

Article

# Deaf Liberation Theology and Social Justice

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**Abstract:** Deaf Liberation Theology is a branch of theology that has been developed over the past twenty years, with the book *Deaf Liberation Theology* published by Ashgate in 2007 (Lewis 2007) as a focal point of this development. This article briefly looks at the roots of Deaf Liberation Theology in both the concept of Deaf people as an oppressed linguistic minority and the principles of Liberation theology as an engaged contextual theology using the methodology of the hermeneutical circle. It then seeks to examine the impact of Deaf Liberation Theology in practice over the past decade, in particular the impact especially through increasing self-confidence and self-esteem so that deaf people themselves feel empowered to work for social justice. It will use personal reflections by a number of deaf individuals in the UK as source material, and look at how this experience and developments in Deaf studies might develop into the future to further develop social justice.

**Keywords:** deaf theology; liberation theology; practical theology; contextual theology; social justice; intersectionality; feminist theology; disability theology

## 1. Introduction

Deaf Liberation Theology, like other Christian theologies of liberation (for example those from Latin America, or feminist theology) has always been intended to be transformational in its impact—not just a nice theory, but a practical subject that would lead to increased social justice for deaf<sup>1</sup> people within the church and within the world. The methodology of theologies of liberation, rooted in experience and sociopolitical analysis, and leading to action assumes, as Phan (2000) states that “any genuine liberation theology anywhere must fight against all forms of oppression”. Petrella (2006) agrees; “Latin American liberation theology was born with the promise of being a theology that would not rest with merely talking about liberation but would actually help liberate people”. However, Petrella argues, the social and political changes in Latin America, and especially the demise of socialism, have led to liberation theology losing sight of its historical project and simply “rehashing their rereading of theology” leading many to conclude that liberation theology is stagnant or even dead. I am very aware of these criticisms with respect to Deaf Liberation Theology, and as a reflexive practitioner in the field of deaf ministry have often wondered whether Deaf Liberation Theology does have any practical impact on the lives of deaf people or whether it is simply a nice idea that may affect the field of academic theological enquiry with its particular perspective but does not change anything in the lives of those deaf people who encounter it.

However to investigate a question such as ‘does Deaf Liberation Theology actually help liberate deaf people?’ is a challenge. I could point to the work I’ve done in my own context using the principles

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<sup>1</sup> For many years a convention has operated in deaf studies and related areas whereas a capital D is used to indicate Deaf people as a linguistic/cultural minority and lowercase d to indicate deaf people as those experiencing hearing loss or impairment. However Kusters et al. (2017) argue that in a changing academic environment, as debate moves on, this is often an unhelpful and unintentionally oversimplifying distinction and suggest that lower case ‘deaf’ is used for all deaf people unless there is a good reason to continue to use Deaf (for example Deaf Liberation Theology is capitalized in the same way that Black or Feminist Theology might be).

of Deaf Liberation Theology and talk about how it's made a difference to the local Deaf church, perhaps backing this up with interviews with members of the churches, however this method would be fraught with difficulty. Quite apart from the risk of overestimating the impact I've had (similar to the risk of using the method of theological reflection as a way of highlighting the 'rightness' of your position noted by (Thompson 2008)) my role as a leader of the congregation would make it very difficult to conduct any form of face to face interview with members of the churches because of the difference in power. I may be deaf along with them, but I am a deaf person with education and in a position of authority (what (Ladd 2003) calls a subaltern-elite researcher). Both (Morris 2008) and (Sutherland and Rogers 2014) conclude that written questionnaires are completely unsuited to the researching the views of deaf sign language users and therefore I could not even give out questionnaires to be handed back anonymously. In addition, the period of time I have been here has been long and the pace of change has been necessarily slow so while members of the churches might say 'oh yes, there's been a practical impact on my life' they may not remember what the impact has been or be able to articulate it in so many words. So I was left with a question to be answered, but in search of a method to approach it. Much of my work in the field of theology has been as a participant observer, and therefore I decided to watch and wait and see what emerged of its own accord, not driven by my questions.

