

Ecclesiology of Deaf Churches as Reflected in Corporate Prayer

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In this article, I seek to present an ecclesiology of the Deaf church as reflected in one of the most critical areas of the church's life and ministry: corporate prayer.¹ My wife, Vesta, and I were church planters among the Deaf in several Eastern Europe countries for over a decade. Prior to that, we worked as volunteers in Romania for five years and led Deaf teams to evangelize, disciple, and plant Deaf churches in multiple cities. We have planted churches among Deaf peoples in many countries and on multiple continents.

Deaf Ministry or Deaf Church?

Each of our church planting efforts was tied in some form or fashion to a local hearing Baptist church. These hearing churches wanted to integrate the Deaf people into hearing worship using sign language interpreters. We faced this challenge in nearly every country where we sought to plant Deaf churches. Our commitment remained resolute to focus on reaching Deaf people with

¹ "Deaf" is capitalized where it refers to the Deaf as a distinct people group that have more linguistic and cultural affinity with each other than with the hearing in their own country. When used as an adjective (e.g., "a deaf person"), it appears in lower case.

the gospel, to begin discipleship, and then to establish a local, autonomous Deaf congregation. We have sought to train Deaf church leaders with the Bible as a guide for principles and let the Spirit of God lead churches in the practices of what is meaningful culturally. In fact, “the Bible only becomes useful when it is made Deaf.”² Starting autonomous Deaf churches rather than Deaf ministries in hearing churches has been much more strategic and fruitful. Some places offered more resistance to that strategy than others, but the results of planting autonomous, indigenous Deaf churches have been very consistent.

Indigenous Deaf Church

When a group formed, the starting point has always centered on the Acts 2:42-44 passage and the basic functions of the church:

⁴²They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. ⁴⁴All the believers were together and had everything in common. (NIV)

Deaf people are oral learners – they attach important truth to narrative. Thus, we use biblical story sets in all phases of planting Deaf churches. One of the story sets we have used with the Deaf people who have come to faith centers on each of these basic functions: fellowship, baptism, Lord’s Supper, the study and proclamation of the Bible, and prayer.

Each of these areas is basic to the formation and functionality of the local church. As with any linguistic, cultural group, the distinct activities may have unique features to them as they align with biblical ecclesiology. In

² Wayne Morris, *Theology Without Words: Theology in the Deaf Community* (Farnham, Surrey, UK: Ashgate Publishing, Ltd. 2008), 108.

the case of the Deaf, there will be Deaf-centric applications when it comes to the practice of biblical teachings on the church.

Corporate Prayer in the Life of the Deaf Church

Corporate prayer is, of course, one of the most critical aspects of the church functions. The Deaf face some daunting challenges in corporate prayer. Wayne Morris correctly points out that “access to worship for Deaf people has often been on hearing people’s terms using hearing people’s ways of worshipping.”³ This is evident in several ways.

Prayer Posture is Different Without exception, we have witnessed Deaf people, believers and unbelievers alike, bow their heads and close their eyes when prayer was introduced initially. The image of people praying like that is all they had ever seen, and in order to pray “correctly,” they followed that pattern. Yet, this is completely foreign to how the Deaf communicate with each other. To close one’s eyes and look away or down would be extremely disrespectful in conversation with another deaf person. This applies to prayer. Yet, looking to heaven and using their sign language to pray to the Father does not seem to occur naturally to the Deaf.

“God Doesn’t Know My Language” Suggesting to a deaf person that they can look to heaven and use sign language to pray often evokes the response, “God would not know sign language, would He?” Sign language has always been looked down on and ridiculed by the majority culture as a form of communication considered inferior, even illegitimate, when compared to the majority language of the people around them. Certainly, God would not understand such a remedial, barbaric form of communication that lacks the depth of spoken languages.

³ Morris, *Theology Without Words*, 84.

The Deaf Heart Language is Different from Hearing Part of the rationale for the view mentioned above of sign language is reinforced by the fact that as recently as ten years ago, only 44 of 120 countries in the world had even recognized the national sign language as a legitimate language.⁴ That mentality carried over into the church in most settings and thus, churches did not see sign language as a real option for communicating biblical truth or for establishing credibility of a Deaf-centric approach to ecclesiology.

