

# Worship 'in the face' of God



**'The God who so lovingly turns his face towards His people and signs to them', Gill Behenna writes about the vibrant, visible worship of the Deaf community she has served for 25 years**

Imagine a time of worship in the church you usually attend. Now in your imagination, take away the music. How does that feel? Now take away any written liturgy and finally take away the reading of the Bible. What would be left?

For 25 years, I've worked as a Minister in the Deaf community, and have been wrestling with the issues of culturally appropriate worship for Deaf people whose first or preferred language is British Sign Language (BSL).

## Signing songs not always helpful

Many people have enjoyed watching the Sign Language Interpreters at events such as New Wine or Spring Harvest. There is no doubt that BSL is a beautiful language and a song in sign language can be powerful and effective – especially for hearing people. I have interpreted at many such events and people often tell me how much the sign language has added to their worship. What no one ever asks me, or the Deaf people there, is whether the Deaf people have found it a worshipful experience watching one interpreter, signing songs that often include endless repeats without being able to participate in the music. Of course, some Deaf people do have access to music and enjoy such worship experiences, but for others the idea of music is simply something that they cannot relate to and cannot use for worship.

There is another issue that may make it hard for Deaf people to engage in the sort of worship that hearing people love. We all say and sing things together! It's one of the ways we express our corporate worship. I recently read the following email from the Christian mother of a Deaf child:

*'My son is deaf and we had a meeting today at his nursery to talk about his progress. He is doing great, but his support worker couldn't understand why he wouldn't join in with the 'music and movement' sessions. This involves all the children simultaneously signing and singing the songs as a group.*

*I pointed out that there is no equivalent collective use of language in his world – he is fluent in BSL but knows only its use in conversation or turn taking – never as a group all doing it at once! It would therefore be totally alien to him for everyone to be signing and why on earth should he join in – he'd be too busy watching everyone else! (and maybe waiting for his turn!)*

*This struck a chord for church stuff, how bizarre that we expect Deaf people to sign things together – you can't see each other when you're doing it and if you could it would be confusing!'*

Add to all this the fact that there is no Bible in BSL and you will realize that it doesn't seem to leave much!

When Deaf Christians come together, they are able to worship in their own language, without using interpreters (ie not 'second hand'), and not based on sound. They are developing ways of worshipping that are culturally relevant to them.

Sometimes they may simply take well-known songs and change them, translating them into BSL and signing them without music. Without the music, the song develops a rhythm of its own, linked to the patterns and rhythms of BSL. They may even rewrite a song to fit Deaf culture, replacing the words 'say' with 'sign' and replacing 'hear' with 'see'. Sometimes they use DVDs such as the 'i-worship' series with visuals and lyrics on the screen. Sometimes people sign along to the lyrics and sometimes they just watch.

## Strong tradition of theatre and drama

Often Drama is used (The Deaf Community has a strong tradition of theatre and drama) or storytelling and testimony. Sometimes people use procession and action to symbolize the coming together of the community. They may also create their own expressions of worship which are often 'performance' pieces rather than corporate. One such 'psalm' written by a group

### Psalm 152

*Lord - look at me*

*I want to tell you something, but I can't see you.*

*The hearing world does not understand us*

*Do you understand us?*

*You do understand us!*

*Those hearing ones*

*Have music, bells and singing*

*They get your attention through sound*

*Our prayers are signed silently*

*We are here. Do you know that?*

**We will praise you**

**We will wave our hands and clap**

**We will stamp together so you feel our praise**

**We will hold hands together as we smile our praise**

**We will light candles - and set off fireworks!**

*Then the clouds will roll away*

*And you will notice us at last!*

**At last!**

NB: This psalm is usually signed by one person but the part in bold may be signed by a group as long as they can all see each other – perhaps standing in a semi-circle. This makes the psalm more of a performance piece.

of Deaf students on a ministry training weekend was recently published in *Holy Ground* published by Wild Goose Publications 2005. It is reprinted below as an English translation.

## BSL is a living, dynamic, language

The psalm below is one example of BSL poetry being used for worship. BSL is a living dynamic language that, in common with many languages around the world, does not have a written form. This means that poems and signed hymns have to be remembered and passed on. Sometimes this means they change as each person adds a little to the rendition. It also means that the language has to be articulated – performed – in order for the ideas to be shared. You can't make up a lovely BSL poem and email it round to your friends unless, of course, you video yourself performing it.

All this means that worship that is culturally Deaf has to be dynamic – it is something of the here and now in which people co-operate together. Spontaneous contributions are normal from Deaf worshippers. It also has to be an act of worship that is visible! Deaf worshippers look at each other. As individuals they affirm that they are together in the presence of God simply by acknowledging that other people are there. My friend calls it being 'in the face' of God and so we recognise that some of the 'spontaneous' contributions are indeed Spirit-led communications from the God who so lovingly turns his face towards his people and signs to them. 

## Exciting project to give a Bible to the Deaf community

*Many minority groups have a Bible in their own language, but the Deaf community in Britain are still waiting! The BSL Bible Translation Project aims to give the UK Deaf community a Bible that is totally accessible to them. The vision is that when a Bible reading is announced in church, a Deaf person can watch the same reading being signed in BSL on a hand held computer. The project, to be launched on 6 September, needs financial and prayer support. Details Sarah Haynes at haynessarah@yahoo.co.uk or 07790 475133.*

## about the writer

Gill Behenna has worked with Deaf people for 25 years and is presently Chaplain with the Deaf Community in the Diocese of Bristol. Sometimes she works free-lance as a BSL/English interpreter and frequently pops up at events such as Greenbelt and New Wine. In her 'spare' time she is the Administrator of Signs of God, a nationwide training organization for BSL in Christian settings; she is also involved in a major project to translate the Bible into British Sign Language.