

**The Gift of Silence: Towards an Active Participation
of the Deaf in Sri Lanka**
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Abstract

With his prior experience of ministry for the deaf in Davao City and the subsequent enriching experience of exposure-immersion in Sri Lanka, Bro. Amila Pathum reflects on his concrete encounters with the so-called “silent gifts” of the church: the deaf people. Utilizing the image of a “disabled God,” he explores the pastoral and missiological challenges of ministering to the deaf people who are often marginalized in the life and history of the church. In this paper, Bro. Amila invites us to be open to what the deaf and mute people speak to us about a disabled Christ who is present in midst of our deaf sisters and brothers.

Introduction

For my mission immersion I was given the option to choose where to work. Since I had pastoral exposure with the deaf in Davao, I thought of deepening this experience with the deaf in my own country. Thus, I was privileged to journey and work with the deaf of Sri Lanka at St. Joseph’s College in Ragama, a good one-and-a-half hour drive from Colombo. The school is housed in a former tuberculosis hospital that the nuns transformed into a school for the deaf and blind.

The school serves deaf children from Kindergarten up to the Advanced level,¹and uses sign language and lip reading as media of instruction. This system is also referred to as “total education” for the deaf. At present, there is a former pupil who works as one of the teachers and a deaf nun who looks after the spiritual needs and housing concerns of the school population.

One particular encounter that happened a few months into my mission immersion stands out in my memory. There was a call for an emergency staff meeting and, as usual, I was asked to monitor the primary section until the teacher could return to the class. I loved such opportunities since, apart from the pupils’ break time; it was when the teachers were out on meetings that I could freely talk with the children. It had already been few months since I started studying Sri Lankan Sign Language and I could by then somehow sign simple sentences.

¹This is similar to the K+12 educational program in the Philippines

On this particular day, the teacher left the students with an assignment. I sat down for a casual conversation with a young boy who had been born with both his hearing and his right arm missing. I asked him about his family, his studies and so on. Eventually, I asked to borrow his hearing aid. He did not hesitate to lend it to me. I tried it on, but I found that I could not wear it for too long because of the amplified and deafening noise that it created in my ear.

When the class resumed and I was free to give full rein to my thoughts, I found myself reflecting on this experience. Many questions came to my mind: What kind of world does the deaf belong to? How do the deaf relate to the hearing world? What are their struggles in life? What are they really capable of? What can the Church learn from them? These questions eventually inspired me to write this paper.

How do we look at the deaf in Sri Lanka? I begin to address this question by looking at the phenomenon of the deaf statistically. This will help us to get a good picture of the deaf people whom we are dealing with in this article. I then try to delve into their lives by looking at their joys and sorrows. Here, I specifically look at their struggles as deaf.

Secondly, I introduce the framework of a “disabled” God: an image of God that the deaf can relate to. This framework reveals a God who understands them and whom they can identify with. A sociologist named Nancy Eiesland proposed this idea of a Disabled God to the disabled community. Together with the context and the background of this framework, I will explain some of the characteristics of this disabled God so as to clarify the importance of this image of God that is being introduced.

Finally, I look at the Church vis-a-vis the deaf. The deaf are gifted people and they have many things to share with the Church. We look into the possible areas in which the deaf can be incorporated actively into the life of the Church. Practically, we ask: How can the Church integrate the deaf within its fold?

This paper is an invitation for you to join me to enter into this world of silence: the world of the deaf. As we enter into their seemingly silent world, let us be sensitive to the possible voices that we might hear.