



*Breaking
Silence*

**COMMUNITY
DISCUSSION GUIDE**



TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEAFNESS IN PRISON - THE GAPS	03
Ben Wright	
DISABILITY AND AMERICAN CHURCHES - TWO MORE GAPS	07
Lea Schweitz, PH.D.	
CREDITS	10

DEAFNESS IN PRISON - THE GAPS

BY BEN WRIGHT

I was profoundly impacted by the several journeys depicted in the documentary, *Breaking Silence*. Seeing the perspective of a deaf father, a CODA, a justice-impacted daughter, and the other deaf men impacted led me to think about what more could be done to support this population in the criminal justice system. The lack of access and awareness is eye-opening and should cause us to pause and think about improving this.

I never thought I would end up writing something like this. I was born profoundly deaf and was mainstreamed (I went to a school full of hearing people rather than a deaf school). I found myself providing my accommodations in school—I never knew that captioning devices or interpreters were a ‘thing.’ I would sit in class and read the book while the teacher stood in the front and lectured. I got by—somehow managed to be in the National Honor Society. I was often tasked to work with special education students because I understood what they needed. From an early age, I knew what gaps existed and became acutely aware of how they needed to be filled. I became a special/deaf education teacher, spending most of my career with students with multiple disabilities.

This allowed me to have a unique perspective in gauging the needs of D/deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals when I was incarcerated. In the state of Ohio, they (generally) house all D/deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals in one prison, so specific gaps were pretty evident from the start. The first person I was in a cell with was profoundly deaf and had no voicing skills. He could not write his name. He would draw pictures instead. He had no money in his account because he had no idea how to write to his parents.

I was asked to become a “tutor” for D/deaf and hard of hearing individuals in the ABE (Adult Basic Education) program. The teacher, who had no experience with deafness, tasked me to write a curriculum, lesson plans, and more for these students (using a word processor with zero resources—we weren’t allowed any). I quickly discovered that the teacher would give them pages from an adult coloring book. They would sit there

coloring while the others in the room were learning vital reading, writing, and mathematical skills. I decided that they needed to learn how to add up for commissary—many Deaf were being taken advantage of because they didn’t know how to count for store day. A skill as simple as making a list and adding it up to match the amount they have is something that was missing. One of these men had a parole hearing where he was eligible for release after twenty-five years. He only had a few tickets but was denied release. I am sure there were other factors, but it was written clearly that he must pass his GED before the next hearing. This was repeated in his paperwork—at every parole hearing he had. This is one of the men sitting in the ABE classroom coloring. I am a college-educated teacher and wouldn’t even want to take the GED!

Mental health services are another thing that is seriously lacking. As a special education teacher, I frequently did surveys and assessments for the school psychologist on the students’ life skills, social functioning, etc.—so I sometimes have that checklist implanted when I meet people. There was one Deaf man who came in—he could not write his name, could not voice, and became dirty pretty quickly (He would forget to do hygienic things and then eventually became too afraid to go in the bathroom). He would try to call his mother almost 24/7 and would scream/shriek at others in an instant (short temper). It was clear to me that he needed more mental health services, but he was classified as Deaf and thus sent to the Deaf prison, where no one was trained in working with Deaf who had multiple disabilities. This man’s social skills were so low he did things he thought others would think were funny—like constantly talking about sexual things. This behavior led to him being beaten

multiple times, including one time when he was beaten within five minutes of moving into that dorm.

During my tutoring, I decided to take the guys to the library. None of them had been in the library or knew what it looked like. One of the guys wanted to look at books about motorcycles. I had to have a lengthy back-and-forth with the librarian because he couldn't read. Due to this, he would benefit from a visual chart—books here, check out here, etc. The initial response was that I teach them how to read. They did not seem to grasp that these men were in their fifties, and it was not as easy as "teaching them to read." These men deserve the same access to motorcycle books as anyone else. One of the Sergeants told me that it was their fault for ending up in prison in the first place—I tried to say, still, they have the same rights as the men on death row who get access to these books. Unfortunately, my authority as a Deaf educator and as a person was stripped when I was given an ID number and was seen as the same as anyone else there. One of the most frustrating things was when guys told me about their cases and how they didn't understand what was happening. Some had no interpreter; some had public defenders who had never had a Deaf person on their caseload. I don't know how true it is, but some claim that the police never read their Miranda rights. When I was in court, the initial Judge (for arraignment) tried to write back and forth with me—out of the multitudes of Deaf I met in the prison system, I was one of the only ones who could read. Can you imagine trying to write back and forth with a 75-year-old man who can't read?

