993, who told me he always took off his wrist watch. I wondered about it and I tried it for myself. After several months I forgot to remove it and begun signing the Mass, I was immediately very conscious that my watch that was still on my wrist and it didn't feel right. In addition, God is timeless and eternal, wearing a watch seems out of place; furthermore, the temptation is there to look at it during the celebration, it is something that is not conducive to the way liturgy is celebrated in an unhurried and dignified manner. It is true we do not need to become perfectionists, but once all the preparations have been done, we can concentrate on praying and celebrating together and not worry about what is going to happen next.

We also need to be sensitive to the people and use appropriate language. We avoid using words like 'Lord, hear us'; there are many alternative words that we can use. When dispensing a solemn blessing at the end of the Mass, instead of saying 'Bow your heads', use something like 'Prepare yourselves to receive God's blessings' because once Deaf people bend down their heads, they would not be able to see what the priest is signing. There are lots of little things that we take for granted, and unfortunately we do so without thinking.

Are chaplains really proficient in sign language? If they are still learning and are still struggling, sometimes the liturgical flow can be dragged down and the spirit dampened. I know many Deaf communities have been very patient and accommodating with priests who try their best given the little amount of training they receive. But what would happen if a South American spanish speaking priest is appointed to a parish full time and he knows no English, would the parish think the appointment acceptable? The Deaf communities dare not complain, lest their chaplains are removed; it is one of the issues which continues to remain a thorn in our side. We have striven for better awareness, especially among bishops and clergy, and we are very fortunate to have Archbishop Kelly, President of the International Catholic Foundation, and Bishop John Rawsthorne, Chair of the Bishops' Committee for the Pastoral Care of Deaf people. But what about other dioceses, other countries?

Empowering Deaf people

We preach empowerment and equal participation, but to actually translate these ideals into reality requires careful planning and sustained efforts over a period of time before Deaf people can take on the roles of Pastoral leaders. It does not do justice to Deaf people, if we say they can simply take on

some of the roles of the priests, Religious and Pastoral Workers. They would feel overwhelmed by theological training, expectations and responsibilities. They need opportunities for formation, identify what skills they have, develop relationship skills to work with people, a basic course on scripture and theology, and above all, a structural system in place within a Deaf community where they can work with supervision, with support and the opportunity to net-work.

In the early 1990s, the people involved in the Catholic Deaf Association UK (CDA) spent a lot of time discussing, consulting, preparing, planning and developing two courses, namely, the Visual Faith course and the Catholic Certificate in Religious Studies (CCRS) course. The Visual Faith course is a general basic course that is open to grassroots Deaf members who wish to learn something about their faith, the Bible and the Church's teaching. The 'Visual Faith' course can also be considered as a basic requirement for those who eventually may wish to apply for the CCRS course. The CCRS course is more intensive, suitable for those who have the potential to become leaders in the Deaf community. The CCRS courses already exist in many dioceses and Colleges/Centres for hearing people and is validated by the Bishops Conference in England and Wales. However, it was not sufficient simply to ask Deaf people to join them, or to copy their curriculum and teach Deaf people. We looked at the syllabus and then developed the course material from scratch. The overriding aim is to keep to the standard as expected in any CCRS course; lowering the standard would not do justice to Deaf people.

Henesy House is now the Accredited Centre for the teaching of the Catholic Certificate in Religious Studies. The crucial aspect was to get the approval from the Bishop, Chair of Adult Christian Education (one of the departments of Bishops Conf of England/Wales); we were fortunate in having the support and understanding of Archbishop Patrick Kelly and Bishop John Rawsthorne.

It has proved to be an incredible journey of working, teaching and sharing faith with the Deaf community. The Lord's presence has been very powerful throughout the whole course, there is a vibrant spirit in the faith-community. We completed three Visual Faith courses, one for the North West area; one for Scotland, and recently Dublin, Ireland. A total of 33 Deaf people attended the course. We also completed two CCRS courses, one in Manchester and one in London. A total of 25 candidates were accepted. To this date, fifteen have successfully passed and received their CCRS certificates.

Apart from formal courses, there are many other forms of input that we can offer, seminars or evening sessions such as Faith Journey Group, Bible Study group, Liturgy group. We can cover many topics such as World Religions, religious festivals and celebrations, liturgical cycle, rites and rituals; current moral issues especially relating to society, community, and/or within politics; exploration of creation and nature, discussion on ecology; pilgrimages to holy places; anything Deaf people want to know about. The simple requisites are sensitivity to their language and culture, and creating an environment where they feel free to ask questions, share or remain silent.

