

# **Spiritual Direction for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Directees**

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I have profound hearing loss. In my early twenties, a viral infection triggered the onset of hearing loss which gradually got worse over a period of thirty-five years. Recent cochlear implant surgery has enabled me to participate again in the hearing world, though with some limitations.

A few years ago I was surprised by an acquaintance questioning the need for spiritual direction - 'I don't need spiritual direction because I get close to God during the worship service.' She was referring to the worship music within the church service. Based on this premise, if I can't hear the music, then I can't worship God. Of course, there are many ways of worshipping God other than music, but this got me pondering. If you can't hear the music, sermon and converse with other Christians in your church community, where do you go or to whom do you go to, to discuss spiritual matters? Have you noticed, there are few hearing-challenged Christians attending your church? So does spiritual direction have something to offer to fill this gap? Does hearing loss shape a person's identity and their image of God and how relationship with God is experienced?

The idea for this topic came as a result of others working with me in spiritual direction training. Small adjustments like no background noise, seating arrangements, made direction training for me less stressful and more rewarding. These are things hearing people have little awareness of. I found nothing in the spiritual direction literature directly related to this topic. There are a few papers on related topics - deaf counselling, social work practice, cross cultural direction, loss and discrimination. Barclay et al confirm this, '...the literature specific to addressing spirituality with deaf and hard of hearing people is limited.'<sup>1</sup>

So doing qualitative research, I made email contact with 16 people - deaf, hard of hearing and people who work in their communities. I invited them to assist me to present this topic by answering a few questions in a face-to-face interview or via email. They all profess a Christian faith. I believed they could help me shine some light onto the issues involved.

In offering confidentiality, I have changed the names and any other identifying features. I have explained that their answers will be treated in confidence and there is a consent form to sign in this regard.

### **Here are my questions I used in my interviews:**

When and how did you lose your hearing? Was your loss sudden or gradual?

With whom do you most identify - your 'hearing' culture, deaf culture or somewhere in-between? What life factors played a role here?

How do you rate support of family, friends and community in managing hearing loss?

How has your hearing loss affected your relationship with your Christian community? with God?

Spiritual direction is available for you to discuss and explore spiritual matters. How might your hearing loss impact upon your decision to talk with a spiritual director about your relationship with God?

What qualities would you consider important in choosing a spiritual director?

What does this person need to know and adapt to make a conversation more satisfying for you?

What further comments would you like to add?

**Summary of results:** From the information given to me personally, through interviews or on behalf of another, the 16 responders – 5 males, 11 females – fell into 4 categories: 2 born deaf, 2 born with severe hearing loss, 10 with severe hearing loss in young adulthood, 2 with severe hearing loss as an older person. Under further comments, several of my responders mentioned that they had never heard of spiritual direction and wanted more information about it.

**Born Deaf:** With family and community support and the use of NZSL (New Zealand Sign Language) as their primary language, this group identifies with the Deaf culture. One, who was born into a hearing family who used only a few basic signs, felt disconnected from other family members, quite a different experience from the responder with deaf signing parents. Attending church as a child, because they couldn't understand spoken English, was an isolating and boring experience. However, this was not the case for their relationship with God, which has developed in silent contemplation, especially in nature. Later in life, one began attending a Deaf church, the other a home church which uses modern technology to attend on-line signed Zoom services for informal teaching. Because neither have experienced hearing speech, their lack of hearing has not affected their relationship with God at all.

They did not know what spiritual direction is and saw no need for it. They talk about spiritual things informally using signed language with friends who understand Deaf culture.

