

God-concept through Deaf eyes: Impact on Spiritual Formation and Implications for
Counseling

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Author's Note

This completed thesis is presented to the Graduate Faculty of the College of Behavioral and Social Sciences in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the concentration of Research in Counseling Ministry from California Baptist University.

Dedication Acknowledgement

Dedicated to the .02% of Deaf people worldwide who truly know and follow Jesus Christ as their personal savior. Much thanks to the faculty of California Baptist University for their support. To the College of Behavioral and Social Sciences, thank you for your collective investment in the development of my academic pursuit; may the Lord use all of this for His glory and for His kingdom. Finally, the critical supporting factor behind this thesis is largely owed to the Counseling Ministry program and its faculty: Drs. Stokes and Lewis. Their investment and development of this program has been instrumental in creating the opportunity for such research to be done within the Deaf community.

Abstract

For centuries, the Deaf people group have fought through oppression and continuous adapting to the hearing world in which they are immersed. Amongst the Deaf Christians, two groups of Deaf people will become the focus of this study: Deaf people who attend Deaf church with Deaf leadership and Deaf people who attend interpreted/simultaneous communication services at a hearing church. Each group bear a distinct perception on God, based on the language used in their church (Ardila, Bernal, and Rosselli, 2016). Furthermore, their relationship with their pastor depends on the language modality within the church. An investigation will be placed upon whether both groups of Deaf people possesses a distinct *God-concept*. Also, a focus will be placed upon the pastoral leaders, both Deaf and hearing, to gain their perception of God and their role in counseling. A secondary goal for this research thesis is to provide a resource to the Deaf and hearing pastoral leaderships as well as counselors by providing insight into how Deaf people view God in their natural language as opposed to a hearing perspective.

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Chapter One: Introduction and Purpose

Theology as a behavioral science proves to be a practical application in discerning His Word as epistemological Truth, observing human behavior as a product of heart desires, and in understanding how His Truth shapes and guides perception of the world. In this study, theology as a behavioral science will be utilized in an attempt to investigate the God-concept of the Deaf people group. An observation of the modern church and the movements that have emerged in the recent years is that a specific people group has been neglected. The Deaf people group is considered one of the largest unreached people groups in the world. Comprising nearly 35 million people of every ethnicity, culture, found in various geographical locations, and economic statuses, the Deaf people group has not gained complete access to the gospel, because there are few who are aware of this reality. Located in Southern California, within the city of Riverside, there is an estimated population of 55,202 Deaf residents (Model Community, 2018); this makes for one of the largest populations of Deaf people in the United States. Statistically, less than 2% of the global population of Deaf people have been exposed to the gospel or have access to it (WHO, 2018). It is increasingly rare to see an independent Deaf church. Less than five percent of churches in America offer an outreach program with a focus on the Deaf people group (Silent Blessings, 2013). A survey conducted in 2012 revealed that there were an estimated 384,000 congregations in the United States; an estimated 19,000 churches offer an outreach of some sort to the Deaf community (Randall, Zylstra, Smietana, Winner, and Kwon, 2017). The Deaf churches that exist today struggle with doctrinal truth and spiritual formation, and often dissolve due to issues within the congregation (Gate Communications, 2018). Misinterpretation of the Scriptures, lack of

context, and adopting a model of teaching that does not engage the Deaf cultural needs often lead to confusion, resentment, hatred, and more within a Deaf church. From a personal experience at a local Deaf church led by a hearing pastor, it was noted that the pastor attempted to provide relational advice to a Deaf couple. This pastor verbalized in perfect English but lacked in his use of American Sign Language (ASL). Unfortunately, the lack of communication in ASL caused the Deaf couple to misunderstand the pastor. An implication is that this encounter has not benefitted the Deaf couple but rather caused more obstacles for the pastor to address. In a pastoral counseling setting, the trained counselor is expected to be competent in handling any situation that enters his/her office. Very few pastors/professionals have experienced the world that Deaf people live in on a daily basis. Deaf individuals who seek out counseling services are at a disadvantage due to cultural barriers and lack of accommodations. Within the territory of Southern California, very small number of counselors are fluent in ASL. The Deaf people group does not have regular access to pastoral counseling or Biblical counseling; oftentimes, the institution hires an interpreter. The cultural barriers of the Deaf world are often misunderstood by professionals within the hearing world. Biblical counseling that embraces the Deaf world is scarce due to the lack of Deaf individuals who have been reached with the gospel. The Deaf churches, locally and globally, are in dire need of leadership, research, and knowledge.

With an overview from a historical, biblical, and theological perspective, the dearth of information in the field of Counseling Ministry is clear. Perhaps an exploration into the God-concept of Deaf individuals and their relationship with their pastors would reveal patterns which we can examine. This research study was inspired by Morris

(2008) based on his interviews with some Deaf parishioners in the United Kingdom; his discoveries revealed that the Deaf people have a unique perspective on who God is, based from their unique identities as Deaf people.

As an example, a unique perspective of Deaf theology is how they view God; God is considered an inaccessible being because they cannot communicate with him directly face-to-face as their cultural custom is (Morris, 2008, p. 97). However, Scriptures show that prayer is a direct communication; therefore, the Deaf have to develop an understanding that their prayers, whether signed or spoken, will be heard by God even though it feels counter-intuitive. The majority of Deaf people refuse or feel anxious in entering a relationship with someone who they cannot visualize or see, without any face-to-face contact; “for these reasons, Deaf people do not symbolically bow their heads, close their eyes or put their hands together to pray, because such behavior restricts communication” (Morris, 2008, p. 97).

Drawing from Morris’ work, three hypotheses were developed: 1) The perception of God of Deaf people depends on the leadership and exposure to Biblical teaching; ASL has more visual-spatial impact on the visualization of God, 2) The choice of language has a significant impact upon Spiritual formation of Deaf and perception of God; therefore, spiritual formation varies, and 3) The use of ASL and Deafhood impacts the counseling situation between pastor and client; sharing the same understanding and language crosses boundaries within the counseling situation. Applying a sociolinguistic approach to this research, the goal was to identify patterns within Deaf congregants that could provide insight into the current state of the God-concept of Deaf individuals.

Statement of the Hypothesis/Research Questions:

An ethnographic interview model became the structure in which the interviews were conducted, as it provides an in-depth loosely structured interview format allowing the participants to answer from their own unique perspectives and experiences; this model approach draws inspiration from Chattergee & Kumar (1999) ethnographic interview model of conversation.

The research questions asked of the participants is the following:

1. When you think of God, what do you visualize?
2. Do you experience a living relationship with Him?
3. When you suffer life-challenges, do you seek out your pastor for help?
4. Why do you like/dislike seeking out your pastor for help?
5. Do you understand your pastor when he counsels you?

In addition to the above questions, the interview questions for pastoral leaders were structured slightly differently to reflect the counselor's perspective instead of the counselee's:

1. When you think of God, what do you visualize?
2. Do you experience a living relationship with Him?
3. When your congregation suffers life-challenges, do they seek you out for assistance?
4. What strategy do you employ for Deaf congregants in a counseling situation?
5. What has your overall experience been with Deaf church members in counseling situations?

Hypotheses

For this study, three hypotheses were proposed. Beginning with the first: It was predicted to be a notable difference in perception of God depending on the leadership of the congregation and furthermore, the language impacts an individual's visualization based on visual-spatial influence of ASL or the audio-centric nature of English expressed through the means of ASL by an interpreter. The secondary hypothesis attempted to prove that the means of the information being expressed, ASL or English, impacted the spiritual formation of Deaf individuals in terms of understanding grace and salvation. From personal experience, an observation was made that higher-educated Deaf people tend to attend interpreted services because they consider the preaching from the hearing pastor as superior to the message presented by the Deaf pastor. The tertiary hypothesis is a notable difference by the means of ASL being used by a Deaf pastor had the potential to impact counseling between the pastor and the client in comparison to the hearing pastor and Deaf client. Figure 1 will show the three hypotheses in summation:

Figure 1

Hypothesis 1: The perception of God of Deaf people depends on the leadership and exposure; ASL has more visual-spatial impact on the visualization of God.

