

# Spirituality and support in the Deaf community

by Nikki Dhillon Keane & Sue Brown

'Watching Signed readings, responses and prayers, we can feel at home with other Deaf parishioners.' These are the words of Ian, a Deaf Christian who attends services at Caritas Deaf Service, which serves Deaf Catholics in the Diocese of Westminster. Ian is describing the experience of worshipping with other Deaf Christians as opposed to attending his local church where he would not be able to follow what is being said and cannot communicate with other parishioners.

In the UK, one in seven of us have a significant level of hearing loss, but most of those will identify as hard of hearing. There are 87,000 deaf people in the UK who use British Sign Language (BSL) as a first or preferred language.<sup>1</sup> Although some can lipread, most would struggle to communicate in English without a BSL interpreter.

The coronavirus pandemic has highlighted some of the difficulties faced by deaf and hard of hearing people in the UK. In addition to the communication barriers caused by wearing masks, the lack of access to information has been a serious problem. Unlike most other world leaders, the UK Prime Minister has not provided a BSL interpreter at any press briefings during the pandemic.

Lynne Stewart-Taylor, founder of the #WhereIsTheInterpreter (#WTI) campaign, explained why it is important that 'sign language citizens have access to the same information at the same time as hearing people'.

She went on to describe how the refusal to provide an interpreter for vital safety briefings makes deaf people feel less valued: '[The] Sign language community have been



telling me that the Government's refusal sends a message to them to say "we don't care if you deaf people live or die". This is really impacting their mental health and wellbeing.

## LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION

Access to information has been an issue for deaf people since long before the pandemic; a survey from the Royal Association for Deaf People found that one in two deaf people in London had no accessible information on important subjects like benefits.<sup>2</sup> For many deaf people, English, which is structurally very different from Sign Language, is a second or third language. As Sign Language has no written form, some deaf people struggle to understand written information.

90% of deaf people grow up in

hearing families, most of whom don't Sign.<sup>3</sup> Having a different first language from the rest of your family can have profound effects on the development of family relationships, self-confidence and emotional wellbeing of deaf people. When a baby is diagnosed deaf, all the information given to parents is from a medical perspective. Deafness is viewed as an impairment which may or may not be able to be 'cured' with a cochlear implant, hearing aids, speech therapy: interventions designed to make the deaf child more like a hearing child.

Rarely is there any introduction to the deaf community, and its rich culture. Historically, parents were advised not to Sign with their child, for fear of damaging the child's capacity to develop spoken languages. In fact, we now know that the reverse is true; learning

an accessible language, such as BSL actually helps a deaf child to develop spoken language.<sup>4</sup>

As a consequence, generations of deaf people have been unable to communicate effectively with their families. Language deprivation has now been identified as a cause of higher rates of mental health problems among deaf people. Deaf children of deaf parents, who communicate fluently with their family, have equal rates of mental health problems as their hearing peers. Not deafness, but language deprivation causes mental and emotional distress.

### **MENTAL HEALTH IN THE DEAF COMMUNITY**

BSL-using deaf people with hearing families are almost twice as likely as hearing people to have mental health problems.<sup>5</sup> Deaf people often face additional challenges, for example barriers to education, resulting in fewer opportunities to reach their academic and professional potential. This can result in feelings of frustration and low self-esteem.

In addition to audism, (discrimination against deaf people) deaf people are more likely to be subjected to abuse; 50% of deaf women experience domestic abuse during their lifetime<sup>6</sup>, and deaf people are more likely to have been subjected to childhood abuse.<sup>7</sup> Yet in spite of increased need, access to linguistically and culturally accessible support can still be a problem.

### **DEAF COUNSELLING AND PSYCHOTHERAPY**

January 2021 marked twenty years since Signs of Hope, a small deaf counselling service linked to Caritas Deaf Service, first opened. We welcome deaf clients from all backgrounds, but offer a Christian perspective for those who want it. Over those two decades we have seen huge changes in UK deaf therapy provision, with the development of Sign Health's counselling and domestic abuse

services, and Deaf 4 Deaf, a 'by and for' deaf counselling and psychotherapy service, offering remote and face to face therapy around the UK.

There is a real need for these linguistically and culturally accessible services. Deaf therapy requires understanding of the oppressions experienced by deaf individuals living in a hearing dominated world.<sup>8</sup> In contrast to the medical view of deafness mentioned earlier, the social model understands that it is not the physical inability to hear which is disabling to deaf people, but communication deprivation and audism. Most importantly, the social model respects deaf language and culture as different but equal.

Deaf therapy based in this model can be an opportunity to support clients exploring their own deaf identity from a non-medical perspective. In her well-known book 'Counselling the Deaf Challenge' (1994) Mairian Corker provides a template for working with Deaf clients, which is still relevant. Working with a Deaf practitioner can be an important opportunity for clients to do this within a safe and informed space with someone who has lived experiences of the challenges of



being Deaf in a hearing world. It is heartening to see the numbers of Deaf professionals increasing, but access to training remains challenging for Deaf people. It is not always easy to secure funding for interpreters on training courses; Deaf trainees need to find accessible personal therapy, supervision and work placements. Postqualification CPD in Sign Language is hard to find.