This same 75-year-old man sat down with me, saying that he didn't understand why he was in prison in the first place. He got his paperwork and put it in front of me. I read details of his case that no one in prison should read—it would have gotten him beaten up or seriously hurt. I have seen men sent to the hospital, even some dying, due to cases like this man's. But he could not read what the paperwork said. The man looked at me and asked me how he could go home. He didn't mean for anything to happen, and he was planning a wedding with his girlfriend. I was put into this awkward position—this man was going to be serving fifteen years in prison, at least. I am not a lawyer, their teacher, or a family member—but this man had no one to explain what was happening. We had been discussing how to appeal a school case, and he wanted to know how. It did not matter how I felt about his case or whether I thought he was guilty—everyone has the right to appeal. After two years of incarceration, the window for appeal was closed—but he didn't know that. I insisted he try to file if he felt he wanted to because surely a Judge would understand why he was late filing. Five years later, I

don't think he's filed anything. The embarrassment he must have felt at the age of seventy-five for being unable to read must have been overwhelming.

One day, I was working in the kitchen during the COVID-19 pandemic. I was the only one in the kitchen—everyone else was doing various work in the cafeteria. I was washing dishes. Suddenly an officer came up to me and started yelling at me. It was confusing, that's for sure. When we got outside, I realized a fire alarm was going off. I had no idea because there was no flashing fire alarm in the kitchen at the time. I'm not sure what I would have done if there was a real fire.

Re-entry services are severely lacking as well. One Deaf man who served sixteen years in prison took ONE class during that entire time due to the lack of interpreting services. Due to his prison sentence and lack of communication, he lost contact with his family. On his release date his officers shipped him off to a homeless shelter. He was back in prison within six months because of a parole violation.

I have presented several experiences I had in this paper—and it should raise red flags in your head. There is so much more, things many people don't think about. For instance, a lot of announcements are done by voice. These announcements allow residents to know what time it is. I was in a cell with another deaf guy and we would have no idea if it was night or day. This really did a number to my mental health—but when I brought up the simple idea of putting a clock in front of the cell, it was as if a light bulb went off in the staff's head. I met some staff in the prison system who genuinely cared and wanted to make a difference. But things like this don't naturally pop up when thinking about what services to provide.

This paper presents gaps in the following areas—education, mental health services, library and access to information, legal rights and communication, emergency preparedness, communication barriers, environmental awareness, re-entry challenges, and age-related challenges. By illustrating these stories for you, a call for action should be present—what can you do to help these areas improve for D/deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals? One thing many are unaware of is that by providing universal access, you are providing access to a people. Learning disabilities and reading disabilities are two areas that severely lack attention in prisons—providing visual access. You are opening doors for many, not just a few. By providing a few more services, you are decreasing the number of people going into the prison system in the first place, closing that revolving door.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1 In what ways does the lack of educational resources contribute to the challenges faced by D/deaf individuals in prison, as highlighted in the paper?
- 2 Discuss the challenges faced by the D/deaf man with multiple disabilities who struggled with mental health issues and lacked appropriate support. How might these challenges be addressed?
- 3 How did the inability to read or comprehend legal documents affect the 75-year-old man mentioned? What steps could be taken to ensure better communication and understanding of legal proceedings for D/deaf individuals?
- 4 Discuss the librarian's initial response and the need for tailored library services for D/deaf individuals. How can access to information be improved for this population?
- 5 Reflect on the story of the Deaf man who served sixteen years in prison and faced challenges in re-entry due to the lack of interpreting services. What improvements can be made in re-entry services to prevent situations like this?
- 6 Connect this to the documentary. In what ways does the documentary align with the experiences highlighted in this paper? What calls for action could be taken from the documentary and this narrative?