In 2013, a conference on Deaf Perspectives in Theology was held in Telford, UK. This was a follow up to a conference with the same title 10 years earlier, but this time all the presenters were deaf. For the afternoon session several deaf people were invited to present their own reflections on the theme of 'empowerment'; and two in particular struck me as relating to my question of what practical impact Deaf Liberation Theology had or could have on the lives of deaf people. Bloomfield (2016) and Silo (2013) both signed about the development of their deaf identity (a key concept in deaf liberation) in the context of their faith and it was clear that for both of them while they had initially thought that deaf identity and deaf liberation were either optional for or inimical to the development of their faith, they had come to conclude that they needed both to be empowered within the church. While neither of them explicitly referenced Deaf Liberation Theology the overlap in discourse because of the shared concept of deaf identity was strong enough for their presentations to be an independent witness to one form of practical impact of Deaf Liberation Theology. A third witness emerged in the same year during a course looking at ministry in the deaf community when students were encouraged to produce a reflection on their own journey to faith and to ministry. One deaf student, Myatt, explicitly referenced Deaf Liberation Theology as being significant for her—not only in the development of her faith, but in the development of her self-confidence and deaf identity to the point where she felt she could explore her vocation to ministry and leadership within the church and this was another spontaneous testimony to the impact of Deaf Liberation Theology. Continuing involvement with Myatt as mentor and supervisor for her BA thesis led to several other conversations and discussions when she referred several times to how important she felt Deaf Liberation Theology was, not only for herself, but for the deaf community. As her reflections have not been printed in any form (unlike Silo and Bloomfield who rendered their presentations into written English for the published conference proceedings) I have had to check my recollection of what Myatt has said with her and ask her permission to include her reflections in this article.

This methodology, of participant observer of a very small sample has both strengths and weaknesses. It does avoid at least some of the risks highlighted above (of my research simply finding the answers I wanted because I want Deaf Liberation Theology to have an impact) and for me the fact that the three women independently presented similar reflections on the impact of deaf liberation on their lives suggests that others may have similar experience even if they cannot articulate it (or do not have the opportunity to articulate it). The weakness of participant observer is always that in qualitative field work there is some subjectivity involved due to the researcher's personal involvement and relationships and this is particularly true as a deaf researcher into deaf theology which is a very small field. (Morris 2008; Lawrence 2009) who also adopt a participant observer method for their

theology argue that this relationship does not prevent critical reflection but in fact may be an essential component in the whole process of critical enquiry in its particular field.

After outlining Deaf Liberation Theology for those unfamiliar with it (and engaging with a few critiques made since publication of the key text *Deaf Liberation Theology* (Lewis 2007)), this article intends to examine the impact of Deaf Liberation Theology in promoting social justice in general and justice for deaf people in particular. Following the methodology of liberation theologies it will do so by looking at stories and experiences of Deaf Liberation Theology in practice from the deaf community in the past decade, especially my own experience and the experience of three other deaf women in positions of leadership within the church in the U.K. As the subjects of this discourse are female as well as deaf, some intersectional analysis will be attempted, although this is limited by the current paucity of research on intersectionality of disability or deafness and gender (or indeed intersectionality of deafness and anything as named by Kusters et al. (2017)). Finally, questions can be posed in terms of what we can learn from this experience, what needs to be done differently, where can we go next and how can we foster more activist orientated intersectional analysis in the field of deafness and disability and religion.

One of the key principles of liberation theologies is positionality—the explicit identification of where are we speaking from. So I need to conclude this introduction by locating myself and the context of this article. I am a deaf BSL user (but with some hearing in infancy which was lost in childhood). I consider my first language to be written English as I acquired English as a native speaker (and can still speak and lipread English with some effort which has significance in the deaf world), and later acquired BSL to a high level of fluency so I now am effectively bilingual. I have been a priest in the Church of England for twenty years; after serving in a number of different roles I have settled in ministry with the deaf community, with my work both focusing on local churches in Liverpool (deaf people in parish churches and all people in sign language using congregations) and nationally in supporting the development of ministry in the deaf community. While I have some involvement in wider Church of England ministry (most significantly as a tutor on the local part time course training people for ordained and lay ministry) my commitment to grassroots ministry with the deaf community is a key component in my freelance work as a liberation theologian.

