

Welcome to Our Silent World

Deaf people often are stigmatized by society—and even by the church. But deaf ministries accrosss the United States are using Spirit-led sensitivity to reach those who cannot hear.

A chill fills Minnesota's night air as about 30 people gather at Pleasant View Deaf Assembly of God in Spring Lake Park, a Minneapolis suburb. Animated conversations, pointing and hand movements punctuate the cedar-lined sanctuary. A young man laughs repeatedly.

"Obviously it's a Saturday," remarks Rod Smith—using sign language, or "signing"—as he observes the boisterous fellowship. "You enjoy Saturday?"

A hearing pastor called into this ministry because of his parents' deafness, Smith follows his question with a loud whoop. Though most can't hear it, they shout back.

Soon Dan Herod, another hearing son of deaf parents, is leading vibrant praise music that sends vibrations humming through the pews. Songs such as "Awesome God," "Look What the Lord Has Done" and "We Bring the Sacrifice of Praise" echo throughout the room. Many close their eyes or lift their hands skyward.

"Don't be afraid to use the gifts of the Spirit," Smith encourages the worshipers. "The Spirit of the Lord is here."

After the worship time Belinda McCleese, a deaf minister and conference speaker, asks the crowd how God has been speaking to people. One man describes the Lord bringing him an opportunity to reach the lost.

Another relates the pain of the impending 17th anniversary of his divorce and shares how the end of his marriage parallels his wandering from God for many years. Now the Lord is

inviting him back into His presence, he says. Returning to a pew, the man slaps hands with several well-wishers.

Later, one of the five African Americans in the congregation recalls her experience as a prodigal. But now, she says, she has an awareness of the Lord's continuing love. Five people surround her and lay hands on her. After their prayer she signs, "Thank you for loving me."

The woman's admission fits with McCleese's sermon based on Isaiah 54:10. McCleese reminds the audience how this verse assures us of God's unconditional, steadfast love. Using a modern illustration, she refers to seeing the movie Titanic and weeping profusely over the young man who gave his life for the heroine.

"How many of us are willing to stand in the gap like that?" asks the church's former associate pastor, hands and arms moving in fluid motion. "That's what agape love is all about. It's about the willingness to sacrifice for someone else. Agape wants no exchange; it refuses to look for applause or acclaim."

This animated scene is a contrast to church services the next morning in southwest St. Paul. Amid frigid weather, 14 people filter into the sanctuary at Twin Cities Deaf Church.

The quiet atmosphere seems to fit with the textured, white plaster walls and burnished wooden pews. When praise and worship starts, no music sounds. Instead, Bev Hill taps her chest, waves her hand and wiggles her fingers as she leads a song titled "Gone."

But the lack of audible melodies doesn't deter worship. As she moves on, Hill mouths some of the words. Others move their hands to silently declare: "He serves me, keeps me, wonderful friend of mine / Every day with Jesus is sweeter than the day before / Christ is the answer to all my wants / Jesus is all I need."

Despite the church's calm atmosphere, pastor Emory Dively speaks on a hot subject: the need to give. Using 2 Corinthians 9:6-10 as his text, he begins by discussing the pressures everyone faces to pay for the cost of living. The way his teen-age son drinks milk, he thinks it would be cheaper to buy a cow. Maybe when 15-year-old David goes off to college, he'll finally be able to afford a sport utility vehicle, Dively quips.

Next, Dively notes that some deaf people rely on pensions or other fixed incomes. And he insists it's spending habits not poverty that ultimately make the difference.

"The story in the farmer sows a little seed, and that's enough. Another sows a lot of seed, and when he harvests the crop, he can sell it for a lot of money. But who owns the seed? It's God's. Money is man-made, but it's God who takes care of us.

"When I grew up, I got a lot of things from the government and learned how to receive," Dively concludes. "When I became a Christian and learned to give, it was a new concept. Deaf culture is get, get, get. But that's not Christian culture. We give."