**Born with Severe Hearing Loss:** Both responders in this category use powerful hearing aids and speech-reading. Both experienced little support, teasing and academic struggle within their school communities. Neither think of themselves as deaf. They don't identify with Deaf culture. They say they identify with hearing culture, but they don't fit easily into it. They find it hard to make and keep friends. Phone conversations are difficult. Both found family generally understanding but often frustrated and impatient. Neither believed this affected their relationship with God. One relates with God through the Word and in worship music. You can read Barry's story in appendix 3. The other finds God in nature and in silent contemplation. Neither knew what spiritual direction entails. To share their spiritual journey and concerns with another, that person would need the following qualities - a good relationship with God, someone they could respect and relate to, someone who can help them explore life issues and goals with and find where God is in this using all five senses. For successful conversation, there must be no background noise. The director must speak clearly, loudly but not shout or mumble, have no strong accent and maintain face contact.

**Severe hearing loss experienced from young adulthood:** This group included those with both gradual and sudden loss. They use powerful hearing aids or a cochlear processor, and speech-reading. When my responder has a loving, understanding supportive partner, they still feel comfortable within the hearing culture, but some unease with social occasions when there is background noise. Without this support and or the support of friends, responders had a sense of belonging neither to hearing culture nor Deaf culture, and of not fitting well into church community. Most found their pool of friends has shrunk since becoming hard of hearing. In this group, three began attending a Deaf church, while three have left church as they felt isolated and then joined a home church and watched captioned services on-line. Two find hearing aids enable them to still participate fully within the church community if background noise is minimal. Two continue attending their hearing churches, believing they are acting as role models and/or wanting a sense of being with others in community worship, even though they hear little of the sermon or fellowship conversation after the service. One sought spiritual direction to fill the void and find guidance to a deepening relationship with God. All needed the worship lyrics screened or sang the words from memory. In the early stages of their hearing loss, all described experiencing grief and loss in several areas of their life – job and drop in financial income, relationships, independence – not just their hearing. Responders described initially struggling to accept the

loss and make sense of why this had happened, and being angry with God. None blamed God. They described how it helped deepen their relationship with God, develop biblical knowledge of God by motivating them to read the Word regularly (rather than hear the Word), discover God in nature and see life with a contemplative stance. With one exception, this group either were unfamiliar with spiritual direction or thought it was just for theology students or priests and nuns. Should they consider spiritual direction, the director's qualities mentioned include: being a good listener, empathy with hearing loss, sound biblical knowledge, a loving relationship with God, offering confidentiality, calmness, patience, respect, honesty and openness, and being non-judgmental, friendly, caring and knowledgeable of what hearing loss entails. For meaningful conversation to occur, the director must speak slowly, clearly, maintain face contact, sit directly opposite and close to them, have a room with good acoustics, well lit, no background noise. Three of this group are proficient at NZSL and would want a director to use sign language. Use of an interpreter is not satisfactory because of issues around privacy and confidentiality.

**Severe hearing loss experienced later in life:** The two in this group attribute their hearing loss to old age. The loss was gradual. Hearing aids no longer help and neither has a cochlear implant. They feel socially isolated, extremely frustrated, tire easily. They have not had time like their younger counterparts to come to terms with and adapt to their loss. Partners say the loss has negatively impacted on everyone in the family. Perhaps this group is the most emotionally affected by their hearing loss, but this has not changed their relationship with God, matured over a lifetime. Both said they would not want spiritual direction because they didn't see the need and engaging in conversation wherein there is constant repeating of what is said or questions written down, is both exhausting and unrewarding.

**With Jean's permission I share her story:**

*I lost my hearing gradually over 20 years. Forty years ago when I was working for the church, the loss became debilitating. Speech at conventions, services and work became frustratingly difficult to follow and listening intently became very tiring.*

*Here's my story, a word picture, describing my life with a hearing loss. I am sitting in a room full of people. There is a buzz as they talk. Then the leader starts to speak – mumble, mumble. I strain to hear. She sits with the window behind her, backlit, her face in deep shadow. I cannot lipread. What is she saying? Hope someone will tell me later. Can't move as the room is full. They call out, can't hear them. I watch my friend who is hard of hearing. The blank look tells me she can't hear either. As soon as the meeting finishes we*

