

Mutual Theological Liberation for the Deaf and Hearing: A Case Study

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Abstract:

Theologian and Deaf activist Hannah Lewis claims that only Deaf people can fulfill their potential for life themselves; hearing people cannot help in this process. The goal of this paper is to find a way that the hearing and Deaf can work together for mutual liberation in the Church. If an “integrated church” works with both the hearing and Deaf community fully, it would take a more collaborative view on the subject of life-giving liberation. Therefore, it is possible that integrated churches can be potentially liberating and thus shows that both sides can help in the liberation of others as well as themselves. A case study of St. Catherine of Siena in Des Moines, Iowa, will be offered. Through examining this church based on Lewis’s questions, the project addresses potential liberation, how the church might improve, and an example for integrated churches in general.

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As a hearing person who is working towards certification in American Sign Language, I need to understand why I want to become an interpreter for the Deaf community. I understand my motivation to be intrinsic, in that I have a drive to learn and understand others. I want to be able to help remove barriers between the hearing and the Deaf, especially in a church-related setting and in rural areas that I will be working near. I believe that if there is open communication, then understanding and learning will occur. So when I read theologian and Deaf activist Hannah Lewis's claim in *Deaf Liberation Theology* (2007) that "reconstruction for Deaf liturgical tradition must be done by Deaf people themselves. No hearing person, no matter how sympathetic or experienced in sign, can do it for us" (Lewis 177), I was discouraged. According to Lewis, in order to achieve liberation, the Deaf community must work to find what liberation in Christianity means to them without help from outside the community. Throughout *Deaf Liberation Theology*, Lewis reviews the history of the Deaf community in relation to Christianity. As she lays out the groundwork for how Deaf people can find theological liberation, she asks four main questions concerning topics of worship, inclusion, leadership opportunities, and Christianity's overall relevance for the Deaf community. If these questions are completely true and filled to full potential for both hearing and Deaf within an "integrated church," then it would be possible for everyone within the church to find liberation. In this essay, I apply these questions specifically to St. Catherine of Siena in Des Moines, Iowa, and show that improvements to art and leadership would need to be made in order for the answers to be fully realized. Although Lewis argues that Deaf people must liberate themselves and hearing people cannot help in this process, the goal of this paper is to find a way that the hearing and deaf can

work together for mutual liberation in the Church. If an integrated church works with both the hearing and Deaf community fully, it would take a more collaborative view on the subject of life-giving liberation. Therefore, it is possible that integrated churches can be potentially liberating and thus shows that both sides can help in mutual liberation of others as well as themselves.

When considering what the definition of liberation means, Lewis pulls from other theologians to bring a concise definition of “life-giving” (Lewis 16). Theology’s aim is “to contribute to the process of liberation through its exploration of the continuing involvement of God in human life” (Lewis 11). Lewis then asks questions to hold that high standard for theological liberation in regards to the Deaf community. One key theological support is in Nancy Eiesland’s *The Disabled God*. Although Eiesland is speaking broadly to the liberation of people with disabilities, her definition of liberatory theology in particular can apply specifically to the Deaf community. It reads:

[Liberatory theology] acknowledges our struggle against the discrimination that is pervasive within the church and society as a part of the work of coming to our bodies. A liberatory theology sustains our difficult but ordinary lives, empowers and collaborates with individuals and groups of people with disabilities who struggle for justice in concrete situations, creates new ways of resisting the theological symbols that exclude and devalue us, and reclaims our hidden history in the presence of God on earth (Eiesland 86).

Within Eiesland’s definition, she draws on the history and struggle that the minority group¹ has undergone. By recognizing this, Eiesland works to use it as a tool when moving toward the future of freedom from oppression. The outcome of mutual liberation theology is seen in the

¹ “Minority group” is how Lewis describes the Deaf community using the Social Model of disability that she shares with Eiesland, which Lewis discusses as the view of disability as society’s fault for not accommodating and providing “appropriate services and adequately ensur[ing] the needs of disabled people are fully taken into account in its social organization” (Lewis 30).

empowering of people so all have the opportunity to live life to their fullest capacity through teachings of God—something that both the Deaf and hearing desire in the Church.

