

Spiritual Life of Deaf people in South Africa

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1. Introduction

To my knowledge no research has yet been done to give a broad overview of the spiritual life of Deaf people across different religious affiliations in South Africa. This section therefore attempts to give a partial overview of the spiritual life of Deaf people (more specifically Deaf Christians) in South Africa. It is informed by my own observations over the past 20 years, unpublished reports and submissions by experts at the National Institute for the Deaf, as well as research done in related fields by theologians within the Dutch Reformed Church. An internet search was also done to evaluate material for inclusion.

2. Religious demographic profile of South Africa

2.1. The most recent South African census shows that 79.8% of the 2001 population of 44.8 million is Christian. The African Independent Churches (31.8%), Protestants (25.5%), Pentecostal/Charismatic churches (7.6%), Catholic churches (7.1%) and various other Christian groupings (7.8%) comprise the Christianity section of the population. The rest of the population falls under Islam (1.5%), Hinduism (1.2%), African traditional belief (0.3%), Judaism (0.2%), as well as other smaller groupings (0.6%). Those who indicated no religion constitutes 15.1%. (Statistics South Africa, 2005:24,28; The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2009).

2.2. Data on the religious demographic profile of the Deaf South African population of 453 104 (according to the 2001 Census; cf. Statistics South Africa, 2005:51) is not available, but it can be assumed that it will differ from that of the hearing people. The reason is that communication barriers make it difficult for Deaf people to fully participate in religious groupings of their choice. Some of the groupings make special efforts to accommodate Deaf people using interpreters, different forms of visual communication and even dedicate religious functionaries for Deaf members of their grouping. However, there are limitations to Deaf members' participation in religious rituals and leadership positions. Mostly Deaf members are seen only as the objects of religious care and instruction, and not as the subjects thereof. Consequently the religious potential of Deaf people is not appreciated or developed. This causes many Deaf people to look for alternatives or to become apathetic.

South African Deaf Christians who prefer Deaf Churches / Fellowships are members of 15 churches or fellowships in the Western Cape, KwaZulu-Natal, Eastern Cape and Gauteng, which are affiliated with the Deaf Ecumenical Forum of South Africa. However, this accounts for only about 4000 Deaf people and their families.

A number of Deaf South Africans are members of Jehovah's Witnesses Sign Language Congregations and Sign Language Groups in various cities and towns across South Africa. There are also a number of Deaf South Africans who are Muslim. Al Waagah Madrassah for the Deaf is an Islamic service provider for Deaf Muslims in Cape Town.

A trend amongst Deaf people is that preference is given to religious groupings which use Sign Language as communication medium and where Deaf culture is practiced. Doctrine and dogma seem to play a secondary role in their choice.

3. Features of Deaf culture

Some of the features of Deaf culture can be identified as follows (cf. L. Siple, L. Greer B.R. Holcomb, 2004):¹

3.1. Collectivism:

One of the main attributes of Deaf culture in South Africa, as is the case internationally, is the inclusion of all Deaf people. Deafness is a bond that transcends barriers of country boundaries, race, gender and creed.

3.2. Loyalty:

The Deaf community sometimes displays a jealous possessiveness towards specific cultural and language property, which they keep away from the hearing (cf. H.L. Lane, 1992, *The Mask of Benevolence*).

3.3. Attitude towards hearing people in general:

Many Deaf people express a negative attitude towards hearing people, seeing them as the oppressors.

There is also the belief that the only difference between hearing and Deaf people is that Deaf people cannot hear.

¹ Although there are good reasons for the development of these features, their causes will not be discussed here.

4. God concept

Christian research done at various schools for the Deaf indicated that little or no God concept was formed in Deaf children as a result of the method and content of religious instruction. There was no understanding of the omnipresence, almightiness and love of God. God was seen as one of the Bible figures in the Bible stories presented to them. The researchers found that the instructional methodology that was followed did not develop the religious potential of the children. Very little, if any, Sign Language was used by the teachers. The reason given was that there were no signs for the concepts. Much effort was put into enabling the children to repeat the facts at the expense of the religious experience of the personal attributes of God. It was also concluded that language development was a prerequisite for religious development. (Roux, C., Snyman, H. & Hendriks, H., 1991, "The Religious Potential of the Young Hearing-Impaired (Deaf) Child").

Adult members of the Deaf Church reflected on their own experience and said that it was only later in life when they became members of the Deaf church where the Gospel was communicated to them in Sign Language, that they met God as a personal God.

The research of J.F. Van Heerden (1992, "Effective Communication in Preaching to the Deaf") confirmed the findings of the previous study. Many Deaf people still think of God in terms of an enlarged human being that occupies a space far away where He cannot be seen.

For most Deaf people it takes a long time before they start developing an awareness of the spiritual dimension. They often go through the rituals without emotionally experiencing the meaning of it. Formalism, many times, plays a dominant role in all the actions that lead to membership and it often remains like this for life.