*dash off. I have missed the message, the notices, the important things we have to do next. I might as well not have come, no sense of camaraderie. This is the norm for me. I live in the world of me and God. If the meeting is longer I switch off and converse with God. I can quietly ask questions, get revelation. My hearing loss brings me closer as we commune together. I can be a Christian without interacting with people. I have my Bible and my phone gives access to so much online material but how to do stuff with people is an ongoing problem. Finding an opportunity to serve is not easy. God has to open doors.*

*Being encouraged in our Christian walk is so important. We need to encourage one another. How is this possible for the hard of hearing? Small groups or one on one are the best. Not everyone has a phone or Bluetooth, but these help. I have a phone app that turns voice into text so I can follow the speaker, not perfect by any means but it is a helpful aid if they have a clear voice. I need to sit near the speaker (I find it hard if they roam about the room). Lipreading helps so I need to see their mouth. It is no good if their mouth is masked, in shadow, or they're too far away. Group prayer is really hard. People drop their voice, whisper, hang their head. It means I don't know the topic, or progression. I become frustrated trying to follow and listening so intently becomes exhausting.*

*I identify with hearing culture, but it's not a good fit. Recently watching deaf people on zoom was so lovely as they encouraged one another in the faith but I was unable to follow the signing. It was almost as bad as when my home group zoomed. I could not hear the conversation and that made me sad - so I don't really fit in there either. I join groups that don't require conversation – music, art, garden, walking. Nature has become increasingly important. It's a relief to go for a walk and commune with God.*

*Who can I discuss my spiritual journey with? Perhaps a friend, a person who I know is available for support and advice but probably a person who has a similar journey? I tend towards the latter as I know they will understand. We can support each other. So, I probably wouldn't go to a recognised spiritual director. However if they took a small group retreat or session I would see it as a way of finding more about my life's aims, ambitions, and how God is touching my life. If this were followed by individual appointments to explore further, then yes, I can see how it would be helpful. I would need to be sure they spoke clearly and slowly, enunciated, opened their mouth and used lots of facial expressions. It would be no use going to a one-on-one session and finding I could not follow them. Hearing people often do not realise that the way they speak can be a factor in communicating. High pitched voices, crackly, soft, growly, lisp or other mouth problems can mean some hard of hearing just cannot follow them. Each person's hearing loss creates different problems. A microphone can be very helpful but also a problem. Too close and it creates a shushing sound,*

*too loud is just as bad. A mike will not guarantee a hard of hearing person will hear. There is a difference between loudness and clarity. Church people show videos or films and discuss them. This makes for frustration. I cannot follow unless it is captioned. For ten years I went to a sympathetic and loving faith community. Although mics were used I could rarely hear. Playing music while someone is speaking or praying is a definite no no. I will not be going up for an altar call for people to come forward for prayer for means I cannot hear; and it is not private as everyone else will hear except me. I was fortunate that I received all my teaching before I became hard of hearing. I do miss camps, special speakers, healing meetings, Aglow where I would find much encouragement. Out in the world my hearing dog raises awareness and questions can be asked without embarrassment. My world has shrunk to my hearing dog, my close friends and my home group.*

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### **My Conclusions:**

This qualitative research provides an understanding of the ways Christians with severe and profound hearing loss manage their experiences within their church communities and with God. Hearing loss does indeed shape a person's identity. The Deaf identify with Deaf culture; the hard of hearing with an in-between culture. Both can find gains in this. With a supportive partner and/or church community, they can continue to be active members of their faith community. When their church communities provide exclusively to a hearing culture, those with hearing loss compensate for the lack of vital input for their spiritual growth, worship, prayer, teaching, by drawing closer to God through contemplation in everyday life, through nature, and through reading scripture. This has given them a more expansive knowing about God and a growing and deepening relationship with a Triune God. However, I do wonder if there are those who have not been able to compensate in these ways and have simply drifted away and become invisible to our church communities. Considering that Jesus paid much attention to the marginalised, should not our church communities become more proactive in addressing these issues of justice and equality.