In a majority of cases, an integrated church is founded by hearing people, so it is important to note that focus will be on how an integrated church can take action toward adequately ensuring Deaf members have full access. In Dr. Mary Weir's "Made Deaf in God's Image," she describes that "to be deaf will increasingly be to be a part of a minority people struggling for the fullness of life from the margins of society" (Weir 3). Deaf communities are scattered throughout the U.S. with approximately "37 to 140 out of every 1,000 people in the United States" considering themselves Deaf (*Gallaudet University*) which pushes Deaf Christians to work towards liberation through a hearing Church. Lewis argues that the Deaf community needs to find this theological fulfillment on their own will, but if there are only around 120 fully independent Deaf churches (*DeafChurchWhere*) when there are roughly 380,000 churches total in America, then Lewis's religious goals for the Deaf seeking theological liberation is not easy to access in this country. Communities that are not in larger populated areas that contain an independent Deaf Church would likely only have access to hearing majority churches and communities. Rural areas are frequent in the Midwest, which is where I will be located, thus my focus is that not all Deaf people would have physical access to independent Deaf churches because of location. Because of this, integrated churches must take action to provide necessary access to all of its members. Lewis's view is a goal that may be achievable in some areas, but will need to be altered for the majority of situations, including within a hearing majority, in order for a person who is deaf have the opportunity and access to potential liberation in Church.

Empowerment for both hearing and Deaf is best described by Bob Ayres in *Deaf Diaspora: The Third Wave of Deaf Ministry* where he defines the difference between enculturation and acculturation. He says “Enculturation is the process by which one becomes part of his or her own native culture. It involves intentional efforts to keep a culture alive throughout time” (Ayres xvii). This is seen in independent Deaf churches, Deaf schools and universities, Deaf groups, and more. By creating activities and environments where the Deaf are in the majority, enculturation thrives. But Ayres argues that in order for the minority group to survive they must also recognize acculturation. “The process of adopting the cultural patterns of another group[...]

(Ayres xvii). This is similar to assimilation, however acculturation works to help find common ground and a cultural “fit” which may be to some mutual advantage. An institution such as the Church must use this idea to find what is most relevant for the members it serves. The idea of many people working towards a goal together would take on a sort of acculturation. Ayres ends his definitions by saying, “Enculturation encourages being set apart while acculturation results in blending in. The survival of a minority cultural group, such as the Deaf community, depends on the balance of these two variables” (Ayres xvii). The Deaf community’s unique culture must survive through enculturation, but they must also acculturate to the larger hearing community.

According to *DeafChurchWhere*, there are four kinds of “Deaf churches” that vary on how accessible the church is to the Deaf community. The first category is an “accessibility” church where a hearing church provides an interpreter for deaf person(s), allowing access or partial access to the service. This would be a scenario in which the person who is deaf would most likely need to request an interpreter or in some cases need to provide their own.

“Integrated” is Deaf joining a hearing church with an interpreter, but also has what J.R. Bucklew, President of the Deaf Bible Society, describes as: “Deaf Sunday school class or a Deaf life group or some sort of group for the Deaf Congregants” (Koh). The “supported” category is Deaf run. They have their own pastor, service, and building, but function under the umbrella of a hearing church. Lastly, an “independent” church is what Bucklew describes as an “autonomous Deaf church, it has its own trustees or elders or deacons, they fund themselves and are in themselves” (Koh). Because of the Deaf community being a minority in general, independent Churches and supported churches are less frequent especially in more rural areas throughout the U.S.

The scarcity of diverse categories of Deaf churches is apparent when looking at Iowa specifically. Iowa has one independent church, one supported, two integrated, and three accessibility according to *DeafChurchWhere*. In Des Moines, Iowa St. Catherine of Siena is categorized as integrated. The church currently has roughly 350 members with 12 being Deaf members. On their website, they claim that “St. Catherine's is the only Church in the state of Iowa that has Sign Language interpreters at every Sunday Morning Mass.” Although this level of accessibility may be positive for the Deaf community in this particular church, when looking at Iowa as a whole this is an overall testament to how rarely the Deaf community is actually able to have adequate accessibility and interpretation for services unless the church has a Deaf majority. St. Catherine hosts a Deaf Ministry group that discusses the readings and Gospel each week from September to May every year. An interpreter is provided during Sunday Mass as well as any event that a member who is deaf would be attending. Through each of Lewis’s four questions, St. Catherine of Siena proves to be partially liberating. If this church makes improvements that

would fully include both the Deaf and the hearing congregants, then it is possible for mutual liberation.