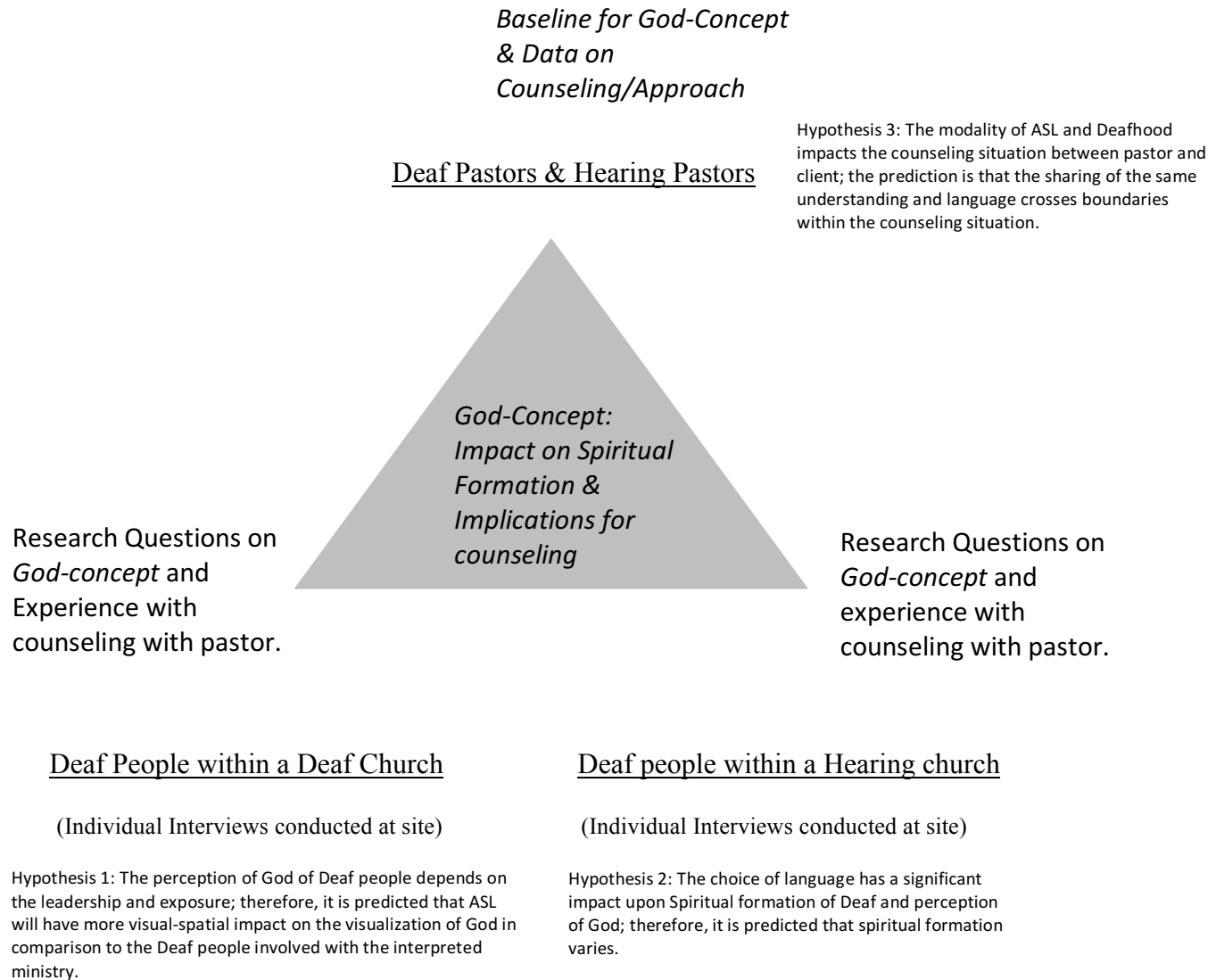
Hypothesis 2: The choice of language has a significant impact upon Spiritual formation of Deaf and perception of God; therefore, spiritual formation varies.

Hypothesis 3: The use of ASL and Deafhood impacts the counseling situation between pastor and client; sharing the same understanding and language crosses boundaries within the counseling situation.

The triangulation strategy (Fig. 2) shows the need for three hypotheses in order to answer the topical study, which investigates the *God-concept* of Deaf people within two different communities; therefore, each hypothesis will serve to validate the reality of each other.

This is displayed in this graph to show the relationship:

Figure 2



Significance of the Study

Morris made it known in his work that his goal was to build a foundational work for other researchers/Deaf professionals to build upon. Morris made it clear since he is not Deaf nor is he fully immersed in that community, it was his intention to open the door for more research to be done (2008). There is a dearth of research in the context of the Church regarding Deafness; even more sparse in the context of relational counseling. As history reveals, the Deaf people group began to develop their own theology (therefore, a working understanding and perception of God), based on Scriptures and linguistic-ethnicity identity, this theology contributes much back into the Church. Therefore, this research study provides a platform to further reveal the workings and relationships between the linguistic aspect of American Sign Language and English having an impact on the spiritual formation of Deaf individuals and their relationship with pastors in the context of counseling. For the hearing Church, the contemporary theology of Deaf people may appear to be somewhat abstract, foreign, and/or liberal but it provides the Church with an opportunity to invest itself and learn from the Deaf; it is a symbiotic relationship that only further glorifies God and His picture of what the Church ought to be.

Harlan Lane (1999) authored *The Mask of Benevolence*, a work which demonstrated the reality that one culture's expectations and benevolence can actually harm the other community amongst them. More often than not, the Church may consider itself perfectly functional yet does not acknowledge the dysfunction in the midst of their routine. It has become normal; it is the way it has been for years, and people expect it to be that way (Chand, 2011). This research aims to investigate the reality of the

impairment of spiritual growth through such mistaken “benevolence” through interpreted messages, simultaneous communication methodology, and demonstrate the current state of various Deaf ministries (Eckert and Rowley, 2013). It may become necessary for the Church to recognize that it needs to become more involved with the disabled culture to fully understand what it needs and how to include it. More often than not, the Deaf people leave churches and plant their own so that they can have one shared language and full communication without exclusion. With the three hypotheses offered, the data collected from the research has the potential to provide a resource for church leaders and relational counselors such as counseling ministers to develop a working understanding of how to communicate theological matters to the Deaf people group. Furthermore, helping these professionals in developing a working insight into how Deaf people think (Sharp, Rentfrow, and Gibson, 2017). Regardless of counseling context, counselors must be prepared to address various challenges, social issues, and inter-ecclesial conflicts with a working theological understanding. If their theological understanding does not include the Deaf people group, then they will find themselves at loss to be able to minister to that community. Furthermore, the counseling ministry would suffer because there is a “mistaken benevolence” or lack of attention to the language and the culture of the Deaf people; therefore, this would lead to a stunting of spiritual formation within the Deaf congregation (Peters, 2007).

Delimitations, Limitations, and Assumptions

It becomes critical for every person reading this paper to understand that this study aims to investigate the God-concepts of the Deaf community native to the southern region of California in the United States of America. Building off the work of Morris

(2008), the research does not imply that the results of this study is universal to every Deaf person on a global scale. One limitation of this study is the fact that this cross-cultural study is not extensive enough to have sound conclusions and applications beyond the American Deaf culture, within the Judeo-Christian context. It is imperative for the reader to understand the delimitations, limitations, and assumptions involved with this study in order to comprehend the results and implications for counseling situations. Beginning with delimitations, participants in this research were selected based on their Judeo-Christian background and a minimum length of three years of participation within a church community. The purpose for this selection was to ensure that the participants had sufficient exposure to the teachings of their leaders. It was ensured that there was a balance between males and females interviewed, which was an attempt to reduce biased answers based on gender tendencies. All participants were adults above the age of eighteen years. In the course of interviewing the participant, the researcher took precautions in structuring the questions to fit the interviewee's perspective and understanding; i.e. "When you dream about God, what do you see?" as opposed to, "When you think of God, what do you see?" Within this study, there were a few limitations that occurred that was not under control by the researcher such as comprehension, length of interview, environmental distractions, location, and such. One of the major limitations within this study were participants who are parents themselves, it became apparent that they were partly distracted by being concerned for their children during their interview. The participant's willingness in sharing confidential information was not something that could be controlled or coerced regardless of the consent agreement between interviewer and participant. The backgrounds of the participants

varied greatly. Their prior experiences with the church community, journey of faith, and communities involved had influence on their comprehension and answering of questions; therefore, the research questions were designed to address a specific focus while allowing for a variety of answers and perspective. Several assumptions about the participants were implemented by the researcher such as prior knowledge of who God is, consistent teaching exposure, being involved with the Deaf community, and having similar understanding of what the research questions were asking. The researcher assumed that each participant had a basic understanding of his or her church's theology and culture, having some sort of a relationship with the congregation, and a relationship with their pastor/leader of their ministry.