A Forgotten Mission Field

Despite differing worship styles, these two congregations symbolize America's deaf churches. Small, underfinanced and usually led by bivocational pastors, they struggle to convince hearing Christians that their world represents a vital missions frontier.

The deaf are one of the last groups to be reached with the gospel, says David Stecca, president of Deaf Video Communications in suburban Chicago. As an example, he points to the lack of missionaries heading overseas to target deaf audiences.

“Right now we’re still in an uphill battle to get the church to recognize the deaf as a mission field,” says Stecca, who is able to hear. “Getting the hearing world to understand there is a deaf culture which the hearing church does not reach is a concept most people don’t understand.

“I’ve had pastors tell me, ‘There are no deaf people; if there were they’d show up at my church.’ I ask, ‘If [they did], what would you do to minister to their needs? Read lips?’”

Sharon Berry, a member of Birmingham Community Deaf Church in Alabama, says the deaf community needs another 100,000 souls to both catch the vision and join the effort. A hearing child of deaf parents, Berry helped organize the fledgling Deaf Evangelical Agencies in Fellowship for Christ to better coordinate multiple outreaches. She sees a lack of resources and opportunities to interact with the larger body of Christ as symptoms of communication barriers.

“I look at people on the front lines and my heart grieves,” Berry says.

Kevin Babin, national representative for deaf culture ministries in the Assemblies of God, says Christians could take a major step forward by simply adding closed captioning to all videos.

“Their first choice would be The 700 Club in sign language, but they realize that may not happen,” says Babin, who is not deaf. “But the church as a whole, with anything they produce, could caption it. Youth, boys, girls, singles, adults—every group has deaf people. The church as a whole needs to improve reaching these people with materials.”

Nor does reaching the deaf necessarily call for arduous efforts, McCleese observes. She suggests that if concerned Christians are too busy to master sign language they simply learn a few basic sign greetings. They also can be more assertive in communicating, using a notepad if necessary.

“With deaf leaders, be supportive of the deaf pastor’s mission,” she says. “Deaf people need support and camaraderie; they need to bounce ideas off people. Without communication we lose a sense of ‘peerness.’”

Because it is difficult to ascertain the precise definition of deafness—which can be partial and is not requested on census forms—population estimates of the deaf vary widely. In the United States, numbers range from 15 million to 28 million. Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C., the world’s only liberal arts university for the deaf, pegs it at 20 million.

Worldwide, some experts place it at 78 million. But other ministries include in their count the hard of hearing, aging seniors or others with partial hearing ability, resulting in numbers as high as 364 million.

Mike Buus, a hearing man and president of Deaf Opportunity Outreach International (DOOR), a global missions agency based in North Carolina, favors a count of 25 million to 40 million profoundly deaf people. This is defined as those who have never heard, who often can’t read or write, and whose primary means of communication is sign language.

However, Buus says the important issue is not numbers, but that millions desperately need the gospel. Only 6 percent to 8 percent of the U.S. deaf population regularly attend church. Worldwide, the estimate drops to between 1 percent and 2 percent.

“If you took them all and put them in one place, there would be all kinds of agencies, missionaries and everyone trying to reach them,” Buus comments. “But because they’re scattered all over the place, they’re overlooked.”

Or at least hindered. Pentecostal missionary, pastor and educator Albert Linderman blames cultural misunderstandings for creating huge gaps between hearing Christians and their deaf brethren. For example, negative attitudes toward dancing

in some conservative denominations put deaf ministries at odds with their leaders, he says. Yet choreographed movements are a powerful means of communicating in deaf society.

Linderman, who can hear, has a doctorate in intercultural studies and extensively researches deaf culture. He says charismatics and Pentecostals often pose a significant barrier to winning converts among the deaf community. While much of the evidence is anecdotal, many people, particularly those in developing countries, view the deaf as needing healing. Linderman says this emphasis creates a harmful, paternalistic view.

The former Assemblies of God pastor reminds Christians that the deaf should be treated with dignity and allowed full participation in church life instead of a focus on their physical condition.