Hearing churches often therefore reinforce expectations that the Bible can be expressed only with more detailed language, and this carries over into expectations of how the Deaf should pray. So, when Deaf people follow Christ, they often awkwardly try to copy how hearing people pray in the majority language—even spelling out terms they may or may not understand—so that the petition will resonate with God’s understanding.

The reality is that the common language of the majority population restricts the full expression of the heart by Deaf People, perhaps similar to the challenge anyone feels when attempting to pray in a second language. Harlan Lane, in making a comparison between English and American Sign Language, says, “the two are as unrelated as any two languages could be.”⁵ It is only in the visual expressions of the national, or local, sign language that we have seen Deaf people embrace responsibility and ownership over the way in which God made them and in how they relate to him, especially in prayer.

Outstanding Features of Corporate Prayer in a Deaf Church

Posture Driven by Heart Language Watching Deaf people experience true liberation when they pray—opening their eyes, looking up, and using their

⁴ Amyl Wilson and Nickson Kakiri, “Best Practices for Collaboration with Deaf Communities in Developing Countries” in *Deaf Around the World: The Impact of Language*, eds., Gaurav Mathu and Donna Jo Napoli (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011), 291.

⁵ Harlan Lane, *The Mask of Benevolence: Disabling the Deaf Community* (San Diego, CA: Sign Dawn Press, 1999), 110.

hands to make their petitions known—has been thrilling to observe over the years. The realization that God not only understands sign language, but that the various sign languages are part of His entire linguistic plan for the peoples of the earth validates not only their faith but also their identity, culture, and language. It is what Sherman Wilcox refers to as “the language of consciousness.”⁶ The realization that they can pray in their heart language, without having any understanding of a majority language, is like being unshackled before their Creator for the very first time. It elevates their language, and it elevates them as God’s creation.

Event-oriented Like other oral cultures around the world, Deaf communities are event-oriented and not guided by the clock, and this is evident in their corporate prayer. This is not a unique characteristic for the Deaf, or for oral cultures for that matter, but it is a defining characteristic of their culture. When the Deaf come together for worship, it is not a gathering that gives focus to a schedule defined by a start and finish time. When they come together to pray, it is not something controlled by a certain spot in the program. They are there to worship, and they are there to pray. There are no time parameters in the schedule.

Hand Mnemonics and the Disciple’s Prayer in Corporate Prayer Very often the prayer part of a Deaf worship experience can last for hours. It is not unusual for corporate prayer in worship to see everyone participate multiple times. Because the Deaf community is familial, everyone is expected to participate.

This kind of community participation is evident in the initial teaching on prayer from the Disciple’s Prayer in Luke 11:2-4 (as we will see more clearly later in this article):

⁶ Sherman Wilcox, “Struggling for a Voice: An Interactionist View of Language and Literacy in Deaf Education” in *Literacy and Deaf People: Cultural and Contextual Perspectives*, ed., Brenda Jo Brueggemann (Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press, 2004), 184.

² He said to them, “When you pray, say:

Father, hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come

³ Give us each day our daily bread.

⁴ Forgive us our sins,
for we also forgive everyone who sins against us.
And lead us not into temptation” (NIV)

One other significant part of the teaching on prayer (and for that matter in all aspects that help make teaching reproducible with Deaf people) is the use of hand mnemonics (hand movements that aid in remembering). These are particularly effective in helping them commit stories, and groups of stories by topic, to memory. The Deaf do this for each part of the Disciple’s Prayer from Luke 11 as part of Corporate Prayer.

Due to the brevity of Luke’s version of the prayer, we initially teach this passage to new Deaf believers. It offers the basics of what Jesus taught and later, when we begin to expand teaching on prayer, we bring in the Matthew 6 passage as well as other passages like John 15.