In addition, the capitalization of the 'd' in Deaf refers to the cultural identity of the Deaf people group; as opposed to the pathological model of impaired hearing. The reasoning behind this distinction is out of respect of the Deaf culture and their lifestyle. The hearing people are the majority; therefore, they adhere to identities related to their countries, ethnicity, and/or lifestyle. The word 'hearing' is not capitalized but rather used to distinguish people who are not of the Deaf world and culture (Lane, 1999). To properly interpret the responses and discussion, it is important to take note of the 'D' as it is capitalized throughout this paper.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Biblical Theology: Mentions of the Deaf People Group

Moving from a broad overview of the current state of the Deaf people group to an overview of what the Scriptures have to reveal about the human condition of disability and deafness, an exploration into Scriptures is required. The following section on Biblical theology makes an attempt to clarify some definitions and concepts necessary to understand the study conducted. Before venturing any further, some clarification is needed; this section addresses the natural human condition of disability and deafness [*soma*], not the spiritual nature of disability and deafness [*pneuma*]. Theological themes obtained from the *somatic* nature of deafness applies directly to the Deaf people group of modern day and sheds insight on how the Church should approach the Deaf people group. The spiritual nature of Deafness as expressed by the major prophets of the Old Testament, King David in Psalms, and the writers of the New Testament applies to all audiences regardless of their human condition. One significant cultural characteristic for the Judeo-Christians is the fact that they believe that all humanity is made in the image of God (*imago dei*); therefore, all human souls have an inherent value. The fallen nature of man resulted in the distortion of His image; sin has a direct influence on the physical nature of man.

Focusing on the *soma* nature of Deafness, it is necessary to examine Leviticus chapter 19 verses 9-18, focusing on verse 14, “You shall not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind, but you shall fear your God: I am the LORD” (ESV). Historically, Leviticus was written when Moses and the Israelites escaped Egypt and settled down at Mt. Sinai. At this point in the history of the Hebrews, the tabernacle was

built and God's glory dwelled within; however, there were no laws enacted nor a priesthood established. Exodus 19:6 commanded Israel to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (MacArthur, 2016). MacArthur (2016) briefly explains the nature of Leviticus, "While the book addresses issues of the Levites' responsibilities, much more significantly, all the priests are instructed in how they are to assist the people in worship, and the people are informed about how to live a holy life." God bestowed these laws to Moses so Moses could begin to form the holy priesthood known as the Levites. At this point, Israelites did not have a formal structure to which they could adhere; they had records of the earlier patriarchal fathers and their lives but nothing to point them toward the future. The geographical location where Leviticus was written did not change; it remained at the base of Mount Sinai. Chapters 17 – 27 of Leviticus contains the theme of appointed guidelines for practical holiness, a continuing emphasis on personal holiness in response to the holiness of God. Hershey Friedman (2002) wrote on this passage from a Jewish ethics and morality perspective,

The seemingly simple verse prohibiting the placement of stumbling blocks before the blind is actually a succinct statement encompassing many important rules of ethics and morality. It is an admonition not to take advantage of the weak and the helpless or to place temptation in the path of those who may be morally weak. It is also a call to action demanding that society and people do everything possible help the weak, the vulnerable, and the helpless. It is a fundamental principle of business ethics and is on par with such essential principles as "The stranger who resides with you shall be treated the same as the native-born and you

love him as yourself" (Leviticus 19:34) and "loving your fellow human being as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18). – Hershey Friedman (2002), PhD.

In verse 14 of Leviticus 19, we must understand the word “deaf” from its Hebrew origin because it was the original language in which Leviticus was written. The Hebrew word used here is *chêrêsh* (H2790), meaning literal deafness (*soma*) stemming from the word *chârâsh* (H2793), which points to spiritual deafness (*pneuma*) (Brown, Driver, Briggs, Gensenius, and Robinson, 1952). As Friedman (2002) points out, from a Judeo-Christian perspective and a direct command from God, the Israelites were not to prey on the disabled but instead love them as they loved themselves; they were to do everything in their power to help and include them. If the Deaf were created *imago dei*, then they carry the image of God; therefore, if Israelites discriminated against the disabled community, they were discriminating God Himself as He would judge them for going against His commands. For centuries, this was the mindset within Judaism. In a Judeo-Christian context, the modern Church needs to embrace this principle and attitude towards the disabled community. However, it is fascinating to see how the Jewish Pharisees and Sadducees treated the disabled community in the New Testament; they carried themselves somewhat higher than the disabled community. Keep in mind that Moses had personal experience before God in the form of the burning bush, “Then the LORD said to him, ‘Who has made man’s mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the LORD?’” (Exodus 4:11, ESV). As a Hebrew, Moses was reminded that God is sovereign above all things and uses people for His purpose. God is fully conscious that He is able to make a man mute, deaf, seeing, or blind according to His purpose. This concept is reflected in the ninth chapter of the gospel of John, “and his disciples asked

him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’” Jesus answered, “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him...” (John 9:2-3). The Jewish concept of sin having a direct impact on the somatic reality of man still persisted over a thousand years since Moses had written the laws of the priesthood, which today is found in Leviticus.

Looking into Mark chapter seven verses 31-35, Jesus was in the early part of His ministry. As He passed through a town, a crowd brought forth a man who was deaf and had a speech impediment; the crowd begged Jesus to heal him. Christ took the deaf man aside, privately away from the crowd.

Then he returned from the region of Tyre and went through Sidon to the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. And they brought to him a man who was deaf and had a speech impediment, and they begged him to lay his hand on him. And taking him aside from the crowd privately, he put his fingers into his ears, and after spitting touched his tongue. And looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, “Ephphatha,” that is, “Be opened.” And his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly” (Mark 7:31-35, ESV).

The Greek word for “deaf” used in this passage is, *kophos* (G2974), which translates to “blunted of hearing” indicative of a physiological issue (Strong, 1990). Mounce (2006) expands on this word, “This word only occurs in the Synoptic Gospels, and, in every occurrence, the biblical writer highlights the miraculous power of Jesus Christ over such disabilities” (p. 159). The contextual background of Mark is that the target audience was the Romans, the Gentiles; this Gospel has less references to the Old Testament in comparison to the other Synoptic Gospels. In interpreting the passage of Mark 7:31-35, it

is useful to note that the target audience is the Gentiles, which means they recognized the power of Christ in healing the disabled. The Gentiles were amongst the crowd who brought the deaf man to Jesus for healing.

In Leviticus, there are chapters full of ritualistic cleaning for impurities in order to cleanse oneself of sin before the LORD. Morris (2008) noted this in both Gospels of Mark and John; for Jesus to heal someone or even touch a disabled person, he would be considered impure and unrighteous due to the sinful nature of the disabled. “However, each person he comes into contact with becomes part of society once more and by touching them, it is they who become ‘pure’ rather than Jesus becoming ‘impure’” (p. 103). Because this deaf man in Mark 7 had a speech impediment, it can be assumed that he was marginalized by his own society because he was not able to function “normally” or interact with them. After centuries of traditions, the Jewish people have added so many laws and in places distorted what was in the Mosaic law to fit their lifestyles and to raise the standard for righteous living. Paul knew this best and admitted himself that he had kept all the laws and yet, it does not account for his salvation (Romans 7:7-25). Jesus encountered this distortion of Jewish customs and laws throughout His ministry; many Jews considered the disabled community to be victims of their own sin and neglected them as opposed to what the Mosaic law spoke about supporting the disabled. In the span of 1500 years, the Mosaic law was distorted and the culture evolved accordingly; therefore, the disabled community was marginalized and outcast. Christ did not embrace this concept when He healed the blind man in John; in His own words, He spoke the same thing that God spoke to Moses in the burning bush, reminding His disciples that God is the one who determines whether man is deaf, blind, or mute for His

own purpose. In the scope of culture, Scriptures show that humanity has adapted its lifestyle to fit the times. The application for the Church is critical today; it needs to embrace the disabled as *imago dei* and look after its own needs like Christ said, “so that the works of God might be displayed in him...(Jn. 9:2-3).”

Taking a page from Enns (1989) in terms of dogmatic theology, “The word *dogma* comes from a Greek and Latin word meaning “that which is held as opinion” and may also denote “a doctrine or body of doctrines of theology and religion formally stated and authoritatively proclaimed by a church” (p. 499). The key distinctions between systematic and dogmatic theology is the fact that the roles of authority are different; the dogmatic theology primarily consists of a doctrinal proposition that is exegetical in nature, represents the decision of the Church, and holds the authority of that denomination. Systematic theology is concerned with what Scripture has to say on various topics within the Church. This section addresses the dogmatic theology of the Church towards the disabled community from two perspectives: Pentecostal and Protestant. The perspectives of Pentecostal and protestant denominations contribute a significant amount of exegetical and contemplative theology from their respective dogmatic perspectives in how to approach the disabled community. Also, included in this section is a few examples from other denominations such as the Episcopal Church, United Church, Church of Christ, and etc.

