

'Physician, Heal Thyself'

6. Hearing Loss

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According to the RNID pamphlet *Deafness*, 'Deafness is one of the most common of all disabilities and still very little is known about it'. The effect of this is that, because most people with hearing problems can see where they are going and can walk there without help, their disability is invisible to those they meet and almost impossible to understand. Another aspect which makes it difficult to grasp the effects of hearing loss is that there are three main groups of sufferers from it.¹

1. The *deaf*, who are born without hearing and who never hear.
2. The *deafened*, who suddenly and permanently lose their hearing, often in early adult life.
3. The *hearing-impaired*, whose hearing declines over a period of time.

The Revd Will Morrey belongs to the second group.² I have belonged to the third group since I was about four years old, which means that I have been losing my hearing for over seventy years, and it is about my experience as a hearing-impaired person that I write. The difference between us is that for him the door to the world of sound slammed suddenly shut during his time at university, while for me the door has been closing less quickly for most of my life and is now only slightly ajar.

There seem to be two major reasons for my condition. A middle ear infection in the late 1920s, long before the time of anti-biotics has had on-going consequences. Also there were relatives with severe hearing loss on both sides of my family, so that there was an hereditary factor also. The first result I noticed was that during my childhood I could hear only when near the source of sound. At school I came to insist on sitting near the front, which was not always well received at a time when children were seated alphabetically. Already I had learned to admit to my disability and to seek ways of coping with it. One way was to become a fluent reader. My mother's visits to the town hall led to my being admitted to the nearest secondary school, a good grammar school. There I studied arts and science and later did divinity (on my own). Also I learned to play the violin.

How far this was the right educational choice is an interesting question. At the time there was very little provision for the needs of children of school age with hearing problems and my own experience has convinced me that such children should so far as possible be in a normal school environment as a preparation for life in a world of hearing adults. Another difficulty in educating children like this is that education is carried on to a very great extent by word of mouth. At every level of education a child or adult with hearing problems will have to work harder than others to grasp what is offered in the class room, lecture room or seminar. Despite the difficulties I came to enjoy getting to know the subjects in the curriculum and at the same time learned to work at them on my own as well as in class.

At the time I began at the grammar school we moved house. This brought us near a new large thriving Methodist church with an even more thriving Sunday school. The Sunday school laid a strong emphasis on the Bible, while the services in the High Wesleyan tradition had their own appeal. It must be said that ordering worship so that it is accessible to those with hearing loss as well as to those with normal hearing is almost impossible. The Sunday services were firmly structured and this went a good way toward meeting my needs.³ The arrangements in Sunday school were also helpful since we sat in small groups around the teachers, with the result that I had little trouble in hearing what they said. It is to this Sunday school that I owe my life-long interest in biblical studies. During this time I began to feel that God had something for me to do and after preparation became a member of the Methodist Church. Soon after this came a clear and definite call to the ministry. The path ahead was less clear than the call, since the second world war had begun and the school was evacuated from Southampton to Poole. Since in those days a candidate for the ministry had first to be a local preacher I began to assist in leading worship and later to do some preaching.

At this time I was still able to play the violin, which has a bearing on my endeavours as a preacher. By the time I began preaching I had played through most of *Hymns Ancient and Modern* and *The Methodist Hymn Book*. From this has resulted another life-long interest, although now I have to concentrate on the words rather than tunes. At this point, however, my musical career, such as it was, was halted and never resumed. First I broke my arm and after a while my call-up papers arrived. The next five years or so were spent in the army, briefly in West Africa and for almost all the rest in India. My Local Preachers' studies continued, but I seemed always to be posted just before I could sit the examinations. When possible I conducted services. After being demobilized I began at

¹ L. Jones, J. Kyle & P. L. Wood, *Words Apart* (Tavistock, 1987), 3.

² See W. Morrey, *Seeing is Hearing* (obtainable from the author, The Revd. W. Morrey, 12 Llwyn-Y-Grant Road, Cardiff, CF3 7ET, £4.50 incl. postage).

³ See T. Sutcliffe, *The Challenge of Deafness* (obtainable from the author, T. Sutcliffe, 12, Parsonage Court, Bishop's Hull, Taunton, Somerset, TA1 5HR), 89.