Awareness of the availability of spiritual direction needs to be raised. All of the life experiences these responders shared - grief, loss of job, income, relationships, independence, issues with acceptance, isolation, frustration, tiredness, anger are so appropriate for spiritual direction. Especially for those who lost hearing in early adulthood, spiritual direction could be an enriching experience. For those born with severe hearing loss, providing that the conditions of clear communication are there, there is an openness to the

possibility of spiritual direction. Should those Deaf and using NZSL as their primary language seek spiritual direction, then the director will need to use sign language.

## **Discussion:**

The causes for deafness and hard of hearing are diverse. I believe it's important to distinguish between them and the different levels of hearing loss, because how and where a person fits within this community of hearing loss, can shape a person's identity. In this research, I delved into how this can influence a person's image of and relationship with God.<sup>2</sup> To begin this discussion, I define some terms and give some brief background information to deafness which I believe may be helpful in spiritual direction sessions with such a directee.

Expressed simply, we hear because sound waves stimulate hair cells in the inner ear and their response is relayed via the auditory nerve to the brain for processing into speech. Sound energy travelling in waves is measured in frequency, Hertz, Hz, and amplitude or loudness, decibels, dB.<sup>3</sup> The most important frequencies for speech and language are between 250 - 8000Hz. The most common hearing loss is in the high frequency range which involves the soft voiced consonants, for example, f, s, t. With these sounds missing, words containing these sounds becomes difficult to hear. When the brain hears these words within the context of a sentence, their meaning can be become clear. However this mental processing takes concentration and is tiring.

Common usage defines **deafness** as happening when a person can't understand speech even when the sound is amplified through a device like a hearing aid, however, technically there are four levels of hearing loss.

With **mild deafness**, speech frequencies need 25 - 29 dB amplification. Some words will be hard to understand especially if there is background noise.

With **moderate deafness**, speech frequencies need 40 - 69 dB amplification. This is the amplification range of normal speech, so understanding a conversation without hearing aids is very difficult.



With **severe deafness**, speech frequencies need 70 - 89 dB amplification. Even with the use of hearing aids, speechreading and/or sign language is needed to communicate.

With **profound deafness**, speech frequencies even above 90dB amplification can't be heard. There may be an inability to hear any sound at all or lack of hearing within the speech spectrum of sounds.

Deaf and severe hard of hearing people may have speech problems, unclear speech or none, and difficulty understanding others' speech. Often they learn other ways of communicating - speech-reading, which includes not just lipreading but also reading the tongue, teeth, cheeks, eyes, facial expressions, gestures, body language and anything else that gives clues as to what the person is saying, and sign language which uses a series of hand movements and total body expression. In New Zealand, New Zealand sign language, NZSL is preferred. Different countries have their own signs.

Hearing loss affects social, language and communication aptitude. The absence of hearing or any of the five senses of sound, sight, taste, smell, touch, shapes brain development and a person's contextual knowledge of their world. Language is often mistakenly equated to just speech, which is an oral to aural cognitive function, but it also includes manual to visual functioning, which is sign. Children born deaf or who have lost hearing before they learnt to babble sounds or understand speech rarely learn to speak language. If a baby is born into hearing families who don't know sign language, spoken language development is slow. If the baby is born to signing parents, then language development isn't delayed. The child's language is sign. Some parents choose to provide their deaf baby with hearing aids or cochlear implants and so their child acquires spoken language.<sup>4</sup>

Spoken language cues a child to socially appropriate behaviour. Severe hearing loss children with delayed language development also experience delayed social development and are susceptible to social isolation if they don't attend a deaf school or a deaf unit attached to a normal school. Those children who identify with Deaf culture, use sign language and feel less isolated. However, if their parents don't sign, isolation is felt in the home. Deaf with capital D is used to refer to people who identify with Deaf culture. This culture of no hearing, is not based on family culture or ethnicity. It is a communal culture similar to Māori culture, wherein individuals consult with their group to make decisions. There is pride in their culture.<sup>5</sup> It helps the person to

accept deafness positively, with an identity shift from hearing loss to a reframing as Deaf Gain.<sup>6</sup> They don't think of themselves as having lost hearing, they don't know any different.