After the results of the 1991 research had been studied, the Deaf Church and the De la Bat School for the Deaf joined efforts to find appropriate ways to develop the religious potential of the Deaf learners. This was done in consultation with the Theological Department of the University of Stellenbosch. The catechism material and methodology were replaced and adjusted in line with the new approach.

No follow-up study was done. However, after five years results were seen when young Deaf believers started to take up leadership positions in the school and congregations of the Deaf, with confidence and in personal relationship with God.

5. Church concept

Deaf culture is, among other features, epitomized by collectivism. Belonging to a church fulfills many social needs as well as the need for belongingness. This is even more so where there is an absence of social clubs and other groupings. The Deaf church becomes the place where Deaf people meet.

Deaf churches also became Christian communities where the spiritual potential of Deaf people could develop. In this context it becomes possible to have a Deaf church council with the responsibility to build and manage a congregation of Deaf believers. Deaf believers in a Deaf church and Deaf believers in a hearing congregation have different experiences of what church is about. In a Deaf church there is the possibility to express Deaf collectivism and loyalty to fellow Deaf people in the realm of Christian fellowship and service.

The Dutch Reformed Church established the first Deaf Congregation in South Africa in 1976. Since then three other congregations have been established. Other groupings, fellowships and Deaf congregations of other Christian denominations followed. Since 2004 there has been a growing awareness among all the Christian groups of the need to work together. Following the establishment of the “Deaf Synod”, consisting of representatives of the four Deaf congregations of the Dutch Reformed Church, a Deaf Ecumenical Forum was established for all the Christian groupings, fellowships and churches to join forces to more effectively provide spiritual care and development to Deaf people.

Deaf collectivism was again expressed, but in a broader, spiritual way that enriched the Deaf Christian community and gave further impetus to the producing of Deaf spiritual leaders.

6. Forms of worship

Deaf people in hearing churches have very little room for worshipping in a Deaf-specific way. In Deaf groupings and Deaf churches, Deaf people have the freedom to worship, teach, preach, communicate and praise God in their own language and culture:

6.1. Visual and spatial:

Apart from Sign Language, other forms of visual communication are also employed. The visual media that is used must fulfill the function of communication on both emotional, cognitive and spiritual levels. It must support the theme and the message in such a way as to enhance understanding and spiritual growth. Space must be used in such a way as to contribute to the dialogic character of the church service.

6.2. Prayer:

Except for the praying person all eyes are open to follow the prayer and to take turns. Usually the person who prays stands in front for all to see the prayer. In hearing congregations it does not happen like this. This makes it difficult for Deaf members of hearing congregations to participate fully and freely. Hearing congregations usually do not have Sign Language interpreters.

6.3. Praise and worship:

Culturally Deaf people prefer to praise and worship in Sign Language without music and voice. They use rhythmic movements and devotional dance to express themselves, but other than in the case of the hearing, their movements are elements of Deaf communication. (Cf. Van Heerden, 1992:171-176).

6.4. Drama and role play:

Effective use of drama and role play as elements in the preaching and liturgical order enhance participation, understanding and application of the biblical message.

7. Training of spiritual leaders at the National Institute for the Deaf (NID)

On 10 April 2006 the Deaf Christian Ministry Africa College was established in Worcester, South Africa. The training of Deaf students for the ministry started with seven Deaf students.

7.1. In 1998 the new schools Act came into effect whereby government took over all schools, with negative implications for religious instruction by churches in schools. From 2004 to 2006 ministers for the Deaf and other concerned Christians (in total 22) came together to discuss the spiritual need in Deaf communities. Statistics on the table showed that only one percent out of a Deaf population of 400 000 had access to special spiritual care for Deaf people. About four percent were at schools where they got exposure to some extent. This varied from school to school.

7.2. The aim with the establishment of the Deaf Christian Ministry Africa College was to train Christian Deaf persons from various cultural groups in South Africa in theology, enabling them to become ministers and pastors of the Deaf. The intention is that after completion of their training they will return to Deaf communities for a Deaf-to-Deaf ministry.

7.3. When the college was officially opened on 10 April 2006, it had the support of 12 church denominations. For the first time it was possible to have training for Deaf people to become ministers and pastors with the support and blessing of the broader Christian church. This opened the way for a new dispensation for spiritual care and development of Deaf people that was previously not possible. This will have a ripple effect in Deaf communities towards enrichment of their spiritual life.

8. Suggestions for research

8.1. A follow-up study of the one done in 1991 at the De la Bat School for the Deaf will be valuable to evaluate the effect of the changes implemented as a result of the first study.

8.2. A Deaf-friendly research design, making use of focus groups to explore and research themes related to aspects of the spiritual life of Deaf people in South Africa.

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