Audism within the Church

Lloyd A Godin

SLNG-1317-002 Introduction to the Deaf Community

John Mark Raymond

April 2021

Sadly, like many hearing people, Audism was not something that I had ever heard or thought of before. I did not feel superior to Deaf people, but I was ignorant. But what is Audism? Simply put, Audism is a reference to "the discrimination and prejudice against individuals who are d/Deaf or hard-of-hearing" (Ai-Media). Toby Fitch, a Deaf man, further defines Audism as "to behave in the manner of one who hears" (Fitch, 2018). Together, Audism is not merely the discrimination of d/Deaf/HOH people but includes the associated "hearing privilege."

Audism is based either on the fallacy that life as a d/Deaf/HOH person is wretched or on a pathological pattern of thinking that produces a negative bias towards a d/Deaf/HOH person (Fitch, 2018). Audism generally tends to manifest in two ways: attitude and accessibility. Attitudes towards d/Deaf/HOH people include assumptions regarding the d/Deaf/HOH person's abilities (or lack thereof) and consider deafness as unfortunate or in need of fixing (Ai-Media). These attitudes become palpable in the denial of accessibility to communication. Primarily, accessibility issues usually happen in one of two ways: 1) the lack of an effort to communicate (Ai-Media) or 2) active barriers to accessibility of communication (Fitch, 2018).

The Church is supposed to be a beacon of Hope and Love to the world. Regrettably, this is not the experience of many d/Deaf/HOH people. Audism within the Church has, and continues to, turn away the d/Deaf/HOH, even current late-deafened members (Bennett, 2019). Roughly 98% of d/Deaf/HOH do not claim to know Jesus Christ as their Savior (Various, 2001), making them the largest unreached people group in North America (Silent Blessings, 2013). The International Mission Board says that 1,534 d/Deaf/HOH people around the world die every day without knowing Christ (Church Relevance Team, 2019). It is estimated that 94%

of churches have no way to reach the d/Deaf/HOH community, and the few that do are doing so inadequately (Lawrence, Building Deaf Ministries That Work, 2019). The Church is not only declining to minister to the d/Deaf/HOH community, but there is an overall failure to train and equip people to do so (Church Relevance Team, 2019) along with a limitation of d/Deaf/HOH persons to the lower levels of Church leadership (Brosterhuizen, 2005).

Exodus 4:11 states, “Who decides whether people speak or do not speak, hear or do not hear, see or do not see? Is it not I, the Lord?” (NLT, 2015 Revised). While this verse could be interpreted in a positive light, giving Hope to the d/Deaf/HOH, in most instances, it is used to portray deafness as a sign of disfavor from God. This negative attitude, combined with common ignorance (literally meaning “no [or lack of] knowledge”), causes the denial of accessibility within the Church.

d/Deaf/HOH people are often deprived of accessibility to communication within the Church. Foremost, the Church has a predisposition to accentuate the spoken word and does not engage all five senses (Bennett, 2019) especially in the area of music worship (Dunn, 2018). Additionally, the Church has an overwhelming shortage of qualified sign language Interpreters (Heitger-Ewing, 2017).

The prominence of the spoken word has led many d/Deaf/HOH to avoid Church services as they are unappealing and time-consuming (Dunn, 2018). This has even led late-deafened clergy to consider leaving (Bennett, 2019; Various, 2001). A technology team may have words to a song, or Bible references on screen, but most sermons are not captioned, in person or online. Moreover, there is little to no outreach to d/Deaf/HOH children (Heitger-Ewing, 2017).

Many American churches lack the essential capabilities to clearly convey the Word of God to d/Deaf/HOH (Heitger-Ewing, 2017). No complete Bible exists in any sign language (Koh, 2018), including American Sign Language [ASL] (Heitger-Ewing, 2017). Additionally, proficient sign language interpreters are scarce, leaving the task largely to volunteers with only a few months of training (Lawrence, Building Deaf Ministries That Work, 2019).