Diocesan service

At the two-day national Pastoral Conference 2002 organised by the Catholic Deaf Association UK, in one of the discussion groups they were looking at the role of the People of God, the gift of our baptismal calling, and the ecclesial Church. One Deaf person pointed out that although the People of God are more important than the buildings, we just cannot manage without the infrastructure and that it was just as important to pay attention to it as to the People of God. I think he is right, Deaf ministry cannot truly flourish if there is no infrastructure.

Each diocese has a RESPONSIBILITY to serve *all* people, this includes Deaf people. Yet how many dioceses have a Diocesan Deaf Service? How many of them have a Centre or a place where Chaplains, Pastoral Workers and Deaf people can meet? Where can we store our resources?

Unfortunately, there seems to be the view that specialist ministry among Deaf people is a luxury, an option that can be cut when resources are short or there are financial difficulties. Recently, I saw an flyer advertising a new office being created, and application forms sent out for the post to work with the increasing numbers of Catholic refugees. Yet, this diocese has never offered financial support to the Deaf community, even though Deaf people have lived in this country all their lives. Statistics, and I suspect, policy such as equal opportunities, can have an amazing impact on decisions.

‘For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body - Jews or Greeks, slaves or free - and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.’ [1 Cor 12:12-13]

As you know, the needs and rights of profoundly deaf people are often harder to acknowledge and properly address. Yet, it is we - the Deaf community together with all who work with us - who have a responsibility to inform the bishops and those in authority, and explain that we are citizens who play a full part in the Church and society. The Church will always be the poorer if they do not include us.

Deafness, disability or gift

I do not live on my own, I live with a community of priests at Henesy House, as well as with the community of the Sisters of Our Lady of Evron. But I have often thought and dreamed that if I ever were to own a house, I would not hesitate to give it the name ‘Peniel.’ You will find it in the story of Jacob, it is one of the stories that fascinates me and I never tire of trying to gain a deeper insight into the story.

“Jacob was left alone. Someone wrestled with him until daybreak who, seeing that he could not master him, struck him in the socket of his hip, and Jacob’s hip was dislocated as he wrestled with him. He said, ‘Let me go, for day is breaking’ But Jacob answered, ‘I will not let you go unless you bless me’. He then asked, ‘What is your name?’ ‘Jacob’, he replied. He said, ‘Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have been strong against God, you shall prevail against men’. Jacob then made this request, ‘I beg you, tell me your name’, but he replied, ‘Why do you ask my name?’ And he blessed him there. Jacob named the place Peniel, ‘Because I have seen God face to face,’ he said ‘and I have survived’. The sun rose as he left Peniel, limping because of his hip. (Gen 32:23-33)

It is important to remember the whole story of the Patriarchs. Before Jacob’s struggle with God, he prepared the meeting with Esau, his brother, from whom he cheated and stole the birthright and Isaac’s blessing. Perhaps aware that he had done wrong and wanting to amend his unjust conduct, he could only become a man of blessing again if he wrestled for it and received it, this time, from God. It is difficult to unravel and discover what messages the story has for us. It is interesting to note that it is not clear who the victor is. The one who wrestled with Jacob pleaded to be released, “Let me go for the day is breaking.” It was Jacob who seemed in control of the situation for he refused to let his opponent go unless the stranger blessed him.” Jacob did not claim a victory, he merely said, “I have survived” and he started his travel again, limping.

Of course, one has to understand the biblical background. Jacob stole his brother’s, Esau, birthright; as a consequent he later he became wealthy. But what Jacob had done was on his conscience, and one day he realised he would have to face his brother, he tried to placate and bribe

him by offering him gifts and servants before visiting him. The night before he met brother, Jacob wrestled with God.

We all wrestle with God emotionally and spiritually. Our conscience continues to prick our memory and tries to make us face and accept our dark shadow. Wrestling is a desire to be with God and to be fully known by God as I am but this could only be attained from the state of being unconscious to the state of being conscious. This involves self-acceptance, accepting our own place and our own history and even imperfections. Wrestling does not occur when two people are at a distance from each other, it's human contact, skin to skin, in short, intimacy. Jacob wrestled with the stranger all night and refused to let go. He wasn't winning since it would be absurd for he was the one who was struggling with accepting what he had done to his brother Esau. Once he accepted and owned his full responsibility, he was then freed but in the process he was injured. This would be a human condition that required healing rather than punishment. Jacob changed his name to Israel (One who struggles with God), his life is changed. The subsequent meeting with Esau proved positive, they reached reconciliation, and Jacob's conscience appeased. In Jacob's case, his injury inflicted from wrestling with an angel is a symbol of transformation as opposed to disability as a punishment for what he had done. Jacob received a gift from the mysterious stranger, and Israel, as a nation, continued to flourish.