“A person who is deaf has developed cultural strategies which are part of the deepest level of the formation of the individual’s personality and self-identity,” he says. “To ‘heal’ their deafness would affect them on the deepest level of identity and would be detrimental to those who were either born deaf or became deaf at an early age.”

The founder of Oklahoma-based Deaf Ministries Worldwide is more outspoken on the subject. Gary Barrett, who lost his hearing at age 27, insists that 90 percent of the deaf do not want to be healed. He asserts that treating their condition as a handicap keeps many from converting to Christianity and points out that at Gallaudet University’s first-ever international deaf conference in 1989, one speaker remarked that religion is not considered a part of deaf culture or heritage.

“For many years the deaf have been looked upon as disabled people in the same way [others] view the blind, crippled and mentally retarded,” Barrett says. “When being approached in

this manner, the deaf have been very unresponsive to the gospel.”

Besides misunderstandings and miscommunication, other barriers keep the gospel out, such as a deaf person’s bitterness over past slights. Then there is the fear of losing control, which deaf bus driver Mike Fahley says is a major issue in his community.

“It’s a lack of understanding,” explains the resident of St. Paul. “I think [many among the deaf] don’t fully understand spiritual things. Most deaf people rely on vision. If they can see it, they are satisfied. But they don’t see Christ, they don’t see spiritual things. It’s hard for them to understand things inside.”

A Deaf Pentecost?

Trying to meet the formidable challenge of convincing the deaf community of spiritual reality are a small but growing group of dedicated pastors and missionaries, such as Emory Dively. A deaf minister and former president of Deaf International Bible College (since renamed Carlstrom Deaf Studies) at St. Paul’s North Central University, Dively in 1993 became the first Assemblies of God presbyter to the deaf community.

After a decade of serving as president of the college, Dively stepped down to return to a deaf church that had once had an attendance of more than 120. Pastoral turnover and other problems had caused it to dwindle to seven. He has since rebuilt it to a community of about three dozen. The numbers, he says, represent a plateau common to deaf congregations around the nation.

Dively hopes to establish a role model that will spur a thriving deaf church and to apply the theories he taught for so many years.

“It’s much easier at Bible college,” he gestures. “I traveled

all over the world and saw lots of things going on. We don't see a lot of success in America, and I want to see that happen."

A dramatic 1989 encounter Dively had with the Holy Spirit fueled his belief that revival among the deaf is possible. The Michigan native had experienced the baptism of the Holy Spirit at a summer camp in his home state in 1975, but didn't receive the gift of tongues.

However, three days after coming to the deaf college, Dively observed a woman in a prayer group expressing intense emotion with her hands as she prayed. Recognizing something unusual was happening, he resisted the Holy Spirit's moving. He had just become the president of the college and didn't want to be lying on the floor, moving around and out of control.

God spoke to him about his pride, he says, posing the question, "Do you want to do this the hearing way, by speaking aloud, or by moving your hands in a new prayer language?"

After yielding to the Lord, Dively danced in the Spirit for 20 minutes, though he says it felt like a moment. Afterward, he finally understood what being a Spirit-filled pastor meant. He had received the Holy Spirit, even though his tongue wasn't verbal.

"To me that was deaf Pentecost," he says, stabbing the air to emphasize his point. "God did this. He met me where I was. At that point, I felt accepted for who I was. Jesus had come and accepted I had gotten filled with the Spirit.

"At that moment I knew deaf churches would work around the world. I knew there would be a revival. People always say, 'There's not enough money, there's not enough pastors, not enough this or that.' But I knew, through this Pentecostal manifestation of speaking in tongues, that God's work was going to prosper among deaf people."

Dively's experience may seem unusual, especially to those in the hearing community, but it is not unique. Many deaf and hearing persons who minister in this community relate receiving the gift of tongues in this manner or observing others using new, unknown forms of sign language.