Phan (2000) identifies, ‘doing’ liberation, by being involved in and committed to the ongoing struggle for liberation, inclusion and social justice (which are related, although perhaps not identical, as Russell (2015) distinguishes between the three) as an essential prerequisite for ‘doing’ liberation theology. In addition to exposing me to a huge range of stories and experiences this commitment gives me, as a theologian and participant observer, the opportunity on a daily basis to see how my theological perspective impacts on the life of deaf people, not only in the church, but in general. Phan’s (Phan 2000) assertion that “theology is never neutral” (which is repeated time and again by other theologians of liberation—see (Lewis 2007) for discussion of this point) and that the theologian is never socially uncommitted poses the question of which (whose) cause the theology is supporting. I choose to support the cause of social justice for deaf people, not just as a political decision, but as a decision that is driven by my faith whereby Christianity is good news for the—however the poor are defined. However I am a Christian priest, and while I will cheerfully push the boundaries of Christian theology, I continue to engage with theology as a practitioner within an institution and as a follower of the way of Christ and that perspective also influences my theology.

It is also key for my commitment to Liberation Theology that I am deaf myself. While I am privileged by comparison with many deaf people—as a bilingual highly educated professional—I still live with many of the issues of belonging to a minority group that is vulnerable both to the prevailing political ideology which (in 2017) limits the support I rely on to function effectively when relating to the hearing Church and also to the everyday frustrations around being deaf in a hearing world. It is one of the issues around being deaf (or indeed disabled) in theology that we need to assert the need for deaf or disabled theology to be done by deaf or disabled people themselves. So much theology relating to deaf issues is about deaf people by hearing people or professionals. This is discussed in (Lewis 2007)

but it is still an issue both in the wider world of deaf studies (Kusters et al. 2017) and theology. Much of the work published referencing deaf people in theology in the past decade (e.g., Morris 2008; Lawrence 2009, 2013; Meller 2011) has been by hearing people who may identify themselves as such, but who are still writing from the perspective of outsiders. However there has been some recent theological work produced by deaf people. Shrine (2011) a deaf priest published a short booklet on ministry with the deaf community as part of the influential Grove pastoral booklets series. He also edited conference proceedings from the second 'Deaf Perspectives in Theology' conference held in 2013—and unlike the first conference of this name, all presenters were deaf themselves (Shrine 2016a) Myatt, a deaf Baptist minister, produced a BA thesis on deaf theology (Myatt 2015). Finally, from the USA, VanGilder (2012) a deaf academic and Methodist minister uses Liberation Theology principles to explore doing theology with deaf women in Zimbabwe, bringing a Global South perspective into the discussion. As I will discuss in this article, some of this new deaf theology is explicitly influenced by Deaf Liberation Theology, others the influence is more implicit but still traceable. And the more deaf (and disabled) people doing (and publishing in whatever form) theology, the more social justice—in the sense of widening participation, action, inclusion in all levels of society to those previously excluded (Russell 2015)—is being served.

Not all the sources I quote in this article are deaf—many are hearing liberation theologians from a variety of racial and social backgrounds, genders and orientations—but I rarely use the work of hearing people writing about the deaf church (cf Lewis 2007)—and if I do so I identify them as such. Myatt, Bloomfield and Silo—the three women whose journeys, in addition to my own, provide the source matter for reflection on how Deaf Liberation Theology promotes social justice—are of course deaf BSL users. All four of us are white and live in the UK. Two of us are Church of England priests; one is a Baptist minister, and the other a lay woman whose Christian journey has not been bounded by a single denomination.

## 2. Deaf Liberation Theology—What Is It?

Phan (2000) suggests that the development of liberation theology was the most influential movement (in the church) of the twentieth century. He asserts that liberation theology is better referred to as liberation theologies—a diverse and wide ranging collection of theologies with differing emphases, viewpoints, analyses and aims depending on social context (including, but not restricted to, feminist theology, womanist theology, *mujerista* theology (Latina women's liberation theology), Queer theology, African American theology, Latin American theology, *minjung* theology (from the struggle of South Korean Christians for social justice), disability theology and deaf theology) but sharing similarities of methodology. He argues that this shared methodology includes three elements: analytical, hermeneutical and practical mediations of epistemology.