I remember years ago I visited the annexe St. Vincent's Unit at St. John's School, Boston Spa, a specialist Unit for deaf children who had additional handicaps. I saw on their timetable that once a week they had a 'Hot Chair' session. I enquired what it was about, they explained that they took a name out of the hat and a different person would sit in the 'hot chair' and all the others including children, teachers and staff were free to say what they wanted to say to that person about himself or herself, both good and bad. The only simple rule was that the person sitting in the 'hot chair' would not be allowed to say/sign anything but just to listen. I thought it was interesting because it is one of the excellent ways of learning about yourself. You may lie about yourself or have an inflated opinion of yourself but others will most certainly have a more true evaluation of you. I have never seen the session at work. Obviously it must have been very difficult for the person who was sitting in the 'hot chair' having to listen to all sorts of things being said about him or her. It would take a huge amount of humility, courage and honesty to take it all in. The idea or principle of the 'Hot Chair' appeals to me because I see a clear connection with Jacob wrestling God. If you have to listen to what they say about you, more likely than not, you will be embarrassed, hurt, humiliated and even shocked. Truth sometimes hurt. This is the symbol of the injury that Jacob endured. The physical limp was merely an exterior manifestation of what went on inside the soul of Jacob; it was only when he reached the full acceptance and realisation of his act, and accepting the truth, that he experienced peace and no longer needed to wrestle with God anymore, the struggle was over but the injury was left in his hip as a consequence of the pain of accepting the truth about himself. He was reconciled with God, with Esau and with himself. It is interesting to see how the story unfolded, reconciliation between Jacob and Esau naturally followed.

As long as Jacob was struggling with his own image and denying that he had done wrong to his brother and to God, he would never enjoy the full and free relationship with Esau, with God and with others. He was always running away from his shadow, he was afraid to see what his own image would be like. He subconsciously knew that his own image fell far below the image that God had intended him to have.

Being deaf often leads us into a situation where we are forced to ask for help and support. This could be difficult, awkward and frustrating. To be fully conscious of oneself is to acknowledge we have a need for God and for others. Gone are the days when we had to rely on our hearing friends to help us make a phone call, relying on the kindness of a friend to relay to us the television programme. However great the technological strides, there will always be a danger that Deaf

people will have an over-inflated view that they are fully free and independent. We are now more in control of our lives, and deafness is now less of an issue, but deafness will always be there just as the hip injury was to Jacob. It is part of our history and even part of our image. The experience of deafness has contributed, defined, and coloured the person I am. Hearing people will have to acknowledge and accept our deafness rather than trying to normalise us. The implication is for chaplains and Pastoral Workers, not only to respect them - in many cases that hasn't been the problem - but to realise their life stories as sacred, and the situation they are in at the present moment. This may sound obvious, or look trivial on paper, but in reality it has far reaching implications, especially when shepherding the Deaf community. The shepherd stays with the sheep through thick and thin; the pastoral carers need to spend quality time with Deaf people and be part of their family.

Paddy Ladd, in his doctorate research on Deaf culture, *Understanding Deaf Culture: in search of Deafhood* 2003, came up with a new term 'Deafhood' to replace the word deafness. According to Paddy Ladd:

Deafhood is not a static medical condition like 'deafness'. Instead, it represents a process - the struggle by each Deaf child, Deaf family and Deaf adult to explain to themselves and each other their own existence in the world.

Paddy Ladd explained that the term 'deafness' is unsatisfactory because it tends to be medically oriented. We are people who are created in the image of God. The story of the healing of the deaf man (Mk 7:31-37) is not simply about the restoration of hearing but about restoring the deaf man's rights and dignity, bringing him back into the community that had rejected him, as well as making the community accept the deaf man and to treat him as a human being like themselves. It is not merely a coincidence that the deaf man in question was now opened to the mystery of other human beings surrounding him when he was no longer in isolation and ignorant of his own personhood. In the past, the Deaf community has been given very little respect because they have never been truly enabled to progress on their faith journey towards God as Deaf persons. Jacob resumed his journey but with a limp but this issue (the limp) wasn't referred to again anymore, only his meeting with Esau, and of course, his relationship with God. To transcend deafness doesn't mean to ignore or obliterate it but to accept it as part and parcel of our life. Once this happens, it can become a gift because it is now incorporated in the on-going process of self-actualization, maturation and holiness in our life journey towards God.