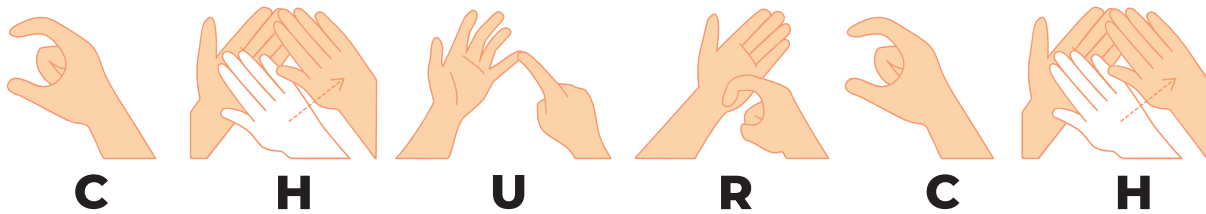
Deaf Christian clients may benefit from therapy that understands their deafness and their Christian spirituality. It is well understood that faith informed counselling can help clients who view their issues through the lens of their own spirituality, whether or not the issues themselves are directly related to faith. This is also true of deaf clients, and there is a need for increased provision of faith- literate deaf counselling.

### **DEAF PEOPLE AND CHURCH**

Some deaf people have been fortunate to find accessible and welcoming communities where they can fully experience the life of the Church and the Christian family. Sadly, others are not so fortunate.

Deaf Christian, Ian, described the stress caused by problematic attitudes within the Church. He spoke about experiences of priests refusing an interpreter because they believed it wasn't necessary. He also spoke about the difference it makes when priests are able to Sign the Mass, and when deaf people have the opportunity to worship together as a community. Deaf services provide vital social contact for people who are often isolated, cut off from communication from most of society.

Deaf worship is much more powerful when it is rooted in deaf culture, but that does not have to mean celebrating separately from hearing communities. Shell Roca, who works for Caritas Deaf Service, points out that making worship accessible to Deaf Sign Language



users benefits everyone. 'For deaf people, not having access to church life can be greatly damaging to their spiritual wellbeing and means that they miss out on many important social interactions, but it also means the wider Christian community are missing out. We all have a lot to learn from the deaf community and the strength that they gain from their shared experiences.'

Lack of Sign Language communication, as well as lack of educational opportunities, can create barriers for deaf people wanting to learn more about or understand their faith; this can lead to misunderstanding and confusion. Christian counsellors can be very helpful in these situations, as can the Sign Language prayer groups and Bible study offered by some deaf church groups. Here, deaf people can explore spirituality in the context of deaf culture, making it not only accessible, but relatable and real.

Social isolation and disconnection from hearing families can lead some deaf people to join religious groups or organisations, where they may be vulnerable to spiritual abuse or cults. Faith-informed counselling can sometimes help deaf people extricate themselves from damaging religious groups or relationships, helping to build an understanding of what healthy spirituality and communities look like.

Although there are several other services like Caritas Deaf Service around the UK, there are still areas with no access to Christian services. For deaf people living in those areas, it will be even more important to have deaf-accessible Christian counselling.

In order to achieve this, we need more deaf counsellors with an understanding of Christianity, and Christian counsellors who can communicate with deaf people and who understand deaf culture and experiences.

Perhaps, as a community of Christian counsellors, we can think about how to encourage access for deaf clients, practitioners and trainees. We can also think about how to make our churches and communities more welcoming places for deaf people. It may be surprising to find what hearing people can gain from reaching out to learn more about deaf culture and the beautiful expressiveness of British Sign Language.

#### Notes

- 1 British Deaf Association: statistics <https://bda.org.uk/help-resources/#statistics> (accessed 18.1.21)
- 2 RAD (2020) Do Deaf Londoners have enough access to advice in BSL? [www.royaldeaf.org.uk](http://www.royaldeaf.org.uk) accessed 16.1.21
- 3,7 National Deaf Children's Society [www.ndcs.org.uk](http://www.ndcs.org.uk) (accessed 1.2.21)
- 4 Hall WC (2018) What you don't know can hurt you: The risk of language deprivation by impairing sign language development in deaf children *Matern Child Health Journal* 21(5) 961-965
- 5 British Society of Mental Health and Deafness [www.bsmhd.org.uk](http://www.bsmhd.org.uk) (accessed 1.2.21)
- 6 Women's Aid [www.womensaid.org.uk](http://www.womensaid.org.uk) (accessed 1.2.21)

- 8 Munro, L Knox, M and Lowe, R (2008) Exploring the Potential of Constructionist Therapy: Deaf Clients, Hearing Therapists and a Reflecting Team *Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education* 13(3) 307-23

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