Deaf minister Belinda McCleese is another case in point. She received the baptism of the Holy Spirit as a sophomore in college.

Though verbal expressions welled up inside, she wondered about the reality of a visual tongue. After watching a woman use an unknown sign language as she sang, the former pastor opened herself up to the possibility.

"If I only speak, how would it be a sign to the deaf?" she asks. "If we could see it with our eyes, it would be a [confirmation]. The Lord allowed me to do this. It happened in the bathroom. I had to see my language [in a mirror]. I realized that's how other deaf people could 'hear.'"

A Divine Awakening

Even with the power of the Holy Spirit, the challenge to reach the deaf isn't easy, Dively acknowledges. Without widespread social networks or large crusades, the deaf must rely on friendship evangelism. But leaders have faith that these obstacles will be overcome and usher in a divine awakening among the deaf.

One of the mountains deaf Christians must climb while introducing the gospel to others is their peer group's lack of religious background. To address the problem, Twin Cities Deaf Church in St. Paul sponsors two weekly home groups.

"Deaf people say: 'What is Jesus? What is God?'" Dively explains. "They often have no heritage of church because of the lack of communication. So we expand this understanding of the basics of Christian faith. We do it in small-group

settings so the deaf people have a chance to interact a lot. And there's also an opportunity for developing leadership."

Leadership, or the lack of it, is another hurdle. Because he believes that the deaf themselves hold the key to introducing their culture to Christ, Dively thinks that for them to attend hearing churches is a waste of resources. He argues that mainstreaming the deaf in hearing churches, similar to a practice promoted in many school systems, only holds them back.

"If they go to a hearing church, they sit there, and the interpreter might be fine. They might appreciate what goes on. But there's no deaf leadership, no deaf worship leader and no opportunity to develop deaf leadership. They don't get an opportunity to use their gifts."

But there is an opposing view within the deaf community. Some believe that indigenous deaf churches are too risky. Besides a lack of finances, without training and skills needed to manage the day-to-day operations of a church, many have floundered. Deaf people wind up returning to a sign-language service, or they stop going to church altogether.

Still, the Assemblies of God favors the indigenous model. With 88 indigenous deaf congregations, it is the denominational leader in such works. Kevin Babin compares many attempts to meet deaf needs to a white Southerner passing out tracts to gang members in New York.

"He wouldn't understand the culture," says Babin, a missionary for the last six years. "The only way to learn the culture is to learn their language. The last time we did a survey, 90 percent of conversions [among the deaf] were happening in deaf churches [as opposed to hearing churches]."

The need for learning in a compatible environment is what led Ron Southwick to leave Youth With A Mission (YWAM) two years ago to start Deaf World Ministries in Titusville,

Pennsylvania. Southwick had worked in deaf missions with YWAM since 1994. But he favors teaching the deaf with sign language instead of using interpreters in hearing-oriented classes.

Though he can hear, Southwick got involved in deaf ministry gradually. After working with a couple of deaf people in California, he learned sign language at his brother's church after returning to his home state. There he met a deaf woman who told him a friend needed to accept Christ. When he asked why she didn't share the gospel with her, the woman replied, "That's the preacher's job."

"It was like the Lord tapped me on the shoulder and said, 'These people need what you learned in YWAM,'" he recalls.

But it hasn't been smooth sailing. The spiritual warfare is intense, Southwick says, and he suspects it was behind a motorcycle crash last summer that temporarily put him and his wife in wheelchairs. As a result of the accident, he was forced to cancel a six-month ministry-training class he had scheduled to begin last September. Seventeen prospective students have indicated an interest in enrolling this fall.

Southwick believes training needs to be duplicated in many other places. More missionaries are needed just to explain the basics of the Bible and other information so that conversions are valid. Commitment is also vital.

"Their culture is relational, and the long-term effects happen with long-term ministry, unless there is a support base there to help them," he says. "Short-term has some benefit, but long-term commitment to a work is what we are looking for."