Some deaf children who don't use sign language become isolated from both hearing and non-hearing peers' social circles - the in-betweens. This affects them into adulthood. Labels and words can have a profound effect on a person. Terms picked up in casual conversation or in media, deaf and dumb, deaf mute, hearing impaired are derogatory and focus on what people can't do and implies something that is substandard, damaged and needs fixing. A person with hearing loss is not less, just different.

Post-lingual deafness occurs after a person has learnt speech. This hearing loss is usually gradual but can be sudden. The causes are diverse - medical side effect, infection, disease, trauma, age, genetic late on-set. The person may use hearing aids, receive a cochlear implant, learn lipreading and speechreading. They face challenges in the workplace, socially and often need time to come to terms with the changes this loss has imposed upon them and to adapt. Feelings of isolation, loneliness are common and sometimes depression. Miscommunication can strain relationships. For married couples, divorce is not uncommon when one partner loses hearing.<sup>7</sup>

New Zealand's hard of hearing who have not learnt New Zealand sign language and immersed themselves in Deaf culture, have a sense of belonging to neither the Deaf nor the hearing cultural worlds. This may result in them having a difficult time establishing a satisfying cultural and social identity.<sup>8</sup> However, when I listened to my responders share their stories and testimonies of experiencing God's presence in their lives with me, we discovered familiarity with each other's experiences. This is mutually therapeutic because it gives a sense of belonging to, and a recognition of a connection that identifies with an in-between culture - a blend of Deaf and hearing yet having unique qualities.<sup>9</sup> For these responders, it seems relationship with God has been strengthened through adversity. Acting like a catalyst, when church community is failing them, they seek God in experiences outside it. Richard Rohr suggests adversity invites a person to move from what he calls the first half of spiritual life journey where self-forming and serving occurs to the second half, to soul serving, where life is lived out within God's love.

This is not a loss but a gain.<sup>10</sup> Society may view deafness as a disability, a loss that needs fixing, but by reframing deafness as a way of being that enhances perceptions, perspectives, and insights that are less common to the majority of hearing persons, we can come to realise what a valuable asset the Deaf and hard of hearing person can bring to our understanding of how gracious God is in the world and to our churches. God allows no barrier to stand in the way of relationship with His people. The ability to speech-read, involving whole bodied listening using all five senses, can heighten awareness of finding God in the ordinary everyday experiences. The physical silence of hearing loss, enables access to other forms of silence. My responders have all found the treasure of enriching, intimate relationship with the Trinity in contemplative silence. Thomas Merton, cited in *Blessed Silence*, wrote, 'We cannot really hear God without silence.'<sup>11</sup> This reframing of 'disability' as life gain not loss is expressed too by Schulz's research participants. They found their disability a life learning experience and believed God gave their lives meaning and purpose through their disabilities.<sup>12</sup> It is encouraging to learn of these examples of the gifts to be found in adversity.

Spiritual direction has much to offer those with hearing loss.<sup>13</sup> Without having any prior knowledge of spiritual direction, my responders listed 'text book' qualities of a spiritual director. Most expressed the need for a director to have empathy with hearing loss. Quoting my responder John, 'The greatest help came from people who showed a caring understanding of my problem. They listened.' In spiritual direction, the director is challenged to empty self of their own will so they can become receptive to God's divine will. It's a time of kenosis. To achieve this, the director's cultural world view and their own experiences need to be put aside temporarily so that they can really BE with the person they're accompanying. This is interpathy, but is it achievable?<sup>14</sup> Frequently we are unaware how our culture influences our responses to others. If the director is perceived as being insensitive or judgemental, this can become a huge barrier to meaningful relationship. In a spiritual direction session with a directee with significant hearing loss, successful communication requires the efforts of both director and directee. Even with active listening strategies like speech-reading, good hearing aids or a cochlear implant, the directee will probably still require the director to use communication strategies. It is unrealistic for the director to be expected to know all about the issues of hearing loss, but having some prior awareness offers a warm welcome. Of course, it is always wisest to ask a directee how communication can be better facilitated and the need to clarify may happen often during a session.<sup>15</sup> As in all cross-cultural communication, in this way there is a bridging of the gap between the different cultural experiences of director and directee which though challenging can be so mutually enriching. Appendix 1 offers some suggestions on how to facilitate better communication.