The first question Lewis asks is: Is worship accessible, relatable, and creative? Accessibility would include not only providing an interpreter at all events but technology providing visuals and the structure of the church laid out so that all can see the speaker and interpreter. Pews would be structurally set up so that all have equal visibility. For example, movie-theater style so that the speaker would be on the lowest level or having the speaker on a higher level than the viewing congregation. Technology, such as a projector, displaying the reading, hymns, etc. should be utilized so that visuals are provided to those who prefer it. Books containing the hymns and readings would help with accessibility too. Art displayed in the church is crucial to be visually interactive.

St. Catherine of Siena uses chairs set in a semi-circular fashion. This helps with visibility but is still challenging for people in the back rows. Although this could change easily, and the chairs may be set up in this particular order because of recent pandemic concerns, visibility for all should be a main concern for the church so that all can engage fully. Technology wise, the church does not have a projector or books, making it hard for anyone to follow along with songs or readings unless they are familiar with the songs and responses. General art is limited with mainly white walls and a cross centered above the altar. A separation wall sits between the heart of the chapel and the general lounging area. Currently, because congregants have to be spaced out for safety reasons, some members sit behind the wall, which provides only half visibility through partial glass windows. This seating arrangement forces the congregants who sit behind the wall to be physically separated from the speaker and rest of the congregation and also

demonstrates how the structure of the church is crucial for every member to have equal access to worship.

In order for this church specifically and integrated churches in general to be accessible to all congregants they would need technology to display visuals, written English in forms of books and bulletins, an interpreter at all events, and the layout of the church positioned in a way that all can see easily to maintain acculturation. Mariana Portolano writes in “Shun not the Struggle’: The Language and Culture of Deaf Catholics in the U.S., 1949-1977” that historically, “the very presence of an interpreter [in the 1950’s] served to highlight the Deaf members of the assembly were linguistically removed from direct communication with the priest” (Portolano 105). However, if there is no interpreter at the service, then the Deaf would be isolated, not able to receive the Word or participate in the service. For this reason, interpretation is necessary. If St. Catherine of Siena were to improve on the accessibility portion of Lewis’s question, they would need to consider visibility and also involve more artwork throughout the church so that congregants have various ways to interact in a learning environment.

If accessibility here is mainly about visibility, then relatability is about the content of what is being preached. Christianity has historically been taught for and by a hearing majority. Stories are told of a hearing man named Jesus healing the sick, the Deaf, the blind and disabled, and spreading the word of God by speaking to different people.² Lewis argues that in order for the Deaf community to find liberation, there needs to be positive stories of the Deaf, both historically and biblically. This includes rewriting a large part of hymns and sermons and

² Biblical interpretations of various healing narratives can take on an oppressive view, claiming that Jesus healed people in order to fix them. Whereas a more liberative interpretation, for example, sees that Jesus healed a Deaf man because he needed healing as an individual, and thus meaning not all Deaf people need physical healing. Lewis explains this further in Chapter 7 *Deaf Liberation Theology*.

rewriting to include the minority group. Teaching that includes the Deaf in stories and history could change the perspective from that of 'disability' to a positive portrayal that the Deaf community can look to. To balance that between stories for the hearing people in an integrated church is harder to accomplish, thus Lewis's push for a 'Deaf only' vision. However, if a church were to utilize study groups, then it is possible to learn many different perspectives on stories/history.

St. Catherine of Siena mainly teaches from the hearing perspective. This church does have several ministry groups including a Deaf Ministry group, in which readings and Gospel for the coming service is discussed. This allows for enculturation where opinions and interpretations of the text are discussed through the individual group's view. The typical Catholic hymns have not been written for the inclusion of the Deaf community. In order for St. Catherine of Siena and other integrated churches to balance the stories and history being told, study groups would need to work for each group to discuss the Bible in ways that relate to themselves. It may also be beneficial to have a mix of readings and music providing all with stimulating content to engage.