Many in deaf ministry are optimistic, but they are also realistic. In spite of some encouraging signs, Gary Barrett of Deaf Ministries Worldwide feels that deaf ministries have lost ground in recent years. He attributes that partially to a change from treating the deaf as a distinct ethnic group to treating them as a downtrodden society.

While this is a common missions approach, he says an accompanying shift from hearing to deaf control in many ministries led to the retirement or loss of many hearing workers.

"The truth is, most deaf are being reached for the first time ever," Barrett says. "While hearing people in some countries have had a lifetime of hearing the gospel and have had several revivals, most deaf people haven't even heard the gospel for the first time."

But leaders in deaf ministry are taking steps to see that revival does occur in the deaf community worldwide, and there are some positive developments.

Two years ago the Assemblies of God appointed its first deaf missionary, who was sent to Nicaragua. In 1998, the Deaf Evangelical Agencies in Fellowship for Christ held its first meeting in Dallas. The group now networks about 40 organizations and advocates a comprehensive approach to evangelizing the deaf.

Deaf Video Communications in Wheaton, Illinois, plans to add a 5,000-square-foot technical center in the near future. Iowa-based Deaf Missions is also seeing increases in the use of materials it produces for the deaf, especially videos.

And deaf churches are growing in other parts of the world. Don Cabbage of the World Mission Society says his group is planning to start deaf churches in Fiji, American and independent Samoa, and has seen congregations grow in Brazil and Mexico.

"Everywhere I've been the response has been wonderful," he says. "We're in a position now where we need to train deaf men and women for the work. That speaks of awakening."

"It's starting now, like a flower in bloom," adds Southwick, who will be leading a witnessing team to the World Deaf Games

in Italy in late July. "The next thing will be to see the deaf reaching the deaf."

Results are still small, and there is much work to be done. But deaf ministry leaders hope it won't be long until the message of Christ is loud enough for all to hear.

Ken Walker is a freelance writer in West Virginia, and a frequent contributor to Charisma. Albert Linderman, JoAnn Smith and Laurie Johnson helped to provide sign-language interpretation.

Please Don't Ignore Us

The church must stop turning a deaf ear to the millions of people who cannot hear.

There are 56 countries that each have a total deaf population greater than 1 million. Worldwide, there are approximately 364 million deaf people. Nearly two-thirds of them are located in just 10 countries:

CHINA: 75.2 million out of 1.2 billion

INDIA: 60.4 million out of 1.0 billion

>USA: 16.6 million out of 278 million

INDONESIA: 12.7 million out of 212 million

BRAZIL: 10.1 million out of 170 million

PAKISTAN: 9.3 million out of 156 million

RUSSIA: 8.7 million out of 146 million

NIGERIA: 7.7 million out of 111 million

BANGLADESH: 7.6 million out of 129 million

JAPAN: 7.5 million out of 126 million

For each of these nations, this represents percent to percent of the total population.

Source: Justin Long, Network for Strategic Missions

Pastor Belinda McCleese now plans to become a counselor to deaf ministers.

Pastoring in the Minneapolis suburbs, Chicago's inner city and the expanse of California has given Belinda McCleese a wide-ranging view of the deaf church. Speaking to Charisma through a sign language interpreter, she says the deaf church's problems are not unlike those of its hearing counterparts.

"I think we're too busy focusing on tradition," says the Pentecostal minister. "The concept of lifestyle evangelism has been lost. People get saved and brought to church and left there."

A former high school basketball player and Catholic, McCleese accepted Christ as a teen through the influence of a fellow student. McCleese's friend had spent time in juvenile detention. But after accepting Jesus, she radiated joy.

Thinking it was a phase that would pass, McCleese visited her friend's room one night. After reading the Bible, the girl praised God, and tears streamed down her face.

"Why are you so happy, and I'm not?" McCleese asked.

"Because I depend on the Lord," her friend replied.

Later, at a youth group meeting, McCleese made the same decision.