There is more to a person than their hearing or lack of it, so although we don't focus on the ears, there are possible common topics to be aware of when working with such a directee because of the hearing loss - grief and loss, isolation and culture, justice and discrimination (unemployment and low income is common amongst the deaf), strong feelings of anger.<sup>16</sup> For the Deaf, lack of hearing is not the problem, it is the community which causes disability. Ableism is pervasive and stifling. It is everywhere. This is why Deaf culture is important to its members. They can live in a way that's unique to them.<sup>17</sup> For the hard of hearing, their issue also is probably not their hearing loss, but the pain of exclusion and isolation caused by negative attitudes, unwillingness or unawareness of their greater community and church towards their needs for inclusive, effective communication.<sup>18</sup> Scripture can also be interpreted to convey a lack of cultural insensitivity by painting a negative picture of deafness. Reinke offers a thorough resource to use for insight to explore these biblical misconceptions within the spiritual direction session.<sup>19</sup>

#### **Recommendations for Ways of working with a person with hearing loss:**

To compensate for loss of hearing the person's other senses are well developed. Offer visual ways of working, for example, Interactive Drawing, dreams, collage. Perhaps engage the sense of touch with use of clay, play dough, sand tray work, and/or offer movement. Some resource material is referenced.<sup>20</sup>

Language needs to be simple, slow and clear. Adopt the vocabulary the directee uses.

Considerations need to be made on the physical environment, for example, lighting, seating. Appendix 1 offers more information.

Each person's story is unique and needs to be heard. Listening is a wonderful gift to offer.

#### **CONCLUSION:**

A spiritual director has this wonderful gift of being able to sit alongside a person in God's presence, listening to their story and guiding them to God. Because we have an inclusive God and because spiritual direction is an inclusive experience, a spiritual director can offer kindness and patience and be with the deaf elderly who need to communicate by writing down words. They can be with the Deaf but will need to know NZSL to communicate and they can be with the hard of hearing. This can be a mutually rewarding experience as

those with hearing loss, from necessity have developed a different way of being in the world that can find God in different but beautiful ways. Their stories need to be heard.

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## **Appendix 1: The Dos and Don'ts when communicating one-to-one with a directee with hearing loss:**

**Make sure your spiritual direction room has enough lighting.** Your hard of hearing directee will be relying upon lip-reading, facial expressions, speech-reading, body language and gestures to supplement their remaining hearing and improve communication. Face your directee directly, on the same level and in good light. Position yourself so that the light is shining on your face, not in the eyes of your directee. Sit directly opposite your directee at a comfortably close distance. Close enough so that they aren't straining to hear you and far enough so that your directee can easily switch focus between maintaining eye contact and speech-reading. If your directee has **unilateral hearing**, that is hearing only in one ear, try to speak more towards their hearing ear. They may cue you to this type of hearing loss, by turning their head away from you and to the side.

**Say your directee's name** before starting a conversation, or following a period of quiet prayer, so you can get their attention and they can focus. Wave or gently tap them if they don't hear you. Invite them to begin when they are ready. Ask them, 'When you are ready, you begin with what you want to share today.' They not only set the agenda, they provide the topic of conversation so there is no confusion. Utilise good spiritual direction skills of staying close to your directee's story. Use the vocabulary the directee uses.

Avoid assuming. For example, a nod may mean they are listening and following you, but does not necessarily mean they are in agreement.

**Minimise background noise.** The hard of hearing have a difficult time hearing over excessive noise. Speech frequencies get lost in a jumble of noise because their brain's ability to filter out background noise is diminished or lost. This is even further exaggerated in rooms with no carpet or curtains or with high ceilings. These rooms have poor acoustics and voices get distorted.

