

The Claggett Statement
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I

WE BELIEVE:

God created the world and saw that it was good. God created women and men to live with dignity and self-respect as children of God. God wants people to live together with justice, equality, freedom, and mutual love.

Instead of trusting God's plan, people made themselves into false gods, oppressing each other and creating injustice, wars, suffering, and death.

But God did not give up on them (us). God sent Jesus as a visible sign of God's liberating love.

Jesus grew up poor. He loved and intimately associated with poor and oppressed people. He knew their suffering and their needs. In relationship with these poor and oppressed ones, Jesus showed us God's compassionate love and God's desire for us all to live with justice and freedom.

Instead of accepting Jesus' way, people rejected the Truth. And Jesus suffered the depths of human pain, degradation, and death.

But praise be to God who enabled Jesus to break through the shackles of deceit and death, and raised Jesus to new life. The resurrection of Jesus gives us great hope that we, empowered by the Holy Spirit, too can break through the shackles of arrogance and oppression.

II

WE RECOGNIZE

a variety of experiences of hearing loss. Some people are deafened as adults; some as children; and some are deaf from birth. All have suffered.

Many deaf people share a common culture, a common language (American Sign Language or "ASL" in the United States and many parts of Canada) and a common heritage of oppression. These deaf people, collectively, are often called the "Deaf community."

Deaf people have long been shackled, often by the "good" intentions of hearing people who haven't understood them. Deaf people lack meaningful representation and leadership in the major educational, professional, and political institutions that affect their lives. This lack grows out of both the intentions and ignorance of the hearing people in power and the "successfully oppressed" condition of Deaf people who experience themselves as powerless and incompetent.

Beginning at a young age and continuing into adulthood, Deaf people characteristically view themselves as intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually inferior to hearing people. This low sense of self-worth is widely known in the psychological studies of deafness.

The majority of Deaf children have hearing parents who did not want to have a Deaf child, and who grieve over their child's deafness. Large numbers of these parents do not accept their child's deafness for a long time. Some never accept it. Many, perhaps most, of the medical, social service, and educational institutions which "serve" Deaf children and adults encourage the parents to resist acceptance of the child's deafness. They are encouraged to try in every way possible to make the child look and act like a hearing person.

This regularly takes one of two general forms: The first is the extreme oralist position of the Alexander Graham Bell Society which insists Deaf children can and should learn to hear and speak. The second is the so-called "total communication" position of the majority of educators in the United States and Canada. This second approach tolerates the use of signs because they are considered necessary for the acquisition of "language." "Language" in this context always means "English." The type of signing usually prescribed in this context is some form of signed English.

Deaf children attend school in a variety of educational settings. In residential schools for the Deaf, the teachers typically are hearing persons who do not understand the children's peer language, do not know American Sign Language, and believe the children to be intellectually and psychologically inferior to hearing children. The primary focus of their educational program is the acquisition of spoken, written, and/or signed English. Often the children do not understand the teachers. Most "communication" is one-way: teacher to student.

Most Deaf children mainstreamed into public schools are partially or completely isolated from groups of other Deaf children like them. Thus they do not experience the comforting reassurance of sameness and peer group identity. Most schools do not provide interpreters for these children and they miss much or most of what is being taught and said in their classes. Many try to catch up by frantic reading outside the classroom.

Some Deaf children do have access to "interpreters." However, most interpreters are not even minimally conversant in American Sign Language. The majority simply try to code the spoken English into a signed form of

English (which many argue does not make meaningful sense). Most Deaf children have very limited skills in English, and have a hard time understanding a (presumably) signed form of English. However, even those who have good reading and writing skills often say they have a hard time with English-based forms of signing.

