

<b>Institution: University of Chester</b>
<b>Unit of Assessment: 33: Theology and Religious Studies</b>
<b>Title of case study: Theology without Words: Impact of Widening Participation for Deaf People in the Churches</b>
<p><b>1. Summary of the impact</b> (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>The impact derives from research into the experiences of Deaf Christians, revealing the extent of their marginalization within hearing culture but also providing qualitative evidence of autonomous expressions of theological understanding expressed through the medium of sign language. This has informed the development of a programme in Theology for the Church of England, delivered in British Sign Language, which has enabled a number of Deaf candidates to pursue accredited Christian ministry. The research has also contributed to raising awareness of the needs of people with disabilities within the churches, resulting in tangible changes in policy and provision.</p>
<p><b>2. Underpinning research</b> (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>Morris' doctoral research at the University of Birmingham (1998-2004) investigated the experiences of Deaf Christians in the UK and Zimbabwe, and was subsequently published in monograph form after Morris joined the University of Chester (as Lecturer in Practical Theology in September 2003) as <i>Theology without Words</i> (Ashgate, 2008).</p> <p>Whilst other extant literature drew attention to the existence of an autonomous Deaf culture, Morris' study was the first extended qualitative research into the lives of Deaf Christians, arguing for the distinctiveness not only of Deaf culture but of Deaf theology, rooted in the visual-spatial medium of British Sign Language (BSL) rather than the traditional oral and text-based sources of hearing cultures. Whilst the impediments to academic attainment confronting Deaf people had been well-documented, Morris' combination of participant-observation in a number of Deaf congregations and extended interviews (in BSL) with 80 Deaf and 16 hearing informants offered in-depth analysis of how cultural attitudes towards people with disabilities affected their day-to-day experiences as practising Christians.</p> <p>Adopting a cultural-linguistic understanding of Deafness, in contrast to social models of disability, Morris argues that Deaf people's exclusion from mainstream activities, including access to educational attainment, occurs as the result of discrimination and lack of accommodation on the part of hearing culture. However, whilst Deaf people have traditionally been marginalized, Morris' research also suggests that British Sign Language is a rich and autonomous source of theological ideas and concepts which lie at the heart of a distinctive Deaf theology, liturgy and spirituality. The research thus identifies a number of ways in which barriers to participation might be removed; and in particular, how Deaf Christians might be empowered and supported in their ministry (Morris, 2008: 119-125). One core principle is to ensure that Deaf people themselves are fully consulted and involved in all aspects of policy and practice: especially access to and interpretation of Biblical texts and the development of liturgies and other resources for worship, spirituality and theological formation (Morris, 2008: 116-117).</p> <p>Morris' research therefore focuses on the experiences of those who identify as Deaf Christians and how their aspirations and theological understandings are shaped by the notion of a 'Deaf culture' with a distinctive (but misconstrued) linguistic identity; and the differences between conventional theological concepts and a unique 'theology without words' relying instead on 'vision, space, touch and relationship' (Morris, 2008: 157). These findings were then applied to the field of theological education, examining how a partnership between an HEI and the Church of England might facilitate a radically new approach to the design and delivery of initial ministerial formation for Deaf candidates. In this discussion, Morris consolidates his critique of educational endeavours which seek to include Deaf students yet continue to discount the importance of sign language as their primary mode of communication (Morris, 2006a). He demonstrates how the access programme at</p>

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the University of Chester reflected an alternative understanding, privileging students' facility in BSL and seeking to build on methods and models of theological reflection and formation previously identified in his fieldwork amongst Deaf congregations.

### 3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

- McCloughry, R. and Morris, W. (2002). *Making a World of Difference: Christian Reflections on Disability*. London: SPCK.
- Morris, W. (2006a). Learning, Teaching and Assessment with Deaf Students: the development of a programme in Christian ministry. *Discourse: Learning and Teaching in Philosophical and Religious Studies* 6:1: 145-173.  
(<http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/subjects/prs/Discourse-vol6-1-Autumn06>)
- Morris, W. (2006b). Does the Church Need the Bible? Reflections on the Experiences of Disabled People. In D.J. Bates, G. Durka and F.L. Schweitzer (eds), *Education, Religion and Society: Essays in Honour of John M. Hull* (162-172) London: Routledge.
- \*Morris, W. (2008). *Theology without Words: Theology in the Deaf Community*. London: Ashgate.
- World Council of Churches (2003). *A Church of All and for All: an interim statement*. Geneva: World Council of Churches. (<http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/central-committee/2003/a-church-of-all-and-for-all>)
- Morris, W. and Blair, M. (2007). *Just and Inclusive Communities: Report of the La Paz Theological Consultation*. Geneva: World Council of Churches  
(<http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/unity-mission-evangelism-and-spirituality/just-and-inclusive-communities/la-paz-report-just-and-inclusive-communities>)

\*The monograph Morris (2008) has been reviewed in *Religious Studies Review*, 03/2009, Volume 35, Issue 1; *Practical Theology*, 12/2009, Volume 2, Issue 3; and *The Expository Times*, 10/2009.

