

Deaf Faith Fellowship @ Revival Prayer Fellowship

By Sarah Phua and Grace Phua

“Deaf people have a voice even though they can’t hear themselves. What they hope for is that people will try to understand them.” –Pastor Barnabas, 66, Deaf

The hall is filled with just shy of 50 individuals ready to worship. The visual technician puts on the first slide, the congregation stands to worship, and with the resounding beat of the drums, begins to sing to the lyrics projected on the screen. This is a typical Sunday worship session, except that at Deaf Faith Fellowship (DFF), everything is in Sign Language. Replete with uniquely created roles like drumming, visual artistry, and cafeteria services, DFF is a far cry from its humbler origins—functionally dependent on World Revival Prayer Fellowship (WRPF), an independent Pentecostal church founded in 1973.

Back then, worship services were held in a rented house at Lengkok Saga with a hearing majority and a handful of Deaf members. Since interpretative services were not yet available to them, Deaf members relied heavily on sermons transcribed hastily by hearing members on paper. Barnabas Phua, now a Deaf Pastor with WRPF, led the Bible study for the Deaf at St. Andrew’s Cathedral and Bible House for six years. He then trained in Bible and church leadership at Christ for the Nations Institute in Texas, USA, for two years before being ordained as a pastor in DFF in 1986.¹

The Challenge to Be Heard: Deafness in Society Today

The D/deaf² comprise a minority of Singaporean society, so much so they are often unseen just as they are unheard. Community for the D/deaf, amongst other challenges, is not easily found or obtained. As hearing folk, we can easily source out interest groups over a multitude of readily available platforms—activities held at the neighborhood Community Centre, social apps, and so on. It is often overlooked how inaccessible all these avenues are for the D/deaf.

This challenge of finding community was amplified even further with the closing of the Singapore School for the Deaf,³ which may well have foreshadowed the eventual spatial disintegration of the D/deaf community and, perhaps, signaled the beginning of an end of sign language usage among the D/deaf. What may eventually also diminish is the influence of older D/deaf role models and the community in which Deaf culture is propagated. It will become harder for the D/deaf to enjoy enriching social relationships with other D/deaf peers cultivated from a shared group identity.

In society, the D/deaf struggle with comparatively diminished and limited work opportunities and remuneration, which is exacerbated by the loneliness they often experience at work. Most older D/deaf engage in mundane blue-collared jobs which require little to no interaction with others, and this often

leaves them struggling with social isolation. Those who work in offices remark that they are commonly ignored in everyday office interactions or secretly gossiped about. Furthermore, the stigma of deafness can be equated with other stigmatizing labels that amplify disability rather than empower the D/deaf to succeed at utilizing their strengths.

It is against this social backdrop that the members of DFF experienced a heightened appreciation of church community, a haven where such disruption is restored. In DFF, sign language is the main medium of communication, thereby resulting in experiences that are vastly different from their everyday life. Being understood and having a sense of belonging is no longer a struggle. While it is common to find interpreters acting as intermediaries between the D/deaf and the hearing, DFF stands out as an exception to this rule. Today, a new hearing visitor attending DFF's service would be surprised by the novel experience of stepping into a service run independently by its members and pastor—almost all of whom are profoundly deaf. These members feel comfortable in a dedicated hall they can call their own, a community space that is increasingly hard to find.

Pillars of a Deaf Church

DFF turns 39 this year, and over the course of its history, its leaders have anchored their ministry on several important pillars:

Fellowship and Ownership

The Deaf community is kept thriving when there are social functions which serve as platforms to maintain contact with other Singaporean D/deaf. It may be safe to say that face-to-face interaction ranks high on their want-to-do list, for sign language is rich in gestures as well as facial and body expressions. The idea of fellowship in community is especially important as the increasingly fragmented network of D/deaf people in Singapore today makes it harder to identify and engage them effectively. Cultivating and crafting a community that is fueled mostly by the efforts of the D/deaf—as opposed to the hearing—makes a profound difference.

Mobilized to Serve—The Deaf Leading the Deaf

Creating such a community requires, for its longevity, members who are equipped and mobilized. Members have to be constantly trained and engaged in activities such as Bible study, prayer meetings, and mission trips. Instead of simply being pew warmers, members are empowered to be an active part of church life. Approximately eighty percent of DFF members serve in one ministry or another.