So Deaf Liberation Theology is one of the new methods of doing theology in which "liberation is a kind of horizon against which the whole Christian faith is interpreted" (Phan 2000) with 'liberation' being defined differently according to context. VanGilder (2012) and also in (Lewis and VanGilder 2017) points out that often 'liberation' is taken to mean liberation from socio-economic oppression as a result of poverty, gender, ethnicity or social class for example whereas deaf people experience oppression more as a result of the medical view of hearing loss and the perception of us as unable to do certain tasks. In *Deaf Liberation Theology* (Lewis 2007) Lewis analyses deaf experiences in the light of the often well meaning 'benevolent oppression' of deaf people by welfare workers, teachers, clergy and others using concepts from deaf studies. This analysis is consistent with liberation theologies use of social sciences as a 'dialogue partner' (Phan 2000) to identify the roots of oppression (and therefore "de-ideologise" the customary interpretation of Christian faith and its language that hide and legitimate oppression or social injustice"). Unlike many other liberation theologies, Deaf Liberation Theology does not make particularly strong use of Marxist tools of social analysis, although Ladd (2003) who provides much of the analytical framework of deaf studies makes use of Marxist theories of class to understand different strands within the deaf community, but focusses on the insights of disability

theory around the ‘medical’ and ‘social’ models and the understanding of deaf people as a linguistic minority of people who use sign language. Morris (2008) is one of many theologians who assume that liberation theology is by definition tied to Marxist analysis (and therefore use this as a critique of its limitations with respect to deaf people for example), however Phan (2000) argues that Marxism is merely one of many tools of social analysis used by liberation theologies and is therefore not essential.

Another key part of the methodology of liberation theologies shown by Deaf Liberation Theology is the use of what Phan (2000) calls “stories from the underside of history” or accounts from forgotten and oppressed people “by which the stimulus for social transformation may be nourished and sustained” (p. 49). *Deaf Liberation Theology* (Lewis 2007) included a chapter on the history of the Deaf Church in the UK challenging the perception that ministry among deaf people was a mercy-driven hearing initiative and showing how deaf people started their own churches and often challenged the dominance of hearing ways back in 19th century UK as well as including many stories and experiences from deaf life in society and the church. One criticism that has been leveled at the use of liberation theology as a structure for doing deaf theology is that it is a ‘hearing thing imposed on deaf people’ (see for example (Green 2012); although Green is a hearing minister working with the deaf community his arguments for what he calls deaf eye or deaf culture ministry, an analysis of how power operates in the deaf church and the need for deaf ‘philosophers’ (his word for theologians) are constructive and insightful but he does not seem to go the whole way of accepting the need for a total transformation of the unjust structures of church and society—which would challenge his position in the deaf church). However the historical researches (Lewis 2007) demonstrate a nascent liberation theology in operation among those early deaf Christians and certainly show a mindset that valued deaf experience, sign language and looked to the biblical imperative to challenge injustice. The theoretical framework of liberation theology may be ‘hearing’ in origin, but the roots of this understanding of deaf experience and the consequent hermeneutic of bible and Christian tradition are definitely there in the deaf community itself.

Having clarified the roots of oppression (which helps to define the meaning of liberation in social, mental, emotional, psychological and spiritual terms and outlines what social justice might look like from a deaf perspective) Deaf Liberation Theology proceeds to use the “hermeneutical circle” (Segundo 1976) to look at the bible and Christian tradition in the light of these insights, and in particular to apply an ‘exegesis of suspicion’ to produce a new hermeneutic—a new way of interpreting the bible and tradition. Deaf Liberation Theology looks at many hermeneutical questions, for example, how deaf people are referred to in the bible, how deaf people might relate to Jesus Christ and uses sermons and articles and poems by deaf people (both historic and contemporary) to argue for a new hermeneutic that affirms (against the hegemonic discourse) that deaf people and sign language are created equal to hearing people and spoken language by God, and that they can fully engage and participate in every level of the Christian faith and the Christian church and that access to and inclusion in the Christian church and faith and working for full justice for deaf people in society isn’t an added on luxury for mainstream churches who have the time and inclination but an integral part of what it means to be a follower of the way of Christ.