Rouse (2008) was a masters of divinity student at the Church of God Theological Seminary in Tennessee at the time when he wrote a piece on the disabled through the lens of Scripture. Approaching this concept from a Pentecostal perspective, Rouse identified that the Pentecostals struggle with the relationship between ‘healing’ and ‘disability.’

Rouse (2008) states,

However, the desire to heal and be healed can at times eclipse the valuable role of disabled individuals in Pentecostal communities. The disabled voice often reveals the 'disabled' state of our concepts of divine healing. Modern reductionist tendencies in regards to healing have ultimately produced a reductionist understanding of the Spirit's work in relation to the individual, community and kingdom (p. 185).

Consequently, the Pentecostal doctrines and their vocabulary have conflicts in how the message and concepts are carried out. A doctrine emphasized by the Pentecostal church is the doctrine of *glossolalia* (speaking of tongues); this serves as a sign of sure salvation being evident when a professed believer first begins to speak in tongues. Cheryl Taylor (1995) shares an observation, deaf people were beginning to be identified to be signing in unknown signed tongues in some Pentecostal congregations. Taylor (1995) identified in the first issue of the Pentecostal Apostolic Faith article written in 1906 that amongst the unknown languages spoken was the "the deaf-mute language." A hearing Pentecostal minister by the name of Harry Brotzman gave a personal account to this phenomenon,

The staff member was 'slain' under the power of God for 16 hours. Much of this time was spent speaking in other tongues as the Spirit gave utterance, and also in the language of signs-beautifully signed. My wife and I were able to interpret the beautiful signs she was using. He writes elsewhere, "That morning three other girls, none of whom had studied the language of signs, gave praises to God in the signs." Speaking in unknown signed tongues was not limited to hearing people, but has also been documented among deaf people. This is not by

any means a new phenomenon within the Assemblies of God. Recently, a group of deaf ministers were asked whether they had experienced signed glossolalia prior to the recent outbreak of this phenomenon, and most said yes (Villafane, E., 1968).

As a result of this revelation, the Pentecostal church affirmed in their doctrine that “[Peter] declares that the baptism in the Holy Spirit (with the evidence of speaking in other tongues) is the fulfillment of this prophecy. Consequently, this experience of Spirit Baptist with the speaking in tongues must be available for *all*, including the deaf” (Paraclete 29/3, 1995). The Pentecostal church recognizes the disabled community as an essential part of the Church; every aspect of Scriptures is to be applied to the disabled community in the same manner it does to everyone else. God’s story of redemption applies directly to the disabled community as well; even though the disabled community does not consider themselves to be ‘disabled’ but rather living without the ability or function and yet continue to live their lives as if they lacked nothing. In Rouse’s words, “As a Pentecostal son (and grandson), I also possess personal hopes for the future of this tradition... [this] brings attention to issues of *kingdom* and *community* in regards to the place of divine healing in the Pentecostal community” (2008, p. 198).

Jeff McNair (2008) brings his voice into this conversation from a Protestant perspective; he highlighted the importance of having the disabled community within the ranks of the churches. He proposes 1 Corinthians 12:22-23, the passage that discusses the parts of the body that make up the whole Body. Moltmann (1997) reinforces McNair’s thoughts,

If we want to change this [the exclusion of disabled community in the church] we have to stop staring merely at the disablement and see the person who is disabled. Then we can also see that every disablement can become a charisma. God's strength is also made perfect in disablements. Those of us who are not handicapped generally stare most at what another person lacks or has lost (p. 67). Indeed, for the church to embrace the disabled community as a living indispensable organism that contributes to the Body of Christ, it must adjust accordingly. In 1972, the General Conference of the United Methodist Church amended a paragraph,

We recognize the responsibility of the Church to serve and receive the services of retarded persons. Realizing that many of these persons are unable to articulate their own needs and aspirations, we commit ourselves to work with them to articulate and realize these needs and aspirations. We further urge support of programs, services and legislation that will enable them to enjoy their human rights, especially in matters of education, employment, and place of residence (Herzog, 2006, p. 78).

The amendment of this passage sparked several mini-movements in the Protestant denominations all across America, notably in the Lutheran and Presbyterian churches. In 1978, the General Board of the American Baptist Churches called upon American Baptists to acknowledge and recognize persons with disabilities to be fully vested members of the Christian fellowship and to take action to enable the disabled community to be fully included in society and in local congregations. In 1994, the Episcopal Church created the Episcopal Disability Network under the direction of the Rev. Barbara Ramnaraine with funding from the national Episcopal Church and personal donations; its

primary purpose was to create resources and information to contribute to the churches in America (Herzog, 2008, p. 90). In the Presbyterian Church, the Presbyterians for Disability Concerns produced a video *Surprising Grace: People, Disabilities, Churches*, that introduced active members of the church with disabilities serving within, in order to promote more inclusion of disabled members in other churches (Herzog, 2008). The Evangelical Lutheran Church currently has four disabilities ministries, which are anchored historically within its various denominational traditions; the Baptist churches continue to provide various disability ministries through benevolence associations and/or internal ministries provided by staff or congregational members.

In terms of Calvinist, Arminianism, Covenantal, Dispensationalism, Dogmatic Roman Catholic Theology, and/or Neo-orthodoxy, the disabled community will find itself in a struggle against what the Scriptures reveals about the disabled and the doctrines of its respective church community. Apart from the *soma* nature of disabled people, their *pneuma* nature does not suffer any disability or obstacle from being redeemed; the physical nature does pose an obstacle but it should not discourage the Church from including them. McNair (2008) states it succinctly, “We [the Church], however, should reject a perfectionist notion of social skills, because we understand how it artificially divides us. We need to change our perspective, as those with intellectual disability are not integrated largely because of *our* discriminatory perceptions and practices” (p. 327). It is critical for the church to understand that independent of the perceptions, the disabled community are still just people. “They are indispensable as equal, full members, as people of faith, and as guides as we learn about the Christian faith” (McNair, 2008, p. 329). As far as the dogmatic theology reveals about the disabled community, the

challenge is presented before the Church of how its doctrine and perspective on the Truth is embraced by the disabled community.

Morris (2008) presented the idea of Deaf Theology, which was inspired by a blind man by the name of John Hull. Hull was struck blind later in his life and came to the realization that the Bible was written from the perspective of hearing men who were able to read; for the Blind community, they had difficulty in contextualizing the Bible. For instance, the analogy between light and dark would be a difficult concept for them to grasp. Likewise, for the Deaf with their ongoing struggle in literacy, the Bible is not something easily grasped. Contextualizing the biblical messages into sign language poses a serious challenge.

Alienation may be felt because the Bible emerges out of hearing people's experiences and makes use of hearing languages and images for God, so that God appears to be a very hearing reality... This alienation may further be felt because many Deaf people struggle with acquiring reading skills (a hearing phenomenon) and so not only the content but also the media through which that content is expressed may cause alienation (Morris, 2013, p. 96).

This creates a challenge for Churches to be able to express their respective *dogma* to the Deaf community; it requires additional staff who are familiar with the language and the culture to be able to contextualize the message within. Morris (2008) expressed his concern and rationale for the formulation of Deaf theology. He recognized that the biblical narratives were critical and have an authoritative role in shaping the theology and recognized that they may feel alienated from the theological language and imagery in the Bible. Morris (2008) takes inspiration from John Hull's personal struggle, "Hull

acknowledges that this collection of books has continuing relevance in the Christian tradition and so he enters into what he describes as a ‘conversation with the Bible’” (p. 95). Understanding that today, the Deaf churches and the Deaf ministries are very young in comparison to the thousand years’ traditions of Judaism, the Eastern Orthodox church, and centuries of Catholic and Protestant dogmas.

Contemporary Theology: An Overview of Deaf Theology

In the words of Grenz and Olson (1996), “Insofar as you are a thinking person who at least occasionally reflects on life’s ultimate questions and a Christian who seeks to understand and apply God’s Word, you are doing theology” (p. 24). For the Deaf people group, this proves to be a challenge as God’s Word is not contextualized to the deaf condition (and never purposed to be); therefore, the way that Deaf people perceive God is different than what the hearing Church perceives Him as. This section will focus on the disciplines of Lay Theology and Ministerial Theology while overlapping with Wayne Morris’ work, *Theology without Words*. Morris (2008) explores the modern day situation of Deaf churches and theology within the context of the United Kingdom. His work is the leading resource that reveals the best developing contemporary Deaf theology in light of the rich history of Catholic and Protestant traditions centralized in the United Kingdom.