The last part Lewis's first question concerning creativity revolves around this stimulation with content and creating a different learning avenue to engage within the religion. In "Embodying the Word" Kathy Black says that "when music is removed from the liturgy because the people can't hear it, other art forms emerge to engage the senses and embody the word of God" (Black 12). If the congregation is allowed to explore what they find meaningful and use that to generate new ways to engage, then this would have the potential to liberate any congregant whether they are hearing or Deaf. To make the church into your own unique

experience (enculturation) would not only make each interaction in the church memorable, it would be something that could not be recreated elsewhere.

Twice a month, two members of St. Catherine of Siena, leaders of Deaf Ministry group, host a movie split between two weeks in which the group discusses the movie afterwards. This takes a different approach from a general discussion by using the movie as a talking point to discuss religious topics. However, the movie time and general group meetings take on a type of linguistic learning incorporating minimal visual learning. The film presents images that are then engaged verbally. In *Visual Intelligence: Perception, Image, and Manipulation in Visual Communication*, Ann Barry explains that, “the perceptual power of the image may also be seen in its ability to dominate the written or spoken word when they appear together[...] the image is perceptually processed along the same alternative pathways as direct experience” (Barry 78). By Barry’s explanation, visual presentation in addition to verbal presentation would allow for greater emotional connection. If the church were to make changes, the ministry groups could encourage creating visual projects of their own, such as paintings, so that they are allowed to interpret the religious topics as they imagine them and thus learning through the power of an image.

The second question asks: Do Deaf people feel safe to be themselves, are they fully included, and is their view valued? Lewis explains that interpreting from someone who is speaking always involves time lag for the people watching the interpreter. The interpreter is not able to sign simultaneously with the speaker. Because of this, proper awareness of this would be that extra time is given so the Deaf can respond and contribute to the conversation. Lewis also mentions the difference in signing in American Sign Language (ASL) or using a form of Sign

Supported English (SSE). This means that the interpreter is signing in English constructed sentences instead of in the language the Deaf community uses most often. If the church and congregants are openly communicating and allowing access to Deaf members then a mutual understanding would help in all members feeling a sense of inclusion and welcoming culture. Ayres says, “either a person feels part of neither culture (negative) or feels connected with both cultures (positive)” (Ayres 10). This draws on the idea of balancing enculturation and acculturation. If a member of the Church is not included in one cultural group, and does not fit with the other, then it is doubly hard to find liberation.

In St. Catherine of Siena small study groups, inclusion and a sense of community comes easily. They discuss the readings and Gospel for Mass in the smaller environment so that a conversation can involve everyone’s view in the group. During the main service, however, there seems to be no awareness of time-lag for interpreting. The Mass moves at its own pace, thus the Deaf Community is left out of some interactions that could be more meaningful. The interpreter uses a mix of ASL and SSE, but it is not always the same interpreter for all services. This causes the Deaf community to not be able to really have a clear understanding of the signer since all interpreters have their own style of interpreting and sign things in different ways .

This church, as well as integrated churches in general, would need to educate and learn to be truly aware of what inclusion and access mean to the Deaf community. By acknowledging time lag in interpreting, meeting in small groups to have discussion, and by having leadership who will listen to everyone's view equally, a church can acculturate to include all members. Ayres comments that “effective ministry recognizes the culture of the people it serves” (Ayres xvii). If the hearing culture and Deaf culture are recognized, then the church can move forward

together toward liberation. If a member feels included in the church, then they would feel safe to be themselves.