CALLS TO ACTION

- 1 Advocate for Inclusive Education. Promote the inclusion of D/deaf and hard of hearing individuals in prison education settings
- 2 Improve Educational Programs in Prison. Advocate for comprehensive and accessible educational programs within prison systems, addressing the specific needs of D/deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals, including literacy, numeracy, and vocational training.
- 3 Enhance Mental Health Services and Training- Call for improved mental health services tailored to the needs of D/deaf and hard of hearing individuals in prisons, ensuring access to trained professionals and appropriate interventions.
- 4 Ensure Legal Rights and Representation: Advocate for the provision of qualified sign language interpreters and legal representation experienced in working with D/deaf and hard of hearing individuals, ensuring effective communication and understanding legal proceedings
- 5 Develop Accessible Library Services- Work towards developing accessible library services within prisons, providing visual aids, charts, and resources that cater to the diverse needs of D/deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals.
- 6 Support Re-Entry Programs- Advocate for improved re-entry programs that address the unique challenges faced by D/deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals, including access to interpreting services, job training, and family reunification support.
- 7 Address Communication Barriers- Advocate for improved re-entry programs that address the unique challenges D/deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals face during emergencies within the prison environment.
- 8 Promote Environmental Awareness- Advocate for training programs to raise awareness among prison staff about the environmental needs of D/deaf individuals, ensuring that accommodations are in place to support their well-being
- 9 Encourage Collaboration and Training—promote collaboration between prison staff, educators, and community organizations to facilitate training programs that enhance understanding and competency in working with D/deaf and hard-of-hearing-of-hearing individuals
- 10 Support Universal Access Initiatives- Call for the implementation of universal access initiatives that benefit not only D/deaf individuals but also others with learning and reading disabilities, fostering a more inclusive and equitable prison environment.
- 11 Raise Public Awareness: Advocate for public awareness campaigns to highlight the challenges faced by D/deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals in the criminal justice system, fostering understanding and support for necessary changes.
- 12 Engage with Legal Reforms: Support or initiate legal reforms to address the gaps identified, ensuring that the rights of D/deaf individuals are protected and that they have equal access to educational and legal resources.
- 13 Collaborate with Disability Advocacy Groups- Collaborate with them to amplify the voices of D/deaf individuals and work together on policy changes, awareness campaigns, and educational initiatives. Nothing about us without us!
- 14 Encourage Research and Data Collection: Support and fund research initiatives that focus on gathering data and insights into the experiences of D/deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals within the criminal justice system, providing a foundation for evidence-based advocacy

DISABILITY AND AMERICAN CHURCHES - TWO MORE GAPS

BY LEA SCHWEITZ, PH.D.

The film, *Breaking Silence*, and Ben Wright's essay, "Deafness in Prisons - The Gaps," powerfully witness the stories of lives at the intersection of deafness and the criminal legal system. Together, they reveal the gaps in family support systems, "education, mental health services, library and access to information, legal rights and communication, emergency preparedness, communication barriers, environmental awareness, re-entry challenges, and age-related challenges" (Wright, 3). The gaps are many - too many. Addressing one, some, or all of these is sacred work for faithful folks.

And yet, in addition, Christian viewers and readers are too often complicit, whether directly or indirectly, in creating and maintaining church cultures that isolate or ignore disabled people - or make them invisible. Christian churches, worship spaces, schools, programs, and educational offerings have too rarely minded the gaps or closed the gaps named in the film and the essay, and instead, they have added particular gaps of their own. This essay will name just two. The intent is not simply to call out harmful practices, but rather the aim is to invite Christian churches into the work of systemic changes in practices and theologies that perpetuate harm. The goal is for Christian churches to become communities of care for and with the disabled. This includes heeding the call for Christian churches to participate in interrupting pathways to incarceration, creating opportunities for access for D/deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals in the criminal justice system, and removing obstacles to reentry. In addition, American churches have the opportunity to address particular gaps of their own. Consider the following two gaps, which sit uncomfortably alongside the many gaps named above.

GAP #1: GAPS IN ACCESS.

Churches and Christian schools are exempt from the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The ADA increased access to workplaces, businesses, public education, telecommunication, and public transportation for disabled people. Specifically, the ADA prohibits discrimination against disabled people in employment, transportation, public accommodations, communications, and access to state and local government programs and services. Despite what we see in *Breaking Silence* and the stories we hear from D/deaf and hard of hearing people in the criminal justice system, it is clear that prisons should be in full compliance with the ADA.

Churches, however, are exempt, and it was not an accident. As Shannon Dingle reports, although a handful of Christian organizations were in favor of the ADA, the National Association of Evangelicals' Office of Public Affairs and its constituency of fifteen million people were not. They actively argued against access to churches for disabled people; and, they "won" their case. Dingle continues:

"The outcome of exempting Christian churches and schools from the ADA has been threefold. First, most Christian education programs have only served abled students. Second, no other religions made similar arguments... Christians stood alone against access for disabled people. Finally, this outcome communicated to the disability community that they did not belong in mainstream U.S. Christianity, as churches either actively opposed the ADA or passively didn't abide by it because they weren't required to do so legally."