Mobilizing members also serves a greater purpose for its community—it makes the Word far more immersive and accessible to the Deaf. For example, it is with this same spirit that DFF runs its own Bible study/cell group sessions—armed with the goal of empowering the attendees, albeit in smaller groups, to share spiritual nuggets gleaned from one another. Conducting a Bible study with the aid of hearing interpreters is a radically different experience from one done fully in sign language, especially for deaf learners who are not as proficient in English. It is not simply about an act of translating words or concepts, just as how a translation cannot express fully the spirit behind the work in its original language. Indeed, there is something else at work when the fervency of Bible learners is matched with the explosive use of Sign.

Methodology and Liturgy for Engagement

While DFF aspires to train members to minister and serve in different areas of church, it faces challenges not uncommon to other deaf ministries in Singapore. Much work and patience are required in hand-holding D/deaf members who lack the confidence to execute what they are trained to do. Perhaps this stems from a deep-seated sense of disability imposed on them by society. A redemptive way of D/deaf engagement

seeks creativity; in DFF, cafe duties, ushering, and visual technician duties require set-up, tear-down, and many processes in-between. Instead of standard operating procedures detailing what has to or cannot be done, pictures are used as visual aids in documenting the steps to accomplish such tasks. The music team comprises a worship leader and a lone drummer, the latter of whom is trained to feel the vibrations produced by the drum. Whilst it may seem like a deluge of off-beat noises to a hearing ear, these Deaf drummers thrive in this way of serving, as do the members of the congregation who, despite being profoundly deaf, seem to hear and respond to these rhythmic and uninhibited drum beats in worship.

In DFF, sermons are usually prepared and delivered by Pastor Barnabas or Deaf preachers, with the occasional interpreter for hearing guest preachers. The sermons prepared by a Deaf or hearing preacher differ in two distinct ways. Firstly, a Deaf preacher would focus largely on the Word's specific applications to the D/deaf. Such sermons, framed as practical steps that enable members to visualize God's outworking in their daily lives, are more easily digested, as opposed to in-depth exposition expounding on complex theological concepts. Secondly, the length of the sermon is typically shorter than one preached at a hearing service. Prolonged focus on the pastor's gestures without sound can be a strenuous exercise, so each sermon should be kept optimally to thirty minutes. This rule of thumb typically applies to other areas, including organized activities. Activities should be kept simple while intentionally engaging their keener senses of sight and touch—a game of charades, touching physical objects, puzzles, or show-and-tell.

Missions to Neighboring Countries

When it comes to missions, Pastor Barnabas has always lamented, “More can be done!” What Jesus said to his disciples in the past that “the harvest is plentiful but the workers are few” (Matthew 9:37 NIV) still rings true today. While the registered number of Deaf individuals in Singapore is approximately 5,500, the number is estimated to be about 13 million throughout Southeast Asia (SEA).⁴ Unlike in Singapore, deaf children in developing countries rarely receive any schooling, much less biblical training. In these predominantly Muslim and Buddhist societies, Deaf churches are especially few and far between.

Pastor Barnabas' passion for missions started 30 years ago in Indonesia. He has since helped plant three deaf churches in Medan, Laos, and Vietnam. He quips, “the deaf churches in SEA are hungry to learn.” The D/deaf he encounters on mission trips are eager to be trained not only in biblical knowledge but systemic processes behind running a church, resources which the Deaf ministries in Singapore have easier access to because of their comparatively higher level of education and close affiliation with the hearing Church. The Singaporean Deaf Church is well positioned to be an Antioch of SEA, but before she can be that, the burden of resourcing strategic, longer-term solutions falls on the overseas churches themselves.

Focus on Loving and Being Loved

Parents of the D/deaf bemoan the difficult parent-child relationship that they share, and understandably so, for approximately 90 percent of deaf children are born to hearing parents.⁵ Strained relationships are mostly due to the lack of understanding between both parties. One of the first challenges that most D/deaf face is being born into a hearing family. Unable to speak the language of the home, they are often misunderstood and isolated, having little to no connection to a D/deaf community. As a result, they do not learn a formal sign language until they are old enough to attend school—that is, if they have the opportunity to attend at all. It is no surprise that most D/deaf would feel alienated by their own families which have been shaped by a society that does not understand their disability nor have the patience to understand or accept them as they are.

It is therefore heartening to know that the deaf in DFF, through their shared experiences, are encouraging one another to work towards developing stronger family bonds. Since strained family relationships often have histories going back years or even decades, conflicts are not always easily resolved. However, with community-focused sermons on loving each other as God loves them, as well as an intentional focus

on emotional health, the Deaf are finding that they are slowly healing from years of hurt or ill-feeling towards their families.

Interaction with the Hearing

Ultimately, even though the Deaf enjoy their own community, interactions with the hearing are integral to the whole religious experience. A powerful way to foster a thriving D/deaf community is to encourage hearing persons to take up sign language classes. Facilitating these sessions not only increases awareness of a D/deaf community, but also promotes regular and meaningful face-to-face interactions that lead to stronger community-building and reciprocal relations of caregiving.