The third essential aspect of the methodology of liberation theologies, growing out of the analysis and hermeneutics is activism: a practical commitment to transform an unjust world through the theology that is done. In Deaf Liberation Theology the focus so far has been on working to transform the church, to challenge the structures, beliefs and practices that oppress deaf people, to affirm distinctive deaf ways of following Christ and in doing so empower deaf people to take their part in working for greater social justice in the world.

### 3. Impact of Deaf Liberation Theology on Social Justice and Deaf Women in the Church

Whenever we talk about social justice in a faith context we often have in mind ‘the church’ (or another faith community) helping disadvantaged people in their local community, for example running a food bank, doing up the church hall to be a community space (often the only remaining

community space in deprived areas), and running programmes of welcome, drop ins for all sorts of vulnerable people (those with mental health issues or sex for example), offering advice and support in areas like debt management or education. Russell (2015) details many such projects. Often these projects have been transformational and promoted liberation, inclusion and social justice in a variety of ways. Sometimes the people who are 'giving' time and money to these projects to help others find themselves engaging in dialogue with the 'receivers' and being challenged and changed, and sometimes the 'receivers' of the projects aims take up the chance to become involved as volunteers themselves, and gain skills and ownership of the projects. These life changing dialogues and movements are examples of what Morisy (1997) calls "glimpses of the new world to which he (God) invites us to contribute and this is the special experience of the church of the poor" (p. 120). Morisy and Russell are both very clear that this kind of two way transforming dialogue and movement is an important part of what faith groups working for social justice are about, in part to encourage a continual questioning of what is being done so that the 'help' being offered isn't simply collaborating with and perpetuating the unjust structures that cause the issues in the first place. The 'benevolent oppression' of the church and social work analysed in *Deaf Liberation Theology* (Lewis 2007) largely arises from welfare policies and processes that divide people firmly into 'givers' and 'receivers' and do not challenge or change structures so that 'receivers' can be truly empowered to participate in decision making processes and ultimately take on leadership themselves.

However, what Morisy doesn't mention and what Russell refers to only in passing is what do we do about the injustices in the structures of the church? How can we look outward to transform the world without 'putting our own house in order' (Forrester 1989 quoted in (Russell 2015)). The 1985 report by the Church of England *Faith in the City* (Archbishop of Canterbury's Commission on Urban Priority Areas 1985) called for a dual focus in work for social justice by the church—it not only needed to challenge the public policy that was creating huge issues in what were then called Urban Priority Areas (UPAs, now referred to as Areas of Multiple Deprivation, AMDs) the church also needed to look at its own life and whatever was alienating people in UPAs from the Church of England.

Deaf Liberation Theology (Lewis 2007), by contrast, recognizes that need to challenge and change the structures and the theological understanding of the church so that deaf people (and disabled people, and all other minorities) can not only gain access to all that the church offers its people, but also become empowered to truly participate in all areas of church life, free to follow Gods call for their lives, free to use their skills and interests in the service of God and others, free to develop as disciples and leaders of the people of God. Shrine (2016b) in discussing what true 'inclusion' of deaf people in the hearing world might mean concludes that it has to mean justice within the church as well—a challenging and changing of structures and assumptions so that the visual world of deaf people is not swamped by the aural world of hearing people but that both groups accept that full equality is something they need to work at. He suggests social justice for deaf people means full access to the world around them—and that this means changing society to enable deaf people to be fully participant members (as opposed to changing deaf people to fit into society) and that the church can be a place where this equality and justice is modelled. However, to work for this social justice in the church requires both deaf people and hearing people recognizing their essential equality and working together to identify and dismantle the barriers to inclusion. It is not something that one or the other groups can do alone. This is very similar to the vision of gender equality in society and the church that Baker (2014) argues for—a vision that recognizes the differences and diversity among men and women, but defines equality as the belief that all people have the same value, regardless of any other defining characteristic such as gender, ethnicity, sexuality, disability or age—and an equal society is where everyone is able to flourish.