The ministry leader says she felt the call to the pulpit while at Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C., at first thinking it meant she should become a pastor's wife. Still single after

14 years as a pastor and evangelist, she has faced discrimination because of her gender.

One of the most painful sources was a man in California she led to Christ. Although an eager participant in Bible studies, his troubled background led him to constantly challenge spiritual leaders.

Amid a slowly developing negative attitude, he grew cold and confronted McCleese, saying that "the Bible says women shouldn't preach." Her attempts to convince male church leaders to meet with the man failed. He finally left and joined a group promoting heretical doctrines, she says.

McCleese believes this fracture illustrates a common problem in deaf culture—people leaving the church because of broken relationships. Pastors struggle, too, which is the reason she plans to use her newly acquired master's degree to counsel deaf church leaders. She plans on continuing her traveling ministry schedule.

She encourages the deaf to reach out to those who aren't lovable or agreeable, such as the man who rebuffed her leadership.

"To allow the Lord to use you, that's missions," the expressive speaker told those gathered at a conference in St. Paul, Minnesota, last fall. "It's a marvelous challenge to listen to the Holy Spirit. I have the Lord in my heart, and I must put my needs aside."

McCleese says her culture retains a sense of strength, despite some of their weaknesses. The inherent hardships of living in a society that often doesn't understand or communicate with them brings a recognition of the need for mutual support.

She also sees a different mind-set among "visual thinkers." Expression through imagery involves more fusion in language, she says. Instead of just words, the deaf choose pictures that

merge their speech into a unique presentation.

Her vision for her culture includes a desire for a wholeness brought by an awareness and filling of the Holy Spirit.

“I hope Christians will understand how God created them, and that He desires to use their potential,” she says, “and see that their identity would be based on the fullness of Christ within them.”

Everyone in The World Must Hear

Gary Barrett is leading a bold evangelistic outreach to the 364 million deaf people worldwide.

Both Gary Barrett and his brother suffered a severe hearing impairment after childhood immunizations, leading them into years of speech therapy. They learned to function with hearing aids, but their parents forbade them to learn sign language. They didn't want their boys to be “abnormal.”

However, when Barrett was 27, a loud ringing noise sounded in his only hearing ear. After momentarily adjusting his hearing aid, he realized he was totally deaf. If he hadn't been a Christian, the now 47-year-old ministry leader says he doesn't know how he could have survived the ordeal; he had always tremendously feared becoming deaf.

Though Barrett prayed for healing, he believes the Lord used the tragedy to lead him into a neglected mission field.

“God in His mercy and grace got me through it and called me into deaf ministry,” says the leader of the Sulphur, Oklahoma-based Deaf Ministries Worldwide (DMW), which he founded in 1989. “There is no greater privilege than to be where God wants me to be.”

It also allowed him to experience the stigma of being deaf. After he lost his hearing, friends slowly drifted away. Even

some family members felt awkward in his presence. He has experienced discrimination and ridicule elsewhere.

Nowhere is the deaf world's financial struggle more apparent than in Barrett's plan to evangelize deaf culture worldwide during the next decade. His "Deaf Souls NOW!" campaign is an ambitious plan of videos, tracts, an animated gospel presentation on his ministry's Web site and discipleship materials for converts.

But of the projected \$1 million cost, DMW had raised only \$5,000 by last Thanksgiving. Part of the shortfall relates to a 1996 fire that destroyed a three-story Victorian home that had served as DMW's headquarters. The ministry has reopened its office, but it lacks \$100,000 to complete and furnish the building.

Although Barrett is licensed with the Assemblies of God, his Evangelism Training Center is interdenominational. Students from a variety of church backgrounds go on mission trips, act in dramas, teach and preach in local churches and work with students from the Oklahoma School for the Deaf in Sulphur. Barrett also reaches out to the latter as senior pastor of Good News Deaf Fellowship.

He estimates 400 to 600 deaf people have come to know Christ as Savior in the last 11 years through DMW's outreach. But he sees that number as modest in comparison with what is coming.