Lane, Pillard, and Hedberg (2011) make the case that the American Deaf-World (the American Sign Language minority) is an ethnic group. An ethnic group is "a collectivity within a larger society having real or putative common ancestry, memories of a shared historical past, and a cultural focus on one or more symbolic elements defined as the epitome of their peoplehood" (Schermerhorn

1978, 12).

This question must be asked: Is it necessary for Deaf people to develop their own theology? Morris (2008) finds positive evidence supporting Deaf people to seek out a theology that is unique to the Deaf culture and perspective of the world. *Faith seeking understanding* is a famous statement to describe the premise of Theology.

Such a theology thus has important social and political ramifications as it is a theology which incites action. Deaf people's awareness of God's love and care for them, as many conversations with Deaf people have indicated, has provided many Deaf people with a sense of self-worth (in the eyes of God), empowering them to challenge the evils that lead to discrimination against Deaf people (Morris, 2008, p. 74).

Grenz & Olson (1996) also emphasized this point, "Theology is not, as many wrongly suppose, a kind of esoteric knowledge possessed by a few superior intellectuals. It is simply *faith seeking understanding*" (p. 24). Of course, theology is the study of God, His attributes, and His relationship with humanity; it is necessary for us to see what the Deaf eyes reveal about His nature and His attributes. McNair (2008) incorporated the Disabled community in the 1 Corinthians 12 picture of the Body; the disabled people are vital because they can teach the Body something new and unique about God and His characteristics such as *agape* love. Theology is vital to the Deaf community so their folk theology or distorted theology is replaced with a working genuine study of God; it must be contextualized and tested against Scriptures. Nadia Bolz-Weber (2005), a Lutheran pastor, described his original experience as an ordained leader of a Deaf congregation.

He was a member of the congregation for years; the Bishop gave him special permission to adjust the liturgy to fit the Deaf (Bolz-Weber, 2005).

The great reformer Martin Luther insisted that worship and the Bible be in the language of the people. In our day and age this doesn't seem all that revolutionary, but think about what it means for a people whose language is visual and not spoken (Bolz-Weber, 2005).

Likewise, modern terminology such as, "called," "spoken to," "still small voice," and "hear our prayers," are somewhat a contradiction to the Deaf people because they feel alienated; therefore, they adjust accordingly with a contextualized application of the concepts. The language of the hearing people, full of rich traditions and history, simply do not embrace the Deaf people. Ladd, Paddy, and Lane, H. (2013) expand,

The **language** of an ethnic group plays many roles: It is the vehicle for transmission of cultural patrimony through the generations; it expresses traditions, rituals, norms, and values; it is a means of social interaction among group members, a symbol of their ethnicity and frequently the "epitome of their peoplehood" (p. 566).

While the language of speech within hearing churches gives insight to theology as interpreted by a common language, the Deaf do not often share the same common language. Therefore, the theology developed can become an obstacle to the Deaf believer, as well for the disabled community as whole. "A church that welcomes the disabled is great, but a bolder step forward is for churches to be inclusive... the disabled need the church – almost as much as the church needs the disabled" (Nelson, 2005, p. 29).

An attempt to identify and distinguish Deaf theology in light of their denomination/affiliations is difficult because it is often incomplete or a synthesis of several different backgrounds and theologies together. Sometimes, this merging and intersection between theologies create something new, such as the sign developed for the concept of the trinity. With the visual nature of sign language, a sign was developed using three fingers in a single movement becoming one. Spoken words cannot express the conceptual picture in a visual-spatial realm but sign language can express the three dimensional characteristics of such concepts. Often, sign languages provide a visual conceptual picture that accurately portrays the theological significance behind it, such as the sign for “Jesus,” one hand with the middle finger touches the palm of the other hand and reversing the movement, vice versa. In that sign alone, the concept of the crucifixion is indicated and is unique to Jesus’ identity in the Bible. Unless one is familiar with the culture and the language, it would be difficult to bridge the gap; it takes two cultures working together in order to benefit one another. One key aspect of Deaf theology, as Morris (2008) observed in the UK Deaf churches, is the story-telling/drama characteristic of the Deaf culture; they will use these methods to express theological ideas and set the context for discussions. Many Deaf people are skilled at story-telling with their hands, facial expressions, spatial reasoning, and portrayal of actions.

The Deaf churches mimic closely the framework of an Emerging Church, “developing in its belief system, in its relationship to the culture, and in its ministry focus” (Enns, 1989, p. 689). The Deaf churches tend to unite over common themes: oppression and lack of access to the Gospel. Postmodernism has permeated the Deaf churches because there is a lack of community and strong trained leaders to shepherd

those flocks. Many of the Deaf converts come from very traumatic backgrounds and spend years within state institutions for the Deaf; the American culture has become first nature to them. The Deaf people are not concerned as to the conservative values of Christianity but rather getting the Gospel out to those who have not heard, an evangelical action, which is characteristic of the Emerging Church. The theology of these Deaf churches is incomplete; however, this does not define every Deaf congregation in the world today. For example, New Life Deaf Church in Fort Worth, TX, has an independent Deaf church under the Southern Baptist Deaf Convention; they adhere to the Southern Baptist dogma but contextualized for the Deaf congregation. In the UK, there are Catholic Deaf congregations who perform masses contextualized to the British Deaf culture. The most common groups found today are Deaf Bible studies, which embrace the emerging church philosophy and dogma. These groups heavily rely on their own past experience of not being included into the churches; with no affiliation to other doctrines, the dogma/biblical theology has become very liberal and loosely interpreted. Granted, most Deaf churches do consider Scripture to be inerrant in origin and adhere to it. It is how they interpret it with a degree of relativism that causes the flux in the spiritual growth of the church.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Participants

An emphasis placed upon Deaf participants, Deaf pastors, and hearing pastors, the intended population were targeted towards Deaf Christians who attend either a Deaf church or a hearing interpreted ministry as well as the pastoral leadership of these churches. The targeted age group was between the ages of early 20s to early 60s; the interest was with those who have had several years participating with a particular ministry and have life experiences. The primary strategy was recruiting people with whom the researcher has made acquaintances, formed over the years of visiting different Deaf churches and ministries. No part of this study was conducted from another source not directly from live participants. An additional sub-strategy was the implementation of the “snowball” strategy beginning with close Deaf friends who are involved within the local church ministries, both Deaf and hearing. Beginning with close friends, there was the possibility of these friends introducing the researcher to other people and so on. In the end, there were 15 participants (non-pastors): ten males and five females, all Deaf to the respective definition of *soma* mentioned.

Instrumentation and Procedures

The methodology for the interviews consisted of an ethnographic interview model being applied towards the participant interviews. The aim was to provide an in-depth semi-structured interview format, allowing the participants to answer from their own unique perspective and experience; this model approach draws inspiration from Chattergee and Kumar’s ethnographic interview model of conversation (1999). Preliminary explanation of the process of the interview was done prior to the actual

interview. Prior to the interviews, a consent form was handed out to each participants specifically requesting their permission for the publication of their responses and the release of liability. The consent form includes the release of rights to the recorded interview by the use of a digital camera (Appendix B). For the Deaf participants and pastor, the forms were expressed clearly in ASL and in English prior to their signature to ensure full accessibility and clear communication of the mission statement of this study to each participant. Furthermore, prior to the interviews, contact was made to schedule a more private meeting to ensure a comfortable environment for the participant. Seeing that American Sign Language is a visual-spatial language by nature, the use of a video camera has been utilized for the recording of all interviews with the Deaf participants and Deaf/hearing pastors. The interviews were conducted on site, in a private setting so each individual's answer and opinion would not be cross-contaminated by the sight of other participants' answers to each question. Each interview was recorded by video for the sake of documenting the visual-spatial answers of every Deaf participant; for the hearing pastors, a written document may suffice so they may express their thoughts better. Given the nature of the interviews and the "snowball" effect, there was potential that the interview would lead to several different topics and conversations; therefore, some confidentiality was desired from the participants. None of the interviews have been conducted in public places or in front of other people/participants. As Minton and Dodder (2003) point out, "They are eager for someone to listen to their opinions. Because they were so open and candid, it was necessary to ensure confidentiality and to conduct the research with integrity and thoroughness" (p. 433). An emphasis was placed to preserve an isolated environment that had minimal distractions for the sake of genuine

cathartic answering of questions. Likewise, such security measures were undertaken to secure the identity of each participant in every step of the interview process, such as assigning unique alphabetical codes to each person's response to the research questions, i.e. Participant 1 responded to the first question with, "God has a spiritual body, not a human one." The participants were informed of the true purpose of the study at the beginning and made aware of the choice to opt out at any point in the interview. At the beginning, the research's true purposes were revealed as an ethnographical study in an attempt to gain an "insider's view" from the participant.