### 4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

The findings that emerged from Morris' ground-breaking research, subsequently consolidated by further evidence, constitute significant and far-reaching impact in two major respects. Firstly, it has enhanced the educational and professional achievement of many of the Deaf candidates who passed through the BSL Certificate in Christian Ministry programme, as evidenced by testimonials and career paths, and facilitated the greater visibility and aspirations of a formerly 'hard to reach' section of the churches. Secondly, it has influenced the organizational cultures and practices of a major Christian denomination in the UK and an international ecumenical organization towards greater awareness of the needs of Deaf people and adoption of principles of best practice in terms of inclusion.

As a member of the Church of England's Committee for Ministry among Deaf and Disabled People, Morris established a partnership between CMDDP, the University of Chester and other ecumenical networks of Deaf Christians, which set out to widen participation for Deaf people in HE. This initiative resulted in a 60-credit level one Certificate in Christian Ministry (<http://www.signsofgod.org.uk/data/signsofgod/downloads/course.pdf>). Morris received two grants from the Philosophy and Religious Studies Subject Centre of the HEA for the development (2004-05) and evaluation (2005-06) of the programme, publishing the outcomes of the research in *Discourse*, the subject centre journal, in 2006. The main finding of this research was that an educational programme which met the specific linguistic and educational needs of Deaf people – in medium of delivery, deployment of Deaf tutors and modes of assessment – could transform the performance of Deaf candidates. This programme thus served as an innovative example of best practice and a model for further patterns of theological training and ministerial formation.

A typical example of this programme's impact on its students is a Jersey-based candidate who, having completed the Certificate in 2007, went on to be the first Deaf person to be licensed as a lay reader in the Diocese of Winchester in 2012. As a result of her achievement, a local Deaf charity, Earsay, created an achievement award in her name to be presented annually. She testifies

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to the confidence-building nature of her educational experience and its decisive role in providing the foundation for moving into licensed ministry.

Morris' reputation in the field of theology and disability also led to an invitation to participate in two international consultations of the World Council of Churches (WCC) on disability and the churches, in Geneva (2003) and La Paz, Bolivia (2007). Aspects of his published work and work in progress were influential on the reports published subsequently, one of which (*Just and Inclusive Communities*) was co-authored with Michael Blair. The methodology and scope of this report reflected many of Morris' emergent concerns, such as the inclusion of illustrative narratives that highlighted Deaf Christians' lived experiences; the 'anatomy of exclusion' in the churches; and the emphasis on theological anthropology and the *imago Dei* as the basis of recognition. (<http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/unity-mission-evangelism-and-spirituality/just-and-inclusive-communities/la-paz-report-just-and-inclusive-communities>)

Morris' research continues to inform consideration of the realities of practices of discrimination and exclusion of people on the basis of their identities, social locations and physical conditions, which has been at the heart of the WCC's work since 2003. The Consultation on *Just and Inclusive Communities* in La Paz, Bolivia in January, 2007 and the document that came out of it, continue to be significant landmarks, both for the ways in which these gave expression to Deaf perspectives and for the creative way they sought to articulate a practical theology of disability that could be implemented by member churches. This process has set the trend for subsequent theological affirmations of those with disabilities, some of which can be found at <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/what-we-do/people-with-disabilities-edan>. The La Paz report continues to be one of the most frequently-accessed WCC documents. Throughout the period 2008 to 2013, it has enabled the programme to approach issues of discrimination and marginalisation as fundamentally theological, and not simply moral or political, challenges. Building on stories and experiences of people suffering from and struggling against marginalisation has been the essential methodological approach of this theological activity.

The theological work that ensued through these consultations' considerations of disability is also considered to have been a landmark towards the establishment of the Ecumenical Disability Advocates' Network (EDAN) (<http://www.oikoumene.org/en/what-we-do/people-with-disabilities-edan>), which last met in June 2013. A special pre-meeting of EDAN delegates to the 10<sup>th</sup> Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Busan, South Korea in November 2013 is designed to prepare them for effective participation in the assembly. It is considered to be: 'a living example of rising awareness on the need for their inclusion, participation and involvement in the member churches and ecumenical structures' (<http://wcc2013.info/en/programme/edan>).

**5. Sources to corroborate the impact** (indicative maximum of 10 references)

1. The impact of Morris' research within the wider church, the Deaf community, and in the early stages of formation of thinking about disability in WCC from 2003 can be corroborated by a representative from The Queen's Foundation for Ecumenical Theological Education.
2. A member of the Archbishops' Council Committee for Ministry of and among Deaf and Disabled People (CMDDP) can provide corroboration of the impact of the research on CMDDP and patterns of training for Deaf ministers.
3. A statement held by the University from a representative of the World Council of Churches verifies the provenance of the 2007 *Just and Inclusive Communities* document, Morris' participation in the 2003 and 2007 consultations, and provides corroboration of its lasting impact on WCC policy through to 2013.
4. A testimonial from the former student on the Certificate in Christian Ministry mentioned in section 4 is held by the University and provides first-hand evidence of the benefits of a bespoke theological programme tailored to the needs of Deaf candidates, and corroborates its role in encouraging her to realise her vocation.