Most Deaf adults do not understand most “interpreters.” But Deaf people have become accustomed to not understanding. They tolerate it, usually because they blame themselves---blame their own presumed ignorance. With so few interpreters fluent in ASL, the majority of Deaf people have never seen spoken English properly interpreted into a form of communication they readily understand. Also, because most interpreters are unable to accurately convey the meaning of an ASL message in spoken English, most Deaf people have never had the opportunity to express themselves freely in a hearing context, and often have been misinterpreted in important settings. These instances of misinterpretation have furthered the myths that Deaf people are inferior, inarticulate, immature, etc.

Most (signing) Deaf people marry people who are also Deaf, and socialize primarily with other Deaf people. The language they use for such social interaction is usually American Sign Language. However, most of them do not believe that their indigenous language is really a “language,” but rather it is an inferior, make-do form of communication. This is what they have been taught by their hearing teachers, counselors, speech therapists, audiologists, and other professionals. ASL is rarely, if ever, taught to any Deaf children in school. Instead, they learn it from Deaf children of Deaf parents, older students, and Deaf adults. Generally, Deaf people do not realize that their community has a “culture” and a “language” which is central to that culture.

III

MANY DEAF PEOPLE

reject the Church because its representatives have been as oppressive as their teachers and therapists. “Religion” has become one more place where Deaf people feel they are told to stop being “Deaf” and try to be “hearing.” They must try to fit into hearing forms of worship with its heavy emphasis on music, its wordy English liturgies, and its love for ancient phrases---all through an interpreter they frequently can’t understand.

Unfortunately, even in the separate Deaf churches and/or programs, there has been little development of indigenous worship forms that reflect the experience of Deaf people. All of this has led to alienation and/or superficial involvement in the Church. Clearly, the situation has not encouraged any real understanding of God and the message of Jesus. Exceptions exist, of course, but unfortunately the exceptions are all-too-few.

The Church generally has not looked upon Deaf people as a potential gift or resource to the broader Christian community. The Church has considered Deaf people to be “handicapped” and, relatedly, has thought Deaf people to be intellectually and morally inferior, unable to learn properly and/or spiritually inhibited by the lack of adequate language. Burdened with such stereotypes, Deaf people have not been accepted as equal members of the Body of Christ. The Church has not recognized Deaf people as persons equipped with theological and cultural gifts with which to enrich the life of the whole Church.

IV

WE BELIEVE

that the message of Jesus is a message of liberation—not liberation from deafness, per se, but liberation from all forms of oppression, which include the denial of basic human needs for things like unencumbered communication, healthy human interaction, self-esteem, positive recognition of one’s culture and language, and meaningful education.

We do not view deafness as a sickness or handicap. We view it as a gift from God, which has led to the creation of a unique language and culture, worthy of respect and affirmation.

We believe that it is necessary to stop trying to communicate the Gospel through hearing people’s eyes, through their interpretation and understanding of the Bible, and through their methods. Deaf people have a right to know the Gospel in their own language, and relevant to their own context.

We believe that American Sign Language is indeed a language---and a worthy and powerful vehicle for expressing the Gospel.

We believe the Holy Spirit is leading all of us to work for a new day of justice for all Deaf people. We believe the Holy Spirit is leading Deaf people to develop indigenous forms of worship that can adequately convey the praise and prayers of the Deaf Christian community.

We stand in solidarity with the oppressed peoples of the world. We believe that God empowers the oppressed to become free. By the act of attaining their own freedom, the oppressed can also help liberate those who have oppressed them.

We believe that God is calling the Church to a new vision of the liberation of both Deaf and hearing people. This vision is deeply rooted in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and in an understanding of the spiritual, socio-economic, political, and educational struggles of the Deaf community.

We believe God has given Deaf people a unique perspective and unique gifts. The Body of Christ remains broken and fragmented while Deaf people are separate and their gifts unknown and strange to most Christians. We believe God is calling us to wholeness.

We commit ourselves to this vision, and trust God's Spirit to lead, to strengthen, and to empower us in this task. And we call upon Deaf and hearing Christians alike to join together in this struggle toward freedom.