Furthermore, understanding that every research project comes with considerable risks, there was an assumed risk of uncomfortableness, such as participants feeling cornered to provide detailed information about their personal spiritual lives or turn to a conversation that may be considered as gossiping. For their protection, the researcher asked only the research questions and nothing beyond the parameters listed, with the exception of clarifying or restructuring the question for better comprehension. The other risk was that the Deaf people potentially could feel somewhat deflated due to their inexperience or lack of exposure with theological concepts about God. The topic of the research could be considered as a sensitive topic since one of the research questions focused on the counseling experience with their pastors. Confidential details were not asked from these participants for the sake of protecting both parties. The church affiliation information and participant's name were not published in the final draft of the thesis. After each interview, the videos signed in ASL were transcribed into English by the interviewer and looked over by a secondary unbiased professional (certified

interpreter) to provide a method where pertinent information were to be included in the results and discussion.

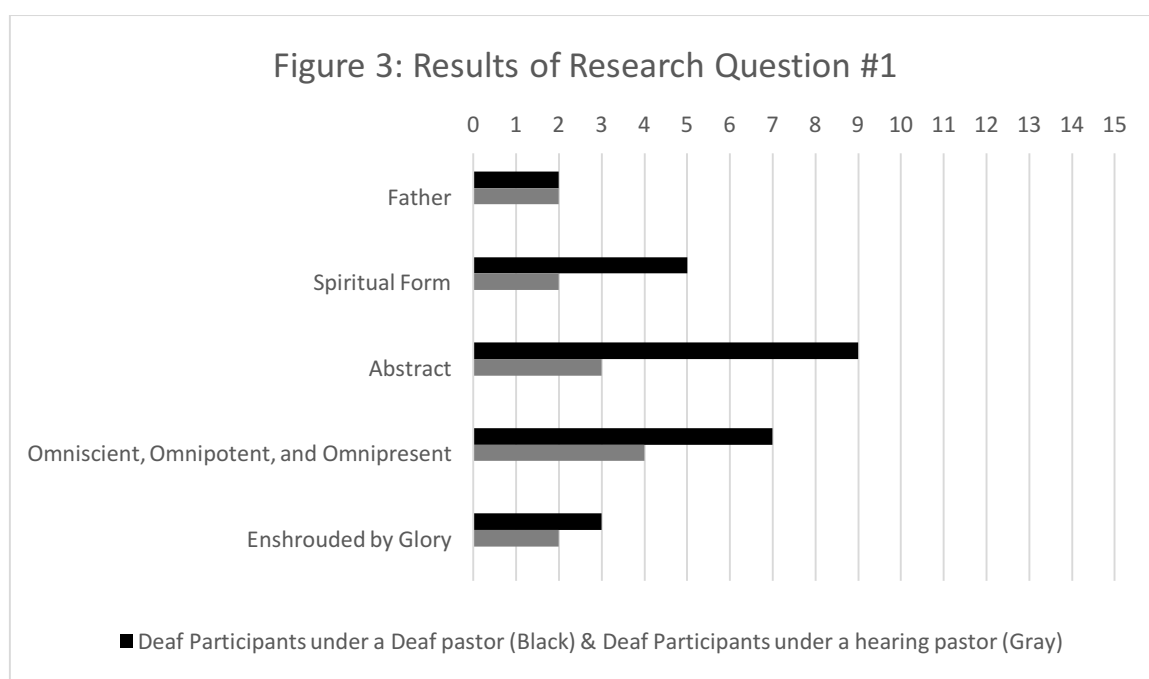
Statistical Analysis Methods

As the hypotheses/research questions make the intended purpose clear, this study is of qualitative nature. Each question was open ended; therefore, some participants chose to answer more extensively than others. Each interview is considered to be semi-structured in nature. After all interviews were completed, each transcript was studied for relevant words, phrases, sentences, or sections (see Appendix A). The target focus was placed on repeating concepts and/or words that are mutually shared across all the participants' answers. In the discussion section, the connections between all patterns and common words can be found. The results of each question has been displayed in the form of bar chart representing identified repeating concepts and words amongst each participants' answers, along with the numerical frequency.

Chapter Four: The Results of the Ethnographic Study – Individual Interview

Results from Participants – Members of Various Congregations

Using a parallel approach to the structure of the interviews, each research question and answer from all participants was studied for norms and patterns. Fifteen participants were interviewed; nine were male and six were female, all who have been part of a congregation for a minimum of three years and are Deaf themselves. Within the males, the age range is between 26-60 years old. Within the females, the age range is between 25-45 years old. Amongst all participants, the ethnicities were varied and should not be considered as a factor within this qualitative study.

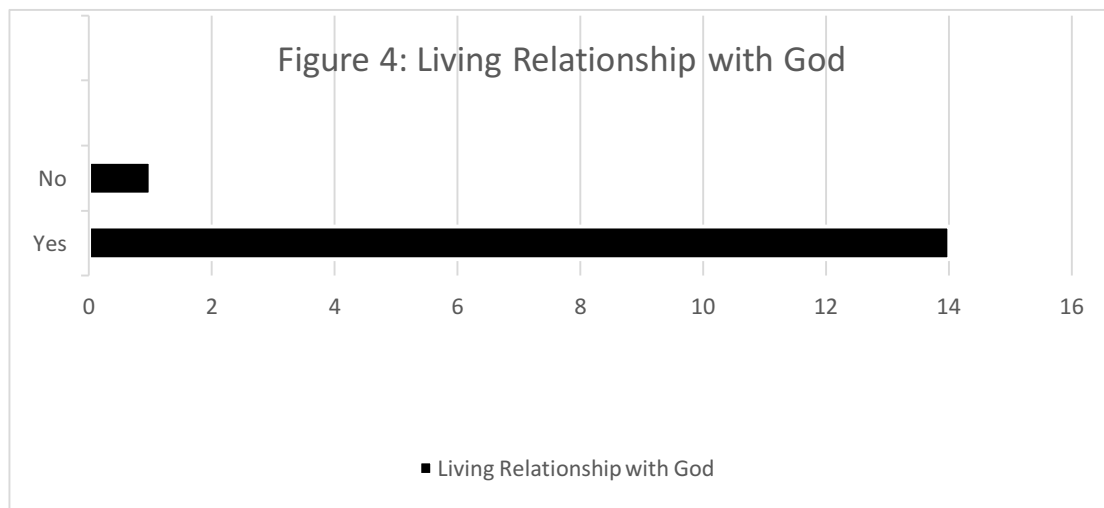


Question 1

The participants were asked the following question, “When you think of God, what do you visualize?” Using a categorical approach, the results were interpreted by the means of total percentage calculated directly from how many participants responded similarly out of fifteen participants. Four out of fifteen participants (27%) envisions God

as their Father. 46% of the participants (7 out of 15) reported God being of spiritual form, a supernatural being. 80% of the participants (12 out of 15) mentioned God as an abstract concept. 33% of participants stated God being surrounded by His glory, not being able to see His face. The most frequent answer from the participants was that they viewed God as omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent; therefore, they envision God as a powerful, abstract being that is all-knowing, all-capable, and always present. 73% of participants shared this trend, which is 11 out of 15 participants. As shown in the figure above, there is not much discernable difference between the two groups due to ten of the participants are affiliated with Deaf pastoral leadership, in contrast only five were under hearing pastors.