The first part of the Disciple’s Prayer gives focus to acknowledging and edifying God alone: “Father, hallowed by your name, your kingdom come” (Luke 11:2). There is no element of surprise on the part of Deaf people that prayer would give attention to praising God and recognizing him. However, the strong statement at the beginning for teaching the disciples to pray gives guidance to Deaf people who desire to follow the model Jesus taught. Taking time to honor the Father and acknowledge Him alone as the One they endear themselves to allows for the proper alignment of His place, and theirs, from the very beginning. Pointing to the index finger on one hand is used as a reminder of the starting place for following the prayer Jesus modeled by acknowledging and honoring the Father.

The second section reflects God’s rule, or kingdom, and is a request that God’s plans, not ours, move forward unimpeded: “Your kingdom come” (Luke 11:2). There is always a discussion about the term “kingdom.” Here is

an effort to help the new believers understand the necessity of seeking God's plan and making a concerted effort to line up to it, rather than planning to do something for Him and then asking Him to bless it. For new believers in a corporate setting, the opportunity to focus on His ruling and command, both individually and within the body, brings understanding about what is priority for the church. At the same time, each individual will point to the middle finger of the other hand as the reminder of the need for God's rule to prevail in their lives, too.

“Give us each day our daily bread” (Luke 11:3) takes us to the next part of the prayer that centers on needs. Many prayers give time and focus to asking God for blessings, healing, direction, etc. Here is where we ask the new believers to be honest about deep desires and needs of the heart. Within a corporate setting of new Christians, there can be a hesitancy to admit honest needs if they do not know each other well, if folks have a history, or if there is no background together. Here we have often seen the development of a stronger, more unified church as people openly begin to let down a façade that protects their reputation and instead embrace a community, a family, of faith. Nothing is off the table for the individual believer or for the congregation. Pointing to the ring finger is the reminder, the mnemonic, for this part of the Disciple's Prayer.

Forgiveness is the next element addressed by the Disciple's Prayer: “Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us” (Luke 11:4). Since Deaf people grow up as a marginalized, oppressed minority, this part of the prayer often takes time and indicates the struggle of individuals with diverse backgrounds.

Nearly all Deaf children grow up without access to sign language within their immediate family, and the frustration, bitterness, and anger that result are understandable. Yet, within the context of a Deaf church, these shared experiences actually lead to a brokenness before the Lord when coming to understand that the individual is created in the image of God, has been forgiven, and has opportunity to make things right in the heart even if resolu-

tion with many oppressors in the hearing world never comes. The corporate prayer meetings where forgiving and receiving forgiveness are given their part are some of the most significant times of communion with God and with each other. The little finger is pointed to as the remembrance for this aspect of the Disciple's prayer.

The concluding section of this model prayer is about asking God for strength, courage, and protection: "And lead us not into temptation" (Luke 11:4). With this section, there is always the discussion about who is responsible for temptation and who is responsible for sin. Often we will reference the Matthew 6 version of the prayer that asks for deliverance from the evil one. Yet, the main point of dialogue has to do with whether God would lead someone into temptation.

We have often witnessed the Spirit of God working to teach individuals, as a part of the corporate body, the source of temptation and the importance of asking for strength, courage, and protection. Most of the understanding Deaf people have about the spirit world is misinformed, distorted, and without any biblical basis. The body of Christ rejoices with the truth that although temptation comes to everyone, God always makes a way for escape and is, in fact, stronger than any evil spirit, including Satan. The thumb is the digit on the hand that is a reminder of this part of the Disciple's Prayer.

There is no magical formula for how to pray most effectively, but utilizing the Disciple's Prayer as a model has been liberating and has offered freedom and transparency in the settings where we have taught it. Copying what Deaf people have seen in hearing churches often results in frustration, stagnation, and dependency. That is why our whole strategy for reaching Deaf people and gathering them together has been an exclusive focus on planting indigenous Deaf churches.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article has centered around the practice of corporate prayer in the Deaf church setting within our mission experience. The bottom line for us has been, and continues to be, that Deaf people have opportunity to come to faith, have biblical discipleship, be a part of biblically based, Deaf-centric church, and be trained to carry on the work of the Great Commission.

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