Bristol University and during my first year there offered as a candidate for the Methodist ministry. It was clear that what was then a moderate hearing loss would present problems, but the call was so strong that I felt I had to go forward.

At this point I had already come to recognize and to accept that I would always have hearing problems: after all, these had been part of life for as long as I could remember. Like many disabled people I had accepted my disability, learned some coping strategies and acquired a considerable obstinacy in carrying on with life. Because so far it had always been possible to deal with the problems I supposed that things would carry on as before. What no one had told me, and I had by this time had a number of examinations, was that my hearing would continue to deteriorate. This I had to find out for myself. On looking back it becomes clear that in *any* year of my life I have heard less well than in the previous year and better than in the year to come. No one who had examined me had ever mentioned that I had a progressive hearing loss.

This situation was further disguised for some time by a major event, the issue of my first hearing aid, a few months after the start of the National Health Service and at the beginning of the second term of my final year at university. The large and cumbersome device which I began to wear gave for some time a great improvement in my hearing. Much of the strain of listening vanished and a new range of sounds appeared, not all of them welcome. It soon became clear that a hearing aid is something which has to be managed and which needs to be adjusted according to surrounding conditions. Those who do not use a hearing aid seem to imagine that it is like using glasses, which provide an instant correction of one's vision. This is not so. Hearing aids increase the volume of sound which the ear receives, and that is all they can do. When one uses a hearing aid it is necessary to adjust the volume to a comfortable level. This level may vary frequently and the sounds transmitted also vary in volume according to the distance of the sound source from the microphone. Anyone using a hearing aid must therefore acquire a number of management techniques in order to make good use of it. It turns out that not everybody can do this, which is why so many hearing aids simply live in their little boxes on the window sill. After half a century I use and adjust my hearing aids almost without conscious thought. Because of my history, background noises are very distracting because I never learned the mental 'cut-out' which those with normal hearing acquire during childhood. Valuable as it was, my hearing aid had to be switched off when I was concentrating on reading, preparing sermons and dealing with correspondence. This said, I felt for some years a great easing of my previous problems and an improvement in my social life and at that time I assumed that these would continue indefinitely.

It was during this period that I completed my probation, was ordained and then allowed to get married (in the Methodism of the 1950s this was the usual order of doing things.) Our first three appointments were in Oldham, Glossop and Todmorden, in each of which we had a child. Like my wife these three children were used to the hearing aids from the start. The main emphases in my ministry were becoming clearer: preaching, pastoral work, and training local preachers, preparing candidates for the ministry and training probationer ministers. Pastoral work is something which I valued greatly from the outset. It brought me into contact with people who had a wide variety of problems, and this corrected any tendency to dwell on my own. Loss of hearing is a condition which produces a sense of isolation and leads to the attitude that the problems are immense and peculiar to oneself. Visiting people who have to cope with all kinds of other troubles produces a healthier perspective on life. In Glossop I began a research programme which led to the award of a higher degree and which continued for some years after that.

In Todmorden I received a smaller hearing aid of a type which had come into use in the NHS, so that my aid was now much easier to wear. Here, as in the previous two circuits, people brought up amid the mill machines had loud voices. These voices helped to disguise a problem which was making itself felt in other ways. Gradually I had begun to find business meetings tiring. In particular it would take me about a week to recover from the District Synod, which in May would last for two full days. However, I could still do my visiting, take services and conduct various training programmes. If anything my hearing loss made me a better visitor, since the visit would be fairly short and not tire the other person. I would rest my ears while walking to the next house. Our next move, however, was to Ilkeston in the Midlands, where we were among people who spoke much more quietly and in a circuit where the policy seemed to be never to have one committee where three would do. Before the end of our time there I had come to realize that at some time in the future normal circuit work would be beyond me and so began to explore the idea of becoming an educational missionary overseas. After the original interview the Methodist Missionary Society sent me to a consultant, who spent some time testing my hearing and then told me, among other things, 'You should on no account be doing committee work'. He made no mention of progressive hearing loss. There were in my diary twenty-one meetings for that month alone, so that my time as a circuit minister had come to an end more suddenly than I had been expecting.