One of the barriers to reaching this aim of true equality, true social justice is that many deaf people have been so disempowered over the years that they have come to accept the dominant narrative that 'deaf can't' do things; that deaf people need to be dependent on hearing people, because hearing people do things better and that sign language is always inferior to spoken language and that there are

no deaf leaders and no deaf history (Shrine 2016b) One interesting example of how embedded this narrative is among the deaf community from my own ministry has been the reaction to me as a deaf priest; the first deaf priest many of the Liverpool Deaf community had encountered. Some refused to believe I was 'properly' deaf because in their minds deaf people don't have the ability to train as priests, others who accepted I was properly deaf thought I was somehow a lower class of priest and given the choice they want a hearing priest with interpreter so that funerals and christenings are done 'properly'. The 'deaf can't' narrative is sometimes so strong that it stops deaf people from seeing that I can be both deaf and a priest and do the job equally well as any hearing person. Striving for true social justice these embedded narratives among deaf people have to be (gently) challenged so that deaf people can start to see that they can be equal to any hearing person.

However other deaf people have been excited by having a deaf priest—and appreciated the leading of worship by 'one of their own'—not just worship that is accessible through sign language but worship that is rooted in the life and experience of being deaf (explicitly or implicitly) and which lifts that up to God as a fit subject for prayer and celebration. And the more deaf leaders we have in the church, the more deaf people will have that experience of seeing that 'deaf can'—and if 'deaf can', maybe they can too. So one aspect of the work of Deaf Liberation Theology in the Christian Church has been this focus on trying to encourage and grow and support deaf people into leadership within the church—sometimes as trained and licensed ministers, but other times simply bringing deaf people to the front of their own churches (both sign language using churches, and hearing churches with interpreted services) as much as possible, enabling and empowering participation and decision making by deaf people at many different levels. A new generation of deaf ministry is growing, where the deaf people take the lead, and work in equal partnership with hearing people across the whole church rather than as assistants to hearing people. This development is happening mostly at local level at present, and mostly among sign language using congregations (separate 'deaf churches' originating from the 'deaf centres' which for many years provided all welfare support and community meeting place for their local deaf communities) but the hope is there that the confidence and skills thus developed can be used in hearing churches at a wider level as well and truly bring about a more just church. (Kusters 2017) talks about the importance of deaf teachers as role models for deaf children in developing their confidence, esteem, pride in being deaf, social and cultural capital and strategies for dealing with a non-signing world and generally preparing them for adulthood and providing an opportunity to increase social justice through deaf adults with the confidence to ask for it and work for it. Deaf adults can be role models for deaf children not only through what they say, but through the fact that they are the same (and as most deaf children have hearing parents they will not have had this experience at home)—a shared ontological basis of life that leads to a deep identification and connection. While the deaf adults I work with are long past their childhood, the 'deaf same' role model as a leader has a similar potential to develop their social and cultural capital and challenge their 'deaf can't' mindset to become one of 'deaf can'. Coleman (2010) writing from the perspective of a hearing Black woman leader suggests that the '7 deadly sins' of women in leadership include such things as 'limiting self-perceptions', 'inadequate personal vision' and 'colluding and not confronting'. These are all rooted in a lack of self-confidence and self-esteem, similar to the experience of deaf people, and she highlights the importance of role models and mentors as means to overcome these (and other issues). Kusters and Coleman agree with me from their different perspectives that these are not 'problems' or 'failings' of an individual, but arise from the social experience and construction of a minority community and therefore require communal, collaborative work and challenging the social narrative to overcome.

Another key factor in developing the confidence and self-esteem of deaf people using Deaf Liberation Theology has been through the explicit use of shared deaf experience, deaf stories, visual-tactile culture in preaching, teaching and worship. Myatt (in a number of conversations) talks of how her first experience of culturally deaf worship had a huge impact on her. Not only could she fully understand what was being signed from the front (she had experience of attending BSL

interpreted accessible worship), she felt, for the first time, that she had an identity as a deaf person and that this identity was important to and valued by God and therefore to be valued by her as well. The act of worship that had such an impact on Myatt had been deliberately designed according to the values of Deaf Liberation Theology—celebrating deaf people, deaf culture, deaf heritage and sign language and for Myatt was part of an ongoing process of liberation at all levels from the effects of growing up deaf in a hearing world—she felt freed in physical terms (free to follow Gods call to ministry in the Baptist church), freed in emotional terms (with the growth in self-confidence and esteem based on learning to value deaf experience and BSL) and freed in spiritual terms (recognition of her full equality before God and learning to value herself as a deaf child of God). She also talks about how Deaf Liberation Theology has made a difference to her faith; helping her to understand and make sense of her struggles with her faith (related to worshipping in a hearing way in a hearing church all the time)—and in particular that she wasn't alone and that there was hope that things could be different. Such a hope is key to inspire people to work for social justice—the hope that things can be different. The absolute key value of stories that include us was highlighted by Moges in her conference presentation based on her chapter in *Innovations in Deaf Studies* (Moges 2017). What the presentation in Sign Language bought out that is only hinted at in the written text was the emotional impact of discovering a book that covered two (Deaf and Queer) of her three intersecting identities (she is also Black). The implication that there are others like me, and there is hope came over strongly in her sign.