He recalls his wife, Rhonda, receiving a message from God one summer in their chapel. As she prayed, the words from Matthew 24:14 echoed in her mind: "Then the end will come."

"I sincerely believe that the deaf will be the last 'nation' to be reached with the gospel, and then the end will come," Barrett says. "That is why the devil fights so hard against deaf ministry. He knows they will be the last to be reached. Then his time is up!"

The Mother of Sign Language

Most people don't know that Lottie Riekehof, author of the world's leading textbook on sign language, is a Pentecostal.

When she set out to compile a sign language dictionary, Lottie Riekehof never dreamed it would sell 1.2 million copies—or that it would become the best-selling book in Gospel Publishing House's history.

"That wasn't the point," says the 80-year-old member of Arlington Assembly of God in Virginia. "It was to help sign language students learn more easily. It tells how to make signs for specific words and concepts. Interpreting is a separate art."

Still, when she completed *Talk to the Deaf* in 1963, she showed it to Claude Qualls, then pastor of the suburban Washington, D.C., church. Suggesting they dedicate the book to the Lord, Qualls asked the Arlington congregation to pray that God would use it around the world.

The book remains in print, although supplanted 15 years later by a newly illustrated version, *The Joy of Signing*. Riekehof had planned to slap a "part two" label on the update. Her editor insisted on a new title.

"One morning it came to me," the author recalls. "I'm sure it was dropped into my heart by the Holy Spirit. Since then, many deaf people have told me how happy they are about the title. Signing is so important to them."

But in 1945, the German native had never heard of signing when she was invited to join the staff of Calvary Gospel Church in Washington, D.C. Her duties included overseeing a home for Christian working women, where she met a deaf church member. After Riekehof took notes for her during a church service, the woman asked, "Why don't you learn sign language?"

“What’s that?” Riekehof replied.

Learning a few symbols each week, she later studied at Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C, the world’s only liberal arts college for the deaf. Her knack for the art led to an invitation to join the staff of Central Bible College in Springfield, Missouri—despite lacking a college degree. She earned her bachelor’s degree while teaching sign language. During her 20-year tenure in Springfield, there were always deaf students at the Assemblies of God school.

After completing graduate work, including a Ph.D. at New York University, Riekehof returned to Gallaudet as dean of women. Three years later she stepped aside to develop an academic program for interpreters, remaining until her retirement in 1990.

Riekehof was a pioneer. Her courses at Central Bible College and Gallaudet University were the first time sign language was offered for credit. But her greatest joy is seeing graduates ministering to the deaf and spreading the gospel.

“I still keep in touch with many of my students,” she says. “It’s very satisfying to know they have accomplished so much.”

So is discovering that, besides hearing people learning from it, deaf children use The Joy of Signing as a reference tool to learn new words.

Riekehof says the deaf are still routinely overlooked, but the situation has improved since her career began. Many churches provide interpretive services or facilities for deaf congregations, or both.

“I would like to see deaf Christians growing in the Lord and becoming active in being active in winning other people to Christ.”

Lessons From The Playing Field

My eyes were opened to the realities of life as a deaf person when I attended a deaf-only football game.

Two-thirds of the way through an interview, Emory Dively, the deaf pastor of Twin Cities Deaf Church in St. Paul, Minnesota, surprised me with a word-association game. Through a sign language interpreter, he instructed me to tell him the first word that jumped into my mind.

"Deaf," Dively signed.

"No hearing," I replied.

"So, that's a disability," the pastor continued. "Now I'll give you another phrase and add something to it: deaf culture."

After groping for a response, I shrugged, "Handicapped."

Dively seized on the word, explaining how most people equate culture with a language group and their clothing, customs or food. If hearing people rethink their view that deaf people are handicapped, it will help improve deaf ministries, he explained.

"Deaf people have a different culture, customs, way of doing things and social networks," he said. "To think of that as a culture brings a more positive view. Hearing people are trained to think of deafness as a negative thing."