Christian churches are not required to abide by the ADA - but they could. Addressing this gap is an important start in reclaiming American churches as a place of belonging and deep welcome for disabled people.

GAP #2: GAPS IN BELIEF.

The second gap, gaps in belief, has nothing to do with gaps in faith or doubts in faith commitments. Gaps in belief is about the true stories that disabled people tell about being disabled and the frequency with which these stories are questioned and ignored. Christians are too often “disability doubters and deniers,” as Amy Kenny calls them (Kenny, 38-55). Certainly, Christians are not the only disability doubters. Doctors, nurses, strangers, librarians, authorities at the Department of Motor Vehicles - any number of well-meaning (or not) people can find themselves in this inauspicious company. Unfortunately, the case for doubting disabled people’s experiences with and of disability is exasperated by media portrayals of disabled people as either villains or fakers. Take a quick mental inventory of the number of times you’ve seen a disability rolled into the character of a villain or seen a disability faked for gain, sometimes romantic, sometimes political, sometimes economic... The disability tropes and metaphors that appear in contemporary media fuels the disability doubters’ skeptical approach to the accounts that disabled people tell. In Christian spaces, disability doubters can also draw on harmful, ableist ideas of healing and sin to further widen the gaps in believing what their disabled neighbors have to tell us about inaccessibility and necessary accommodations. The solution to inaccessible worship is replacing disability metaphors of deafness and being “lame;” it’s about listening and believing what disabled people tell us about the gaps they experience. It is not about disability as a sin or as caused by sin with prayer and more righteous living as the “solution.”

What else might disabled people teach American churches if we abandoned the metaphors that connect disability and sin or brokenness? What other gaps in belief might be addressed when we listen deeply to the witness of disabled people? In her podcast with For the *Life of the World*, Calli Macale names the possibility for closing gaps in beliefs that are centered around deeply held values of autonomy, independence, and normalcy. She says that at the heart of what it means to live a fulfilled American life are false beliefs “of self-sufficiency, of independence, of a capacity to engage in work,” but “disability really counteracts- and in disability studies, we might say, has counter stories for what it means to live a flourishing life” (Rosa, “Reframing Disability”). These counter stories, instead, open up a vision of life as deeply embodied and radically dependent. They invite being in relationships where disabled and nondisabled people are both care-giving and care-receiving in new ways, and it interrupts long held ideas of so-called “normalcy,” which in the end harm us all.

To be clear, the suggestion here is not that American churches first address these two gaps before getting to the work of addressing the gaps that are so clearly and urgently named in *Breaking Silence* and Wright’s essay. The invitation is to consider a both/and approach, or perhaps even better, start with the urgent and necessary call to take action with and for D/deaf and hard of hearing people in the criminal justice system and let them lead American churches to close their gaps in access and gaps in belief.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS & CALLS TO ACTION

- 1 How does your worship space model and value access for disabled people, including D/deaf and hard of hearing individuals? Consult and hire disabled community members and experts to conduct an accessibility audit of your spaces, website, communications, and programs - and then, take action. Commit time and resources to addressing the results.
- 2 Where does implicit disability bias appear in your everyday encounters of moving through the world? Do you believe the stories of disabled people? Take the following short quiz to learn more about everyday lack of access (adapted and excerpted from Kenny's *My Body is Not a Prayer Request: Disability Justice in the Church*, 53). Give yourself a point for every statement that is true for you:
 - Strangers do not typically ask what's wrong with me.
 - I can ride in cars, in rideshares, or on public transportation without worrying if they will accommodate me.
 - I am protected by minimum wage laws.
 - When I dine out, waiters ask me (and not my companions) what I would like to order.
 - Random people do not tell me that my body is caused by sin.
 - At my place of worship, I am assured that there is a plan for my escape in the event of a fire.
 - Usually, people do not make the way I walk or talk.
 - All I need to do to participate in a Zoom meeting is log in.
 - My daily cost of living is about the same as everyone else's.

As Kenny writes, let surprises reshape your understanding of what's "normal" and be an invitation to learn more about the experiences of disabled people (Kenny, 54). After a screening of *Breaking Silence*, consider watching *Crip Camp: A Disability Revolution* (2020) or reading the book edited by Alice Wong, *Disability Visibility: First-Person Stories from the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Vintage, 2020).

- 3 How does your faith community use narratives about brokenness, wholeness, "normalcy," healing and dependence? Do they serve to create belonging or isolation for disabled community members? What do we learn when disabled people are included as bearing the image of God?

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