The question now was what sort of minister I was going to be. The consultant had ruled out going overseas, and after receiving permission to apply for academic posts I became a lecturer at Chester College (now University

College, Chester), which at that time concentrated on training teachers. Now I was a Sector Minister, with my own house and mortgage, later on with furniture, and then with my own card as a registered Disabled Person. This last item required another hearing test, after which the consultant took less than two minutes to put me on the register. From this time onward I was to become much more aware that my hearing was deteriorating at an increasing rate.

Before being registered I had been issued with hearing aids, worn behind the ears, but much stronger than anything I had had so far. This deterioration involved more than a need to have sounds more greatly amplified. It soon became clear in discussion groups that I was developing perceptive deafness as well. This is a condition associated with sensori-neural deafness, which is the usual cause of hearing impairment, and in my case it arose when middle-ear deterioration had reached a certain level. There are two ways of describing perceptive deafness. One is that when a number of people are speaking together it is impossible to distinguish what each one is saying: all one hears is a jumble of sounds. The other description is that only the loudest sound can be distinguished, which is why if I am making tea during a radio news bulletin I turn up the volume more and more to drown out the noise of the kettle. Perceptive deafness cannot be cured, nor does a hearing aid help; all a hearing aid will do is to provide a louder jumble. From time to time I needed greater amplification of sounds, a need met by the issue of increasingly powerful hearing aids. These days I have in one ear the strongest available aid of this type and in the other ear the next strongest one. The strongest aids of all have, for technical reasons, to be body-worn, but so far I can still use aids which fit behind the ear. At the Hearing Aid Clinic they tell me, 'We shall always be ahead of you'. Even with these strong aids listening has become very tiring and I keep them switched off most of the time. One way of illustrating this deterioration is to say that at the beginning of our time in Chester we often gave parties for two or three dozen people. Now, when we entertain, we have two or four guests, except on some family occasions.

Despite all this, during the thirty three years or so we have been in Chester we have been busy. Our children have grown up and left home and two of them are married with children of their own (I am excused baby-sitting). There have been classes for local preachers, classes for candidates for the ministry, and also sessions with probationer ministers. For seventeen years I continued as a lecturer.

This seems a good point at which to mention some aspects of lecturing. Speech is one of these, and accounts for some features of the lectures I gave at Chester College. As a preacher I had learned to project my voice, so there was no problem in making the students hear. The

question was of what they would hear. So far I have had sufficient hearing so that I do not, in the current phrase, 'talk deaf'. A further problem was that when my hearing aids were on a low setting for making myself heard it was impossible to decipher anything a student might say. The solution was to advance on the students while I turned up the volume and then to ask them questions about the topic so that each student got a question. Perhaps no other lectures were quite like these.

During these seventeen years, however, I gradually gave up committee work, phasing myself first out of synods, then circuit meetings, large committees at Chester College, and so on, until at my retirement from the college I belonged to one very small committee and attended no other. By 1982 I had formed the view that I was not as efficient in the lecture room as I should be and I took early retirement. At the same time I asked permission to retire from the active work of the Methodist Ministry. The consultant who supplied the report on which I based my application supported it on the grounds that I had 'a progressive hearing loss'. Having retired twice, so to speak, I had now to wait for what the future might hold.

One thing it held was a letter from Methodist Headquarters, obviously sent automatically to all ministers who retire on health grounds, which included the wish that my condition would soon improve. I received no other message from any other officials in the church. This illustrates a very common attitude toward people with hearing problems found in the churches. The disability is perceived as of no great concern. This attitude was also to be seen towards students with hearing problems. One who was able to adapt to the system stayed on and completed the course. Another, whose hearing suddenly deteriorated had to leave. For some time I tried to have a telephone installed for them with a volume control of the sort provided in my room, but without success. There are conditions which attract public sympathy; hearing loss does not. Another attitude taken by individuals is to assume that anyone with hearing loss can still cope with conversations. Some people try to make sure of this by shouting. Many assume that a hearing aid or aids will restore perfect hearing. It may be that because so little is known about deafness people find it embarrassing to deal with those who suffer from it. Here it must be said that people with different types and degrees of hearing loss have different requirements. There is clearly a great educational task ahead.