For Pastor Barnabas, it was the God-ordained guidance of key hearing leaders, together with the support of church leadership that propelled him to embark on his first mission trip to Medan and his biblical studies in the United States. The hearing will always have an indispensable part to play in interpreting and explaining nuanced information that may otherwise be inaccessible for the D/deaf.

Conclusion

Close interactions with the members of DFF have shown us that the Deaf community has proven itself to be a resilient, loyal group of people whose collective identity is very much shaped by the support and direction they have been given. The growth of the church and the faithfulness of its members are testaments to God's goodness in their lives, and the generous giving of their founding church.

The challenges faced by D/deaf ministries are not uncommon across Singapore. Ministry to the D/deaf is often resource intensive despite their comparatively smaller size. The D/deaf comprise a diverse group of individuals with a wide range of needs and interests, resulting in a perpetual need for interpreters and hearing church members to serve as bridges between the hearing and D/deaf ministries. We cannot discount the impact of good leadership on strengthening the D/deaf ministry. Vision casting, strategy, and wise direction-making are leadership gifts which prove invaluable in the shaping and growth of a healthy Deaf community. As Jesus sought out the lost, the lame, the blind, the deaf, children, and the poor, we would do well to similarly seek them out so that we may learn to share life just as our Life Giver has done.

Permissions

This chapter originally appeared in *Enabling Hearts: A Primer for Disability Inclusive Churches* published by the Koinonia Inclusion Network based in Singapore.

Joni and Friends is grateful to the author and Koinonia Inclusion Network for giving their permissions for this chapter to appear in *Beyond Suffering: A Christian View on Disability Ministry*. You can purchase a copy of *Enabling Hearts* through the following link: <https://graceworks.com.sg/store/category/pastoral-resources/enabling-hearts-a-primer-for-disability-inclusive-churches/>

You can learn more about the Koinonia Inclusion Network by going to <https://kin.org.sg/about>

Notes

1. DFF was birthed in 1981 and formerly known as “Faith Fellowship” before being renamed in 1993 for clearer identification by deaf ministries worldwide.
2. For this case study, we will be using “Deaf” with a capital D in reference to people who identify as culturally Deaf and are actively engaged with the Deaf community. They have typically experienced hearing loss since childhood and share a common culture with other Deaf, as well as use a shared sign language as their first language. In contrast, “deaf” with a lowercase d is used in reference to people with the medical condition of hearing loss, who may or may not identify as culturally Deaf. “D/deaf” is used to encompass both groups prior mentioned.
3. Ang Hwee Min, “Pre-schoolers with hearing loss to get support at Mayflower Primary MOE kindergarten from 2022”, Channel News Asia, November 12, 2020, accessed on 11 January 2022, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/children-hearing-loss-mayflower-primary-moe-kindergarten-678451>. The government announced the closure of the Singapore School for the Deaf in December 2017, following its last intake in 2010. Subsequent deaf students are posted to designated mainstream schools, like Beatty Secondary School, Mayflower Primary School, where they have to adjust to environments in which oral methods of learning and communicating are primary.
4. “Population of Asia (2020),” Worldometers, accessed on April 10, 2020, <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/asia-population/>. The World Health Organization estimates that two percent of the population in Asia Pacific countries experiences disabling hearing loss from childhood. Based on the SEA’s estimated population of 668 million, the estimated population of deaf individuals who are likely to be born with disabling hearing loss stands at about 13.38 million.
5. “From deaf to hearing,” SingHealth, accessed on 18 September 2020, <https://www.singhealth.com.sg/news/faces-of-healthcare/from-deaf-to-hearing>.

About the Authors

Sarah Phua and Grace Phua are hearing daughters of Reverend Barnabas and Angela Phua. Reverend Barnabas is an ordained pastor of Deaf Faith Fellowship (of World Revival Prayer Fellowship, WRPF), the first fully deaf congregation in Singapore. Sarah is currently studying at the Biblical Graduate School of Theology and is a part-time pastoral staff at WRPF, where she worships with her husband, Barnabas Ramesh. She is also the co-founder of Genesis Consulting and Solutions, a professional accounting and consulting firm which seeks to embody and redeem Christian values in the workplace. Grace is the author of *Mommy, Can You Hear Me* (a children’s book on living with deaf parents), and is the founder of O’live & Write, a copywriting and design agency that provides creative content solutions for businesses on tight budgets. They also have two brothers, Samuel and Sean.