Myatt's experience of this deaf culture act of worship, with its impact, was the start of a ten year process of working out what this all meant for her in practice which turned out to be doing a number of courses (starting with a theology course taught in BSL—the 'Chester Course' which was significant for many of its graduates as a stepping stone into further theological training), gaining a degree in theology and being ordained as a minister in the Baptist church—their first deaf BSL using minister and who has a specific role to develop opportunities for deaf people in the Baptist churches which she does along the principles of Liberation Theology. Another interesting step along the way for her was when she used Deaf Liberation Theology principles and methodology to do her own theological research for her BA degree dissertation (Myatt 2015)—analyzing the stories of the deaf people she interviewed (about experiences of loss and how they were or were not supported to deal with them) she came to a series of realizations about her own experience in both social and theological terms that helped make sense of it and gave her more material to build up her own theology for the future—a theology that she puts into action on a regular basis.

Myatt is someone who makes an explicit link to the impact of Deaf Liberation Theology on improving social justice; others might not accept the link, but who also testify to the importance of a strong sense of deaf identity and an awareness of deaf culture and deaf history as being significant in the development of their faith and associated development of the self-confidence and self-esteem that comes with a strong sense of deaf identity. Bloomfield (2016), a deaf BSL using priest, for example writes an account of her journey into the deaf community (as she was bought up orally in the hearing world like so many of her—and my—generation) and her discovery of the deaf community as a place of belonging that the hearing world could never be. This discovery helped increase her self-confidence and self-esteem and inspired her to work for more social justice for deaf people, encourage more deaf people to become leaders in the church or otherwise follow their calling from God using their gifts and skills. She doesn't underestimate the challenges that face deaf people training in a hearing environment, but is able to encourage and support people from her own experience and belief through the 'deaf same' power of the role model as discussed above.

Silo (2013) is another who writes of the importance of a strong deaf identity in enabling her to live well in a hearing world, and to work for a more just society. Her journey has been different to both Myatt and Bloomfield in that she attended Deaf Christian Fellowship (DCF) groups where the emphasis was on a more 'evangelical' type of Christian teaching, delivered through Sign Language and with a strong hearing English perception. However it was also a place where deaf leaders flourished, and where the worship allowed deaf culture and sign language to flourish and develop—a place of



contradictions. It was outside the church that she found her deaf identity—her ‘Deafhood’ (a term created by Ladd (2003) but not adopted much in the UK except in deaf studies academic circles) through her involvement with the National Union of the Deaf and in campaigning work as a deaf teacher of deaf children. Her key insight from her experience has been that “Deafhood alone cannot liberate us”: only Christ can liberate us fully, in body, mind and spirit. In following Christ we are inspired to work for justice, to actively promote ‘good news for the poor’ and Deafhood is an important and perhaps necessary part of this, but not sufficient alone. She actually has raised the question (and references (Green 2012; Ayres 2004)) whether Deafhood/deaf identity is compatible with the belief that our primary identity is in Christ and intends to explore this further. I look forward to her researching and writing in this area as it would be a real challenge to Deaf Liberation Theology which argues for the importance of a strong deaf identity as enabling and empowering a strong and authentic faith and identity in Christ and the self-confidence and self-esteem that encourages actively working for social justice.

Developing and ordaining deaf people (male and female) as priests, ministers and lay leaders in the church is a strong challenge to the traditions of the church which in the UK (as well as elsewhere) has tended to follow the concept of the ‘officer class’ (white, male, middle and upper class) as being born to lead; it is also a strong challenge to the concept that ‘deaf people can’t lead’ (Lewis 2016). However theologically it actually picks up on the biblical tradition that God calls all sorts of people to preach, teach and lead in the church and in fact the primary requirement is that vocation rather than any other qualification. Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians emphasizes this when he says “Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God.” (1 Corinthians 1:26–29 NRSV).