Retirement has proved to be a relative term. Until then I had been preaching in a number of Methodist circuits; now that I was retired I was due to receive my expenses and the requests from some of them ceased at once. Before long I was asked to look after a Presbyterian church which had no minister and later I looked after another one. I have taken many services at two URC

churches during their interregnum and continue to preach in a number of Presbyterian and URC churches. Before my retirement I had at times preached to Anglican congregations, so it may be said that only the Catholics and the Baptists have been able to elude me. There have also been classes for local preachers and for candidates for the ministry and some probationers to oversee. In addition I was for four years chaplain at Callin Court, the local Methodist Home, a post which I had to leave with regret when I developed angina. It may be that some other churches will need to be looked after until their next Minister arrives. For such churches I have developed a formula: services, but no meetings; weddings, but no funerals; visiting, but no hospitals. This may show that after so many years of coping with hearing problems I have become skilled at adjusting matters to suit my requirements as a disabled person.

Another feature of retirement has been the pursuit of various academic interests and of a research programme. Over the years I have become interested in and perhaps even familiar with patristic studies and have attended many of the patristics conferences which F. L. Cross originated at Oxford. Each conference involves a preliminary visit to my consultant, but so far the hearing test results have not prevented me from going. An interest in the Quest for the Historical Jesus has developed from my New Testament lectures and for a few weeks in August I read some of the literature. This has had spin-offs: the people at the Methodist Home where I was chaplain know about the Gospel of Thomas. However most of my time now is given to research into the significance of the scenes in the Catacomb frescoes in Rome. This has proved a more complex matter than at first it seemed, but it should be possible to complete the research and to publish the results, if only because my wife assures me that if I die before finishing the book she will kill me. It will be clear that all of these interests can be followed through in complete silence, and also illustrates the point that although hearing loss makes verbal communication difficult it does not affect the sufferer's intelligence.

As well as preaching most Sundays I can do some pastoral work. So far I can still manage conversations on a one-to-one basis and can therefore visit people at home and in hospital. For a number of years I have run a Hearing-Aid Users Group (called the HUG) for members of a local church. These people not only use their hearing aids but share their church membership and the fact that they all live alone. Requests to take services have come in for most Sundays next year, so that I generally take two services each Sunday.

What lessons can be learned from having to cope with a life-long disability? The first lesson is to accept that it is there. Acceptance is, after all the most realistic and positive attitude that one can take, and is an attitude which helps in making progress when dealing

with the disability. Those who refuse to admit to others or to themselves that they have a loss of hearing make life hard for themselves and for everyone else. Because I accepted my own situation at an early age it has been possible to deal with the problems as they have developed.

The next lesson to be learned is that one can be in control despite the difficulties. Stubbornness is something any disabled person must acquire in order to extend the range of things they can do despite their difficulties. The excellent education offered to me has been worth all the extra effort needed to gain it, and it has given me much to enjoy over the years. It is true also that in some areas of life I have lost a good deal.

After this comes the lesson that a disabled person must be ruthless, especially when their disability is progressive. This applies both to disabled persons and to those they meet. For example, when not preaching I attend worship despite the difficulty. On the other hand I no longer answer requests for directions when people approach me in busy streets where the noise will cause tinnitus if I switch on. Under no circumstances do I attend committees.

These lessons have proved helpful when other disabilities have come my way. The angina which began some years ago has for the present receded into the background as I have reduced my weight, take the tablets and do a lot of walking. Arthritis is more of a problem, but the same techniques have helped. First I bought an electric mower, and now I have almost completed reorganizing the garden so that only the mower, secateurs and a man to do the heavy work are required. I enjoyed using a manual typewriter, but a word processor causes no pain.

If it has been possible to emphasize the positive aspects of life with an increasing loss of hearing it is also true that unwelcome features also occur. For some years it has been necessary, even essential, to spend most of the day in complete silence except for some bouts of tinnitus. I can still hear to some extent if I use my hearing aids, and can converse, but can seldom do so out of doors. However, listening for a long time leaves me tired the next day. This is true of radio and television as well as of live conversations. As a rule I listen to news and weather bulletins; what the current schedules offer do not encourage me to do more. Reading is much more enjoyable. We often see most of our immediate family, but I am happier for these encounters to be short as well as frequent.