**Speak clearly, slowly, distinctly** at a normal level without shouting or using exaggerated mouth movements. Speaking too loudly can distort the words and make speech-reading more difficult. Also it's not uncommon for people with hearing loss to have reduced tolerance for loud sounds.

Keep your hands away from your face. Speech-reading requires a clear view of face and mouth.

Moustaches, beards can also mask facial cues.

Avoid talking too rapidly or using sentences that are too complex. Slow down a little and pause between sentences or phrases. Make sure you have been understood.

**Pay attention to your directee's cues.** If they look a bit puzzled, tactfully ask if they understood you. People with hearing loss sometimes feel embarrassed or get tired of asking others to repeat themselves

or to clarify. If your directee has difficulty understanding a particular phrase or word, try rephrasing what you said, rather than repeating the original words over and over.

**Beware of possible distortion of sounds.** Your directee may hear your voice, but still may have difficulty understanding some words. Many consonants sound the same, so mis-hearing the correct word can trigger misunderstanding. Write it out on paper if necessary.

**Write the important information down** when giving specific information, like an address, date or time for a meeting, or ask the person to repeat the specifics to you so you can make sure they got them right.

**Listening is exhausting.** Take into consideration that for the hard of hearing, listening is exhausting. They are working hard to hear. Towards the end of the session they may become tired and so their brain's ability to process the sounds and understand speech becomes more difficult. The same is true if they are feeling unwell.

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## **Appendix 2: Hearing Loss Statistics**

Hearing loss is a significant issue for New Zealand.

From the 2018 census, The National Foundation for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing estimated that 880,350 people or 18.9% of the population have hearing loss. Of these:

5% are aged 0 -17 years

23% are aged 18 -44 years

29% are aged 45-64 years

43% are aged 65+ years

A world report on hearing loss predicted that hearing loss will steadily increase.

For 60% of young people, hearing loss is preventable. Noise exposure to personal devices and a noisy lifestyle can cause auditory nerve damage. Education about this is needed. <sup>21</sup>

Speaking about the Deaf and hard of hearing community, the chief executive of the Foundation, was quoted in the NZ Herald, 27 March 2017 - '*This is the sector that has been the most neglected, and the greatest hardship I've seen, has been in this sector. People can't get jobs.*' <sup>22</sup>

Awareness within church communities needs addressing. Kevin Liebe writes:<sup>23</sup>

1. Attending religious services is listed in the top three most difficult listening situations for someone with a hearing loss. This alone can be one of the most damaging aspects of hearing loss on a person's quality of life.

2. Most churches have terrible acoustics for speech.

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### **Appendix 3: Technology to enhance communication for the Deaf and hard of hearing.**

Yes, the Deaf and hard of hearing can enjoy music.

My responder Barry, born with severe hearing loss, described how music draws him closer to God in prayerful worship. Despite being technically deaf, music that he plays and music that he 'hears' ushers him into Holy Presence. Barry doesn't hear the speech frequencies of sound, though powerful hearing aids now help, rather he feels the sound vibrations.

In 2000, Dr Dean Shibata, assistant professor of radiology at the University of Washington, demonstrated how this is possible. Using magnetic resonance imaging, MRI, he compared brain activity between Deaf and normal hearing volunteers.<sup>24</sup> His research showed the brain area of the temporal lobe involved in auditory processing became active for Deaf volunteers whilst doing certain visual tasks.

Then in 2001, Shibata's research sample of 10 Deaf and 11 normal hearing volunteers were subjected to hand vibrations. Both groups showed brain activity in the area that normally processes vibrations. However, only the Deaf group also showed brain activity in the auditory cortex. Our brains are flexible and adaptable and those of the Deaf volunteers had re-organised to compensate for hearing loss.