Mary, our role model

We are all familiar with the role of Mary as our Mother, but we have often overlooked the important fact that she was also a *disciple* of Jesus. She is the Mother of God by virtue of the incarnation but she is also our disciple. The fact that little about Mary is written down in the gospels often gives rise to a stereotype image of her as a humble mother who brought up her son, and stayed in her house while her son was on a whirlwind three year mission.

Careful reading of the scriptures will show that Mary was a person of prayer, she proclaimed the *Magnificat* (Lk 1:46-55) when she visited Elizabeth; the scriptures also show her clearly as a disciple of Jesus working in the vineyard:

While Jesus was saying this, a woman in the crowd raised her voice and said to him, "Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you!" But he said, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it!" [Lk 11:27-28]

The common perception from this text is that the woman was complimenting the mother in a biological sense but Jesus pointed out that his mother was more than a physical mother, she was also a disciple who was dedicated, loving, and caring. This was a *very* high accolade that Jesus gave to his mother.

Luke presented Mary as a person of deep faith who kept the word of God as typified in her *fiat*. In the gospel of John, at the wedding of Cana, even though Jesus said “Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come” (John 2:4), Mary let him know that she wished his hour to come, and in the process created an opportunity where Jesus revealed his glory. After Jesus was baptised, he went into the desert, Mary did not run after him. Throughout Jesus’ mission, Mary occasionally appeared and was never far from Jesus but she did not cling to her son. At the crucifixion, the darkest moment in the lives of Jesus and Mary, all the friends of Jesus fled except Mary and John. All four gospels significantly mentioned that Mary stood at the foot of the cross. Then for three days Mary stayed with the disciples quietly suffering with them going through the process of bereavement but at the same time offering maternal support and presence. On Pentecost day, she was there when the Holy Spirit descended on them, and she herself received the gifts of the Holy Spirit with them. Where the gospel stories mentioned Mary, she was available but without attracting attention to herself, not given to emotions but one whose love was disciplined and genuine, and whose love was constantly putting into action the *fiat* she first made years ago. All these are the qualities of discipleship; in fact, the criteria for the collaborative ministry is the presence of genuine compassion.

An excellent chapter *A process to facilitate collaboration* (L Sofield & C Juliano, 1987) lists the key elements that must be part of any process in collaborative ministry:

- a vision with concrete objectives
- a method for identifying the gifts of the community members
- clarity of roles

Nowadays there are many courses, seminars, workshops and training for developing leadership qualities and skills to work with people, but a sure way to bring about the fruitfulness of pastoral ministry, whatever form it may be, is simply to love and to serve people with compassion. This is what Mary endeavoured to do throughout her life, and it is something that everyone of us can do. The gospel pages are full of Jesus’ compassionate actions, he reached out to everybody and he met the heart of those he tended. He didn’t simply fix their problems, he empathised with them, he was truly present to them. He accepted them for who they were and he gave them respect. He made them feel fully human. Unfortunately, we allow ourselves to be attracted by Jesus’ caring actions and forget that Mary’s ministry was equally as caring and as loving as Jesus’, albeit in a different way. This should give heart to all of us, since Mary was an ordinary person but who gave her life, heart and soul to God.

We ask Mary to pray for us because we want to respond to God’s love, the God who loved us first. Mary was faithful to God’s plan of salvation. She is our mother, she is our fellow disciple. We can ask her to help us to follow her Son more faithfully as we minister to those who need love.

To the Deaf community

The clergy, and all those who work in Pastoral Care of Deaf people, are burdened with even more responsibilities. Time becomes a precious gift but we still need to drink the living water from the well *with you*. We need your support, presence and companionship. Use your gifts and share them with us and help us to feel it is good to be human, not be perfectionists. Be patient with us but encourage us to express compassion. We can work

hard, attend meetings, and facilitate people to work in the Lord's vineyard, but it is not enough to talk about Christ's love, we need to actually love and be loved. You have this important ministry of collaborating with us, and for this we thank you.

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