Before writing this article it seemed a good idea to read around the subject. This turned out to be the most depressing experience I have had for years. This was not only because of what I learned about the extent of the problem, but because so little is being done to help people with any kind of hearing problems. What money and resources there are seem to be channelled to the deaf (the

first group of sufferers). There is virtually nothing for the deafened or the hearing impaired.

I have been asked by the Editor what help churches and individuals could give to ministers who are deaf. There are many things that *could* be done, but none of them have ever been offered to me. Some need a good deal of money. Others need a great deal of thought. Looking back over sixteen years of circuit work, I feel that I was expected to function like any other minister, despite my hearing problems.

(1) The church needs to supply a number of gadgets. These include:

- telephones with a volume control;
- 'flashing light' bells for phone and door;
- individual loop systems which can be worn round the neck at committee meetings.

(2) Churches need to keep the committee meetings which the minister with impaired hearing is expected to attend to a minimum. Such ministers should be given a dispensation not to attend synod, and perhaps should also be excused from large church committees. Attempts should be made to ensure that the meetings which they have to attend are held in acoustically favourable conditions. And most importantly, meetings which ministers with hearing disabilities have to attend should be kept short (i.e. forty-five minutes).

(3) Above all, church members should accept that such ministers will be limited by their disability. As I have said, this is hardly ever recognized, yet such ministers are as severely limited, though in different ways, as ministers who are blind or confined to a wheelchair are.

Beyond the ministers with severely impaired hearing, like myself, there are those with the partial loss of hearing which almost everyone develops as they grow older. The answer for these ministers is to admit it and use a low-powered hearing aid. The GP will refer you to the local clinic, where you have a hearing test and an impression of one ear is taken in order to make a mould. The trouble is that from this point the individual is on his or her own. They have to learn how to manage the aid for themselves. This is the part that some people find hard, but it is well worth the effort. It is also as well to recognize that perceptive deafness may occur at some time in the future, if it is not already beginning.

Years ago we frequently sang a hymn by Whittier with the lines:

And so beside the silent sea
I wait the muffled oar.

These lines come across now with a different emphasis. But the last word here must be one of gratitude that in spite of an increasingly severe disability God has not only called me to be a minister but has always enabled me to fulfil that calling.

Postscript by the Editor

One of the books which Robert Way-Rider recommends is *Seeing is Hearing: Reflections on being Deafened* by Will Morrey, a Methodist minister who suffered sudden loss hearing while a student at the University of Birmingham. It is a book which complements Way-Rider's account, since, as he points out, Mr Morrey belongs to the group of the deafened, while he himself belongs to the third group, the hearing impaired. There is no space to attempt a summary. I simply strongly commend the book.

This series has focused on the particular problems ministers and clergy face when disability or misfortune touch them. Even though Morrey does not concentrate upon this in his book, two things stand out.

The first is practical. After Mr Morrey and his wife visited his first church after college the Superintendent minister contacted the college to ask why they hadn't been told that their new minister was deaf. The reply was that it didn't hamper him in college and they had therefore never thought to mention it.

Morrey sees two sides to this. On the one hand he regards it as a compliment to his ability to communicate. On the other hand he feels it was a missed opportunity to smooth the way to his first meeting with local people and future colleagues. It illustrates the difficulty of finding the right balance in dealing with the disabled, and elsewhere in the book he discusses the question more fully.

In the event he found the people in his church 'interested, accepting, and wanting to learn how to help [him]'. He discovered later that they were anxious before he arrived but were now glad he had come.

Gradually he came to see that his disability could be an asset in his ministry. Because he had sometimes to ask a third person what someone had said, relying on others and in a sense saying to them, 'I need your help: I can't do this all by myself', his personality was developed and he expressed in his own being the fact that human beings are not self-sufficient.

Moreover, being deafened was often a help in pastoral care. 'A comment that has often been made to me, sometimes causing me considerable surprise, is "I knew you would understand" . . . People sense that profound hearing loss gives an experiential awareness of what is felt in other losses.'

This leads to the second feature that struck me and which can be dealt with more briefly, since several other contributors to the series have made the same point. After he had become deaf, some people told him quite bluntly that suffering is the result of sin, so his sin must have been the cause. That people he had not met before should come and freely offer this diagnosis added to his burden. He comments: 'If I was supposed to understand deafness as judgment and punishment I was left with a quite grotesque God'. What more need be said?