The third question asks: Are ministry and leadership opportunities fully available, and do Deaf people feel confident that someone will listen to their point of view? Lewis describes the idea of Deaf space in which a Deaf person can come to and feel safe to be themselves. In order to do this there must be Deaf people who are in leadership positions. If a Deaf person sees someone like them leading, then they “can feel confident that someone will understand their problems” (Lewis 180). If no one is in leadership roles that represent the Deaf, then there needs to be proof that opportunities for leadership are completely available. In Kirk VanGilder’s article “Deaf America’s Encounter with Methodism: A Brief Look at a Culture and a Church,” he says that “Deaf Church remains a sacred space for the deaf community where deafness is the norm and no apologies need to be made for being who we are created to be” (VanGilder 249). Although he speaks specifically to the Deaf community, the charge to have a church that is a welcoming space in which a person can fully be themselves can and should apply to any member of a church no matter what background or identity they hold. This would apply to all churches that encourage theological liberation, however, not all churches are successful in achieving a welcoming space for Deaf or hearing people.

In the case of St. Catherine of Siena, Deaf member Gus Cordero is on the Parish Council and leads the Deaf Ministry group. During Mass, members have the opportunity to distribute Holy Communion or read when the interpreter speaks the reading. For events, an interpreter is present if a Deaf member attends. Mr. Cordero serves as a consistent Deaf leader in this church and would be the person that the Deaf community would look to for guidance. The new current

priest is hearing and appears to know minimal sign language. Although only one person is leading consistently as a Deaf role model, Cordero demonstrates that opportunities for leadership are available to any member. Additionally, this points to the importance of leadership being available not just to the difference in hearing and Deaf, but multiple different backgrounds so that all members can feel inclusion. Ayres states that “The answer is in having a diverse group of leaders from a variety of backgrounds. No one is excluded” (Ayres 115). If many different people are leading a more community-aware church would understand each congregant’s view and be able to truly fulfill all members’ potential for liberation.

In the last question, it asks: Is Christianity relevant for Deaf people? In order for the Deaf community to have Christianity be relevant, complete understanding and inclusion must occur in every instance. However, inclusion has consistently been a complex issue because the Christian view on what “disability” means has been debated between two varying opinions. Eiesland states “the persistent thread within the Christian tradition has been that disability denotes an unusual relationship with God and that the person with disabilities is either divinely blessed or damned” (Eiesland 70). Christians have tended to separate people with disabilities instead of including them in the church. They are made into a spectacle on either side, whether it is seen as evil or a gift. Certain alienating effects occur when a person is considered a “gift,” in that they are expected to encourage others with their story of “suffering” rather than living their own lives. Lewis argues that “the seeming power of the powerless in the glorification of their suffering may be understood as one more means of and justification for active discrimination against people with disabilities” (Lewis 76). Rather than viewing a Deaf person as a gift or a burden, Christians should look at everyone as members of the Church following the word of God together. Ayres

confirms this when he says “A Deaf Christian and a hearing Christian have more in common with each other than either does with unbelievers of their same cultures. Christ unites us as His followers” (Ayres 113). Christianity creates acculturation in a shared set of practices and mindsets that can sometimes obscure other points of difference.

At St. Catherine of Siena, there is a mix of positive ways that Christianity is relevant and areas needing improvement. Study groups use conversations to break down the relevance of the Gospel readings and allow members to express how the readings relate to one another. Leadership at the church supports different people from different backgrounds to have roles both during service and other events. Where St. Catherine of Siena lacks relevance is in the creativity aspect that Lewis finds most liberating for the Deaf Community. Encouragement for different kinds of creative activities would help in the religion to become more interactive and easier to interpret in other art forms. In plain terms, the church needs more art to be relevant.

Attendance in Christianity has had a steady decline in the United States that could also point to the general population not finding what is being preached relevant. In Lewis’s context, she reports the decline from a European perspective, which has had a much more significant decrease in attendance in church than America, demonstrating a lack of importance in people’s lives in traditional ways. *Pew Research Center* has found that only 11 percent of adults in the United Kingdom consider themselves “highly religious” (Evans). Comparing this to Iowa with 55 percent, or even looking at the lowest percentage state in the United States being New Hampshire with 33 percent (Lipka), Lewis’s concern for the Deaf community finding relevance in Christianity is much more immediate for the United Kingdom than it is in America. However,

the steady decline in the U.S. should not be ignored. If Christianity is to grow and gain people's fellowship, then it is imperative that the religion is relevant to the people.