The next day I witnessed a lively community at the Minnesota State Academy for the Deaf in Faribault. It was homecoming, and what the small school lacked in plush facilities it made up for in enthusiasm.

Dively circulated through the crowd, smiling and greeting people with the flair befitting a national Assemblies of God presbyter and leader of the state's Association of Deaf

Citizens.

People with cameras and videocameras prepared to film the day's activities. Others strolled by with dogs on leashes or wore baseball caps advertising sports or a favorite product. Several men sported earrings.

Though a football game was in progress on the field, the sidelines were a beehive of activity. Groups of three, four and five gathered to talk in sign language, frequently exchanging hugs, laughs or knowing smiles.

Deaf culture doesn't mean total silence. Many fluent signers can hear, but have deaf parents or children. Others have partial hearing, such as a girl on an open-house tour who told a friend: "They changed everything around in my room. I'm disappointed."

Yet, as a newly inaugurated minority, I found myself becoming more unsettled as the afternoon passed. My discomfort began before the game, when a young man walked up and started to ask me something in sign language.

Dively intervened, explaining that I'm a hearing person. Giving me a condescending smile and a wave of the hand, he quickly turned away. The snub was mildly upsetting. But it didn't bother me as much as an enforced period of silence after a pastor got engrossed in other conversations. Soon, I was looking at my watch, anxiously awaiting our departure time.

As we climbed into our car for the return to St. Paul, I scribble to Dively on a notepad: "I felt disoriented, not knowing what people were saying. Is that the way you feel in the 'hearing' world?"

"That is what I wanted you to experience—reverse role-playing as I experienced in the hearing world—for a better perspective," Dively wrote back. "If deaf people attend a

hearing church, they would experience 'lonely.'"

It's a feeling of emotional coldness and confusion. Perhaps this kind of consciousness raising is what more people need to better understand deaf culture. —Ken Walker

Planting Seeds of Revival in Deaf Culture

Deaf Opportunity Outreach International builds overseas training centers for indigenous deaf-church planters.

Neither Mike Buus or anyone in his family is deaf. He has only a cursory grasp of sign language, but he became president of Deaf Opportunity Outreach International (DOOR) five years ago because of his interest in missions—and a heart for evangelizing deaf culture.

Formerly part of United World Mission, the nondenominational, evangelical agency became independent last year. By then, it had already shifted gears from a domestic teaching and church-starting agenda to training deaf Christians overseas.

The decision came one year into Buus' term. Seventy-five people connected with DOOR wanted to be missionaries, but none could generate financial support. Communication barriers hindered their fund raising.

"The single biggest obstacle the deaf community has is people not treating them like any other unreached people group," Buus explains. "I said, 'If we can't send deaf missionaries, what if we go into foreign countries, give them training and let them be evangelists in their own country?'"

After two years of preparing curriculum, the organization started its first center in Nairobi, Kenya. Its intensive, one-year program helps fill a gap in places such as Africa, Asia and Europe, where there are virtually no opportunities

for the deaf to attend Bible college, Buus says.

The center in Nairobi graduated seven students in its first two years. Another in Hungary started last September, while schools in the Philippines and Puerto Rico began their current class in January.

D00R hopes to open a center in India next year to address a growing spiritual hunger there. Deaf people currently gather weekly in nearly two dozen places despite a lack of trained spiritual leaders. Crowds range from a dozen or two in smaller villages to more than 300 in New Delhi.

"They know about Jesus but not much about Christianity yet," Buus says. "In many cases they're mimicking what they see their parents doing on Sunday morning."

The center in Nairobi is seeing fruit. A congregation there run by nine deaf people averages 100 to 140 in attendance and has planted five new churches. Leaders envision starting 26 additional missions in strategic areas.

When more centers are in place, Buus expects a similar snowball effect.

"My experience is deaf people are very receptive because they're curious about what religion is all about," Buus says. "When [Christian] workers say, 'We can explain it,' deaf people say, 'Go for it.'"