One final thought for now—one of the interesting features of deaf ministry (in the UK at least) is that unlike almost all other ministries, many of the emerging leaders are female. Coleman (2010) highlights how the subject of women in leadership is frequently perceived from the vantage of one particular group of women, usually white and middle class, and assumes that all women leaders are monochrome. She briefly looks at how class, race and cultural background affect the experiences of women (and how assumptions are made about the impact of these differences that do not always reflect reality) and suggests that unlike the western stereotypes many African and Caribbean cultures raise black women to be more socially assertive than white women, and many South Asian women are raised to be ambitious and assertive (she instances the four female prime ministers of Sri Lanka, India, Bangladesh and Pakistan—two of whom predate any female heads of government in Western Europe). These examples hint at how race and gender can intersect in ways that are positive as well as negative. There has been no research on the intersectionality of deafness and gender (and little or nothing on the intersectionality of deafness and race or any other characteristic for that matter) (Kusters et al. 2017; Moges 2017) but I speculate that such research might show similar ways in which deaf women have successfully challenged perceptions of both gender and deafness to develop in leadership and promote social justice in this way.

#### 4. Deaf Liberation Theology and Social Justice: What Have We Learned, What Comes Next?

*Deaf Liberation Theology* (Lewis 2007) concluded with a call for the church to be a ‘liberating-shaped’ church and suggested some practical things that could be done for this to happen. I have tried to operate in these ways in my own ministry and have seen others adopt these principles as well (sometimes arriving at similar principles independently, sometimes more directly influenced by reading the book). And, as I have argued in this article, they do seem effective in promoting more social justice in the church, albeit slowly. Deaf people and the deaf church are, in places where Deaf Liberation Theology principles have been adopted, more visible to and more valued by the hearing church than they used to

be. We are growing a generation of new deaf leaders—ordained and lay people—who seek to actively promote and celebrate deaf identity, deaf history and sign language as part of what it means to follow Christ. In some ways this is nothing new—the biblical imperative for justice has been inspiring deaf Christians (and hearing Christians who work with them) to seek to improve social justice for Deaf people since the foundation of the Deaf church in 1830 (Lewis 2007). However for many, many years this was subordinate to the principle that deaf people primarily needed helping or healing, and that sign language was subordinate to English so the last ten years has seen real change within the church, not just in the Deaf church and what it does but also in the value the mainstream hearing church now has for deaf people in church. The hegemonic theological discourse has been challenged and changed as *Deaf Liberation Theology* called for in 2007. (Shrine 2016b) agrees that things have changed in a significant way in this period. There are still many issues to be sorted; in the Church of England not all dioceses value deaf people and sign language, not all deaf people have equal access to church and training, and not all deaf sign language using churches and congregations are places of liberation. But it is encouraging to trace in the stories I discuss above the spread of the ideas and principles of Deaf Liberation Theology and the growth of social justice in the church.

So what's next? To an extent more of the same is needed; in May 2017 I shared with a group of deaf Christians the stories of the foundation of the deaf church by deaf people and its challenge to the hearing church in the nineteenth century. For many of them this was the first time they'd encountered deaf church history told in this way and they were excited by it and encouraged by it—and perhaps even inspired to follow their example and challenge the hearing church norms they experienced as oppressively well meaning. For me this was an eye opening response—I thought this was well known information now, but it bought home to me the importance of continuing to develop and teach and spread Deaf Liberation Theology as a means of promoting social justice for deaf people within the church. But for Deaf Liberation Theology to be true to itself in promoting liberation it needs to be developed by a wide range of deaf people, from all sorts of backgrounds and experiences. Lewis and VanGilder (2017) explore ways of widening deaf participation in theology through the use of dialogue and stories and working collaboratively so that the gifts of deaf people with skills in English and academic theology and the gifts of deaf people with varying experiences and unarticulated theological reflections can be brought together to create new ways of doing theology that is more authentically deaf, and therefore more liberating, and leads to more action that promotes true social justice for deaf people.

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