Christian churches also need to pay attention to all other identities that the members bring in from the community. People are not just in one category; they are not only 15 or 68 years old. Ethnicity, gender, and many other demographics are involved in a person's life. In regards to being relevant towards the Deaf community, access is a major part of how to involve all members. Black describes that "most hearing congregations, even if well-intentioned, don't know enough to make the effort to reach out to [the Deaf community]" (Black 17). Lewis's push for Deaf leadership acknowledges that awareness of what each community needs would occur if leadership represents different types of members of the Church in order to advocate for them. But this is not only about inclusion and working towards becoming relevant for members. An integrated church has the opportunity to be liberating in multiple capacities. That is, if the Deaf community is being liberated one way, and the hearing community in another, then it is equally possible that both can find liberation in each other's activities without forcing acculturation. Vangilder says that "there are numerous gifts to be found which will only be uncovered when we approach the future together, Deaf and hearing alike" (Vangilder 249). What if people looked at the Deaf community as a group that can help in the liberation of others as well as themselves?

How can a hearing person and a Deaf person help each other for mutual liberation? By ensuring that all members of a church have complete access to what is going on—not just during services but day to day happenings in the church and community—knowledge and understanding of others will occur. Technology to display written words as well as an interpreter for all events would benefit the Deaf community. Black says that "Praising God in sign language in the Deaf

Church was a Kaleidoscope of images” (Black 12). Sign language shows visually the clear emotions of individuals as they sign to each other and respond to the service. Although this image speaks to the beauty of ASL, it also demonstrates that multiple different ways of accessing the word of God are possible. Finding a new and interactive way to fulfill the congregant’s potential in life is not stuck through one kind of structure but can be found in varying forms.

In the Social Model, the Deaf community has been viewed as a minority oppressed group that has been pushed to acculturate themselves into a hearing-world majority. Often this acculturation has been paired with pity and disrespect. However, Weir says that “the pity that has accompanied a long tradition of paternalism surrounding the deaf is fading—hopefully it is being replaced by mutual respect” (Weir 3). If the Church and its members find a common ground in mutual liberation, then respect toward varying interactions with the word can lead to the community helping themselves as well as others towards fulfillment. For Weir “it could just be that the deaf have a contribution to make precisely at this point of a deeper spirituality than our production-gear'd wavelengths have allowed all these decades” (Weir 4). If the hearing majority collaborates and works to take away the barriers that have been put between the Deaf community and the hearing, then together they can find the potential for mutual liberation.

The Deaf community may always be considered a minority group because of statistical population numbers compared to the majority population of hearing. However, minority does not have to also mean oppressed. The Deaf community must take action to liberate themselves, but hearing people can help in breaking down barriers that keep the Deaf community from reaching theological liberation. Lewis argues that hearing people cannot help in this process, that no matter how sympathetic and genuine, the Deaf must work towards fulfillment on their own.

Nevertheless, if an integrated church were to answer Lewis's four questions of worship, inclusion, leadership, and relevance fully for both hearing and Deaf, then it is possible for liberation, not only for themselves but for others as well.

Looking forward, future research should explore the different avenues in which Deaf communities specifically find liberation and how that can be applied to all members of their churches and the Church. The Deaf community has more visual interaction than the hearing; they show different ways of knowing and learning unfamiliar to the hearing. Because of this, the hearing could be potentially liberated by following and participating in a Deaf-Way. Another topic to further investigate is how the other three categories of churches (independent, supported, and accessibility) do or do not take collaborative views of mutual liberation and where improvements can be made. In fact, if the other categories are not reaching fulfillment then it begs the question of if the categories themselves should be reworked. Lastly, more research considering race, geographic location, gender, class, and other factors would help further understand the cultures of the Deaf and hearing communities and would aid in finding ways to keep members of the Church engaged.

Although Lewis's argument towards self-liberation was discouraging to me at first, this work has helped me realize why there needs to be an argument in the first place. Many obstacles and ways of understanding the different cultures of members in a church create barriers in which a hearing majority enforce unless they understand and work towards equality for the Deaf community. If the hearing and Deaf work together to find a common ground, then I believe that all members of the Church can and will flourish in mutual liberation not separately, but together as one.

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