Question 2

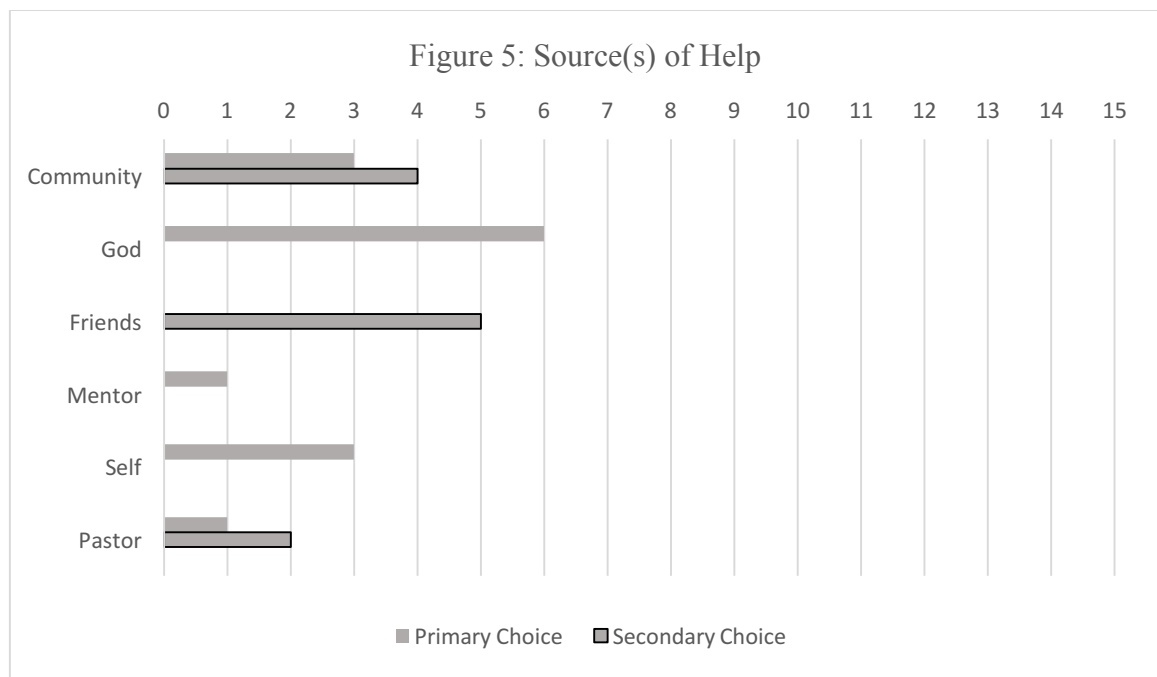


The second question presented to the participants was, “Do you experience a living relationship with God?” The purpose of this question aimed to explore whether people, being involved with the church for a minimum of three years, would answer confidently or with hesitation. 14 out of 15 participants responded with confident affirmation that they do indeed experience a relationship with God, which represents 93%

of the participant study. Out of the 14 participants, nine were members of a Deaf-led congregation and five were members of a hearing congregation. Therefore, in this area of focus, there is no notable difference in how members from either congregation experience their relationship with God in their practical lives.

Question 3

The third question presented was, “When you face life challenges, who do you turn to for help?” Out of fifteen participants, the results can be seen in the following chart:

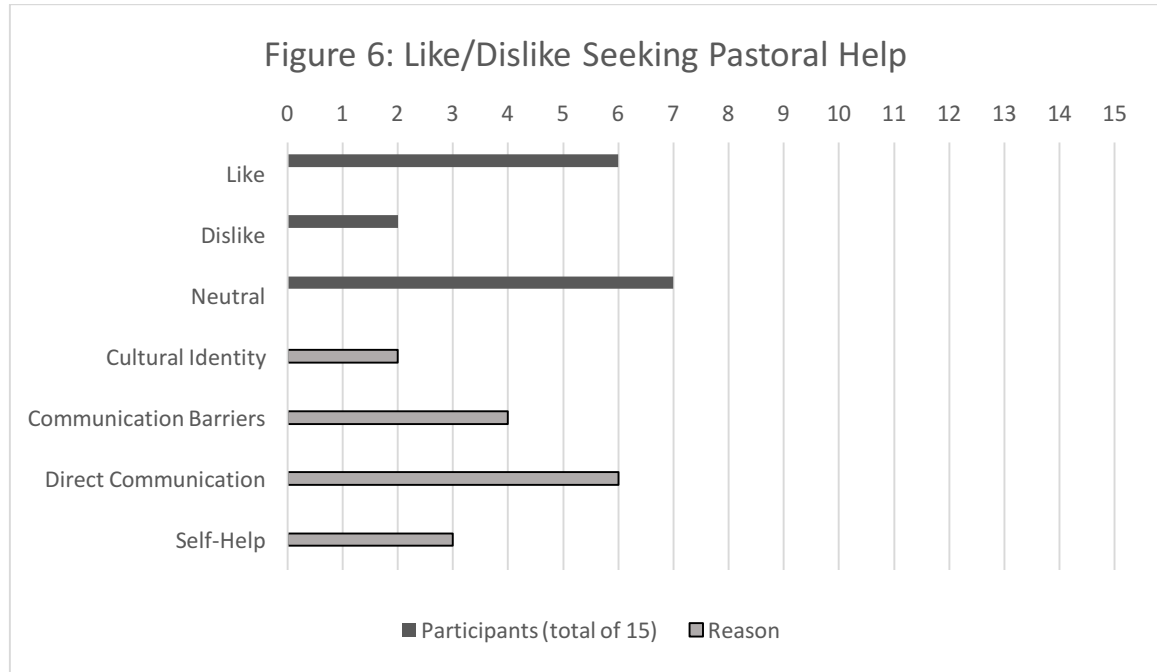


A trend that appeared as a result of this question is the fact that pastors are not considered to be the primary source of help, they are third to God with the community being the most prevalent secondary choice. A potential contribution to this trend is the fact that Christians are taught to maintain a relationship with God; He is someone who can maintain confidentiality and make changes in one's life. Humans, on the other hand, are messy and unreliable people; especially in the Deaf community, news travel extremely

quickly and without regard of confidentiality. Furthermore, there are communication barriers between Deaf and hearing congregants/pastors.

Question 4

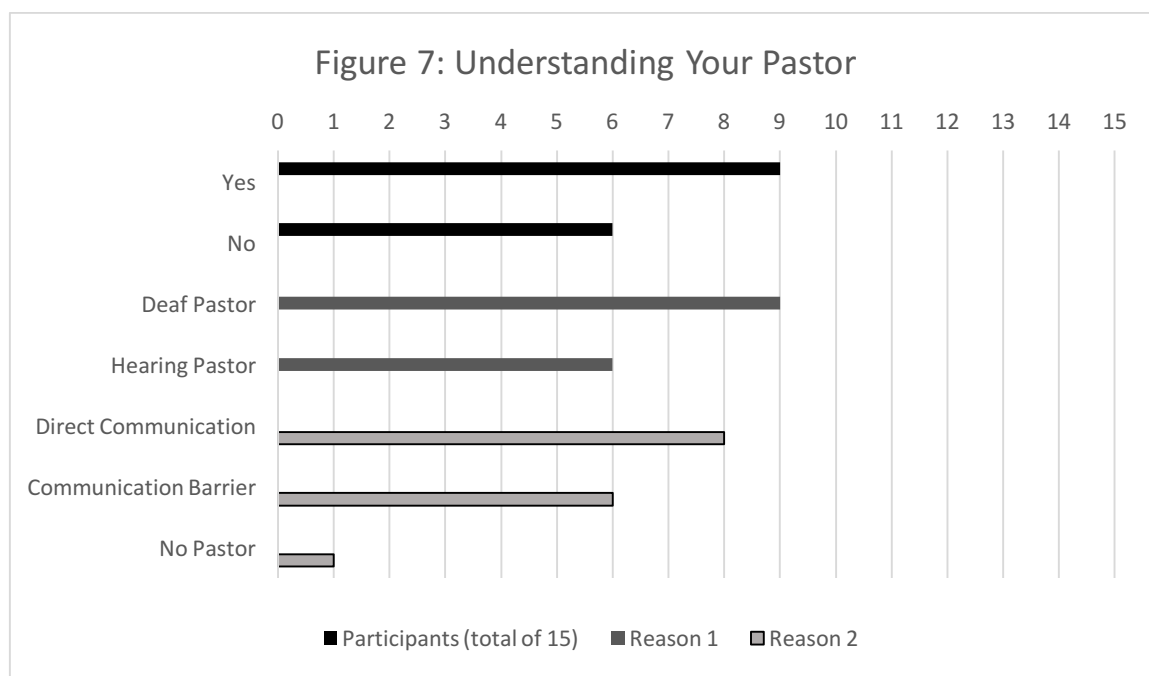
Participants were asked the fourth question, “Do you like/dislike going to your pastor for help? Why or why not?” The results can be seen in the following chart:



Question 5

Towards the end of the interview, participants were then asked the fifth and final question, “When your pastor counsels you, do you understand him/her?”

Communication and language barriers can be an obstruction to mutual understanding of each other as seen in the chart below:



Results from Participants – Pastoral Leadership

This section focuses on the results derived from the interviews with pastoral leaders, both Deaf and hearing. For the sake of obtaining a baseline, it was important to interview pastors who have had received formal training by the means of academic programs or being mentored by other experienced leaders. In this sub-study, six pastors were interviewed: three Deaf and three hearing. They were asked the following questions:

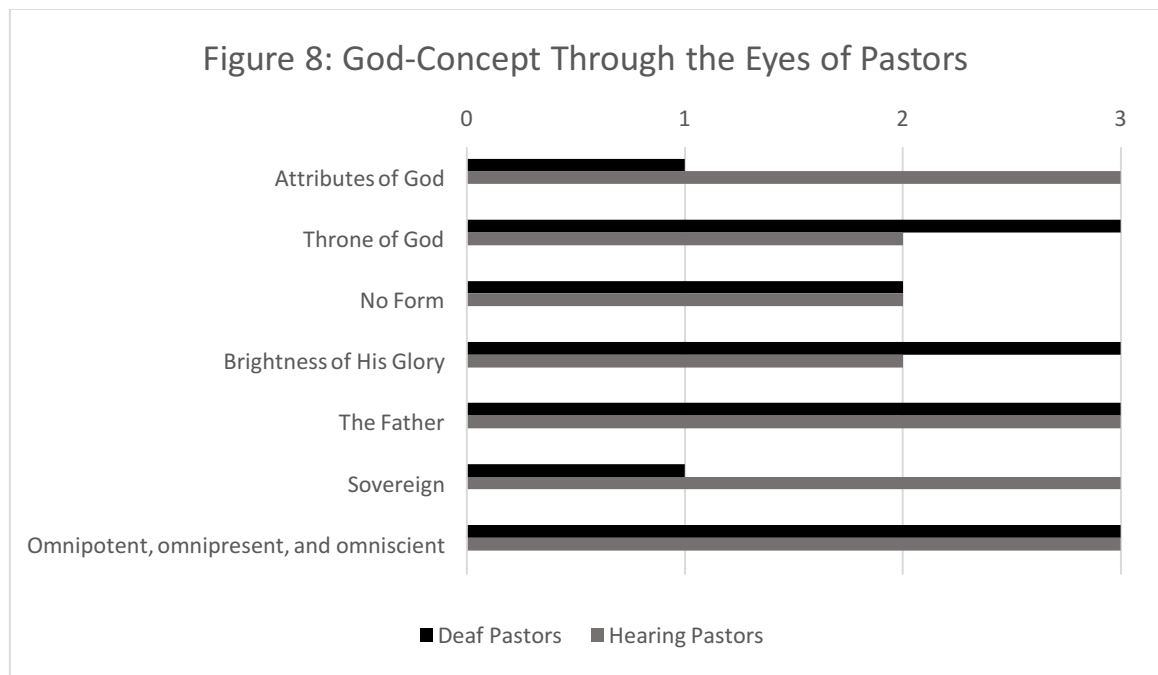
1. When you think of God, what do you visualize?
2. Do you experience a living relationship with Him?
3. When your congregation suffer life-challenges, do they seek you out for assistance?
4. What strategy do you employ for Deaf congregants in a counseling situation?

5. What has your overall experience been with Deaf church members in counseling situations?

The questions were modified to reflect the pastoral role and their interaction with their members due to their formal training and exposure to biblical teachings. The following results are to be considered as a baseline in which we can compare results with the Deaf participants' answers. In the discussion section, this baseline provides more insight into why the Deaf participants' answers were given.

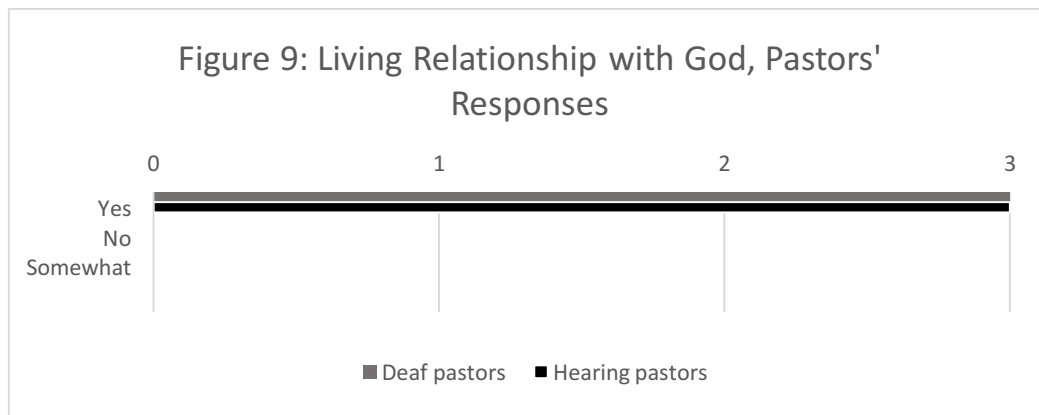
Question 1

The first question presented in the interviews with the pastoral leaders was, "when you think of God, what do you see?" The results of common responses and commonalities, are displayed in Figure 8 below:



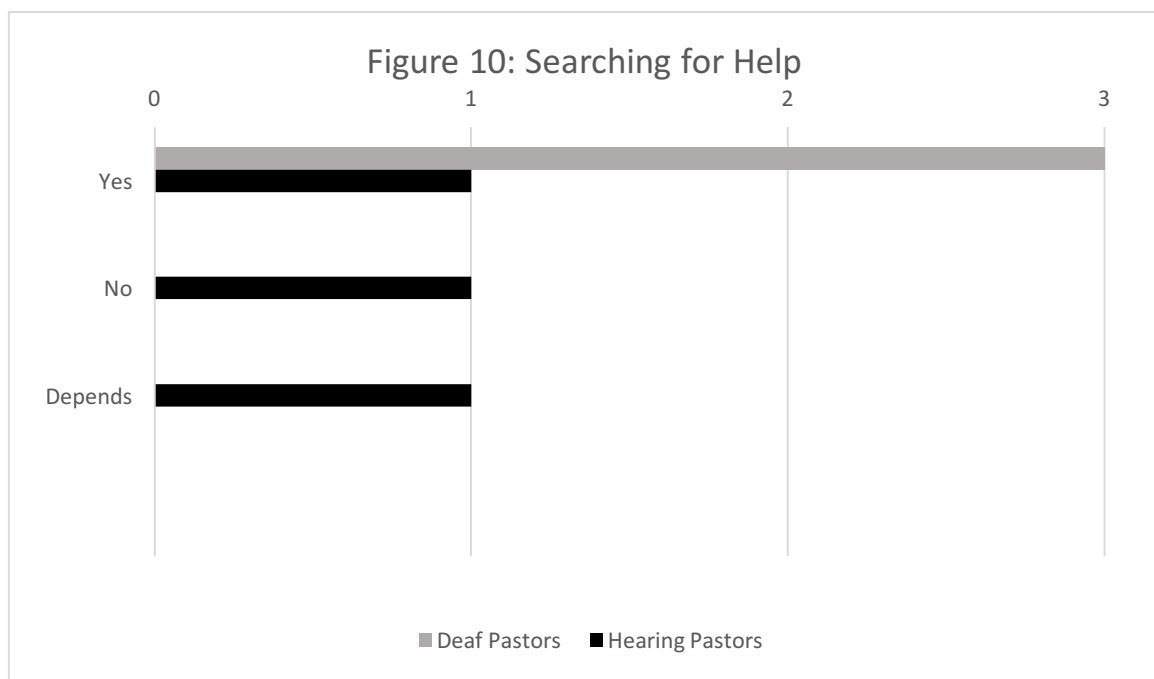
Question 2

Pastors were then asked whether they experience a living relationship with God.



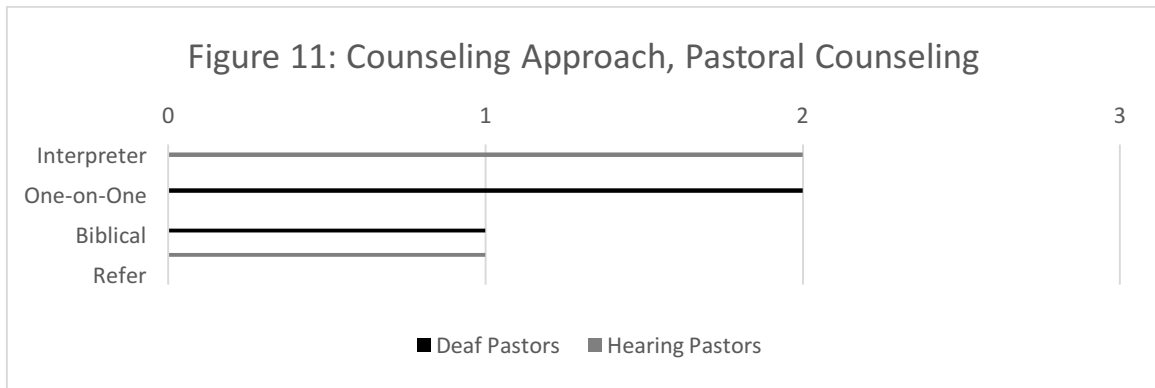
Question 3

Furthermore, pastors were then asked whether their congregants seek them out for help in the midst of their life-challenges.



Question 4

Pastors were then asked about their respective approaches when they receive a Deaf