All sound is vibration. In the developing brain of the Deaf, sound frequencies felt equates to those same frequencies heard and so are processed in the same area of the brain, the auditory cortex. Not surprising considering that Deaf sign language is a visual not a spoken language. This means that music perception can be as real and as enjoyable for Deaf as it is for normal hearing people.

The quality of music perception for the Deaf and hard of hearing can be improved in a number of ways, for example, holding a balloon, or a half empty water bottle, standing bare foot in order to better feel the music vibrations. In 2014, a technological laboratory, Avnet developed a wearable torso harness with wrist and ankle bands which uses wireless communication to translate music into vibrations that give the Deaf wearer a surround body music experience.<sup>25</sup>

Technological auditory advances are rapid and are opening up new multimodal communication options for those who are Deaf and hard of hearing. Nancy Delich's research published in 2014, demonstrated how videophone technology in spiritual direction with a Deaf director and a Deaf directee can play an important role in providing quality communication thereby 'empowering a Deaf directee in their relationship with others and with God.' Her research participants used the words 'liberation, freedom, independence' to describe the impact of communication technology on their lived experiences.<sup>26</sup>



Zoom, a video cloud phone system providing video-phoning and online chat services, can be joined via a webcam or phone. In Zoom using the CC button, closed captions in real time can be added to meetings and webinars. To do this, a Communication Access Real-Time Transcriber, a CART reporter needs to be hired. The CC button can also be used to turn on automated live transcription for pre-existing text transcript. This technology removes communication barriers for the Deaf, offering them the freedom to communicate using their own manual - visual language, sign, instead of relying on a third person interpreter or the written word. For those with a severe hearing loss, captioned text enables better communication. Video-phoning is also available through FaceBook's Messenger Video and WhatsApp. Apple Inc created FaceTime for use on iPhone, iPad and computers running MacOSX. Microsoft offers Skype, though this has been superseded by Zoom. Smart phones, iPhone and Android, can now easily access software programmes, i.e. Apps, that translate spoken speech into written words and text to speech. The complex task of developing an App to translate from voice to NZ sign language is being investigated.<sup>27</sup>

Although advances in hearing aid technology mean aids can be programmed specifically for a person's hearing loss, background noise, distance from the speaker, and an environment with poor acoustics can affect hearing ability. Assistive Listening Devices (ALDs) can be paired with hearing aids and cochlear devices to overcome these challenges. There are many types of ALDs available including personal handheld amplifiers, like Pocketalker and Phonak's Roger Pen, with directional microphones to amplify voices and sounds. Bluetooth is a relatively short-range wireless communication technology that allows for the transfer of data between two or more electronic devices - cell phones, televisions, computers, tablets, hearing aids and cochlear processors. The technology uses radio waves set to a high frequency to transmit data without interference or security risks. Although this technology is evolving, generally it is still not suited for long range transmission in a large venue like an auditorium and places of worship. Cochlear processors and most hearing aids have a telecoil setting which enables the wearer to access Assistive Listening Systems, ALS. These systems can bypass challenging acoustics, distance and background noise by sending sound directly to the ears. They include a hearing loop which creates an electromagnetic field, an FM system and an infrared system, IR. The IR receiver can be worn around the neck on a lanyard and so avoid the need for headphones.<sup>28</sup>

Raja Kushalnagar, Director of Information Technology, Gallaudet University, Washington DC, writes, 'technology powerfully shapes human outcomes.' It offers Deaf and hard of hearing people opportunity for exposure and encouragement to experience greater interaction and inclusion with a wider community. For those with hearing loss, the benefits from learning how to adapt aural information to visual information are

empowering especially if their hearing counterparts can find the incentive to understand and adapt too. The technology is expensive. To make it affordable, Kushalnagar recommends that it 'should be funded as a social and public good.'<sup>29</sup>

Technology design is an ongoing, rapidly evolving process that is sensitive to consumers' changing needs and desires. Developer focus is often on features that are not important to people with hearing loss.<sup>29</sup> A Spiritual Director can support their directee in their use of technology and if necessary suggest consultation with an audiologist for better hearing solutions.

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