Adding an interpreter does not guarantee success because it relies on the spoken word, which can make d/Deaf/HOH feel unwelcome (Bennett, 2019). Furthermore, space for d/Deaf/HOH is typically an afterthought, relegating d/Deaf/HOH to a darkened corner of the sanctuary or another room away from hearing members (Koh, 2018). There are 380,000 churches in North America, with only 39 to 42 serving the d/Deaf/HOH, and only one or two of those have their own buildings (Wilkins, 2020). There is no church (to my knowledge) that has been built with an emphasis on DeafSpace.

d/Deaf/HOH face obstacles to communication in their everyday life. It is exhausting and frustrating. The Church, by and large, has been no different. It is neither a place of refuge nor a place of Hope for d/Deaf/HOH. Audism is pervasive within the Church, in both attitude and communication accessibility. While I could argue that this is largely due to a lack of awareness, the result is the same: thousands of d/Deaf/HOH people will never know the God who created them and loves them.

d/Deaf/HOH people are precious to God, perfectly made as they are. Deafness is beautiful. Psalms 139:13-14, 17 says, “You made all the delicate, inner parts of my body and knit me together in my mother’s womb. Thank you for making me so wonderfully complex! Your workmanship is marvelous—how well I know it. How precious are your thoughts about

me, O God. They cannot be numbered!" (NLT, 2015 Revised). Furthermore, a portion of Jewish law found in Leviticus 19:14 states, "Do not insult the deaf or cause the blind to stumble. You must fear your God; I am the Lord." (NLT, 2015 Revised). It is time for the Church to repent of its Audism, call awareness to the oppression, develop resources to reach out to the d/Deaf/HOH, and train up d/Deaf/HOH leaders who can lead their own d/Deaf/HOH Churches.

Works Cited

Ai-Media. (n.d.). *What is Audism? 5 Examples to Learn and Avoid.* Retrieved from Ai-Media: https://www.ai-media.tv/what-is-audism-5-examples-to-learn-and-avoid/

Bennett, J. (2019, December 26). *Deaf Christians often struggle to hear God's word, but some find meaning in the richness of who they are.* Retrieved from The Conversation: https://theconversation.com/deaf-christians-often-struggle-to-hear-gods-word-but-some-find-meaning-in-the-richness-of-who-they-are-128845

Brosterhuizen, M. (2005). Faith in Deaf Culture. *Theological Studies*, pp. 304-329.

Church Relevance Team. (2019, May 21). *Training and Equipping Church Teachers for Special Needs Ministry - Deaf.* Retrieved from Church Relevance: https://www.churchrelevance.com/2019/05/21/training-and-equipping-church-teachers-for-special-needs-ministry-deaf/

Dunn, R. (2018, August). *Deaf People and the Role of Music in the Churches.* Retrieved from Journal of ASL: http://journalofasl.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/8/2018/08/rencadunn.pdf

Fitch, T. (2018). *Oppression & the Deaf Community.* Retrieved from Toby Fitch ASL: https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5a1fa3f2edaed85f229947c6/t/5a8f48f953450a4a1f82254d/1519339770180/Lesson+05+-+Oppression+&+Deaf+People.pdf

Heitger-Ewing, C. (2017, July 10). *How Churches can serve the Deaf Community.* Retrieved from Outreach Magazine: https://outreachmagazine.com/ideas/23425-churches-deaf-community.html

Koh, L. (2018, October 12). *How the Gospel confronts Deaf marginalization.* Retrieved from Mission Network News: https://www.mnnonline.org/news/how-the-gospel-confronts-deaf-marginalization/

Lawrence, M. (2002). A World We Never Knew Even Existed. Anderson, Indiana, USA.

Lawrence, M. (2019). *Building Deaf Ministries That Work.* Indianapolis: Silent Blessings Deaf Ministries.

NLT. (2015 Revised). *The Bible.* Carol Stream: Tyndale House Foundation. Retrieved from The Bible: https://www.bible.com/

Silent Blessings. (2013). *Why is Deaf Ministry so hard? (Pt. 1).* Retrieved from Silent Blessings Deaf Ministries: https://www.silentblessings.org/why-is-deaf-ministry-so-hard-part-1/

Various. (2001). *Shattering the Silence: Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Christian Speak Out About the Church.* Indianapolis: Silent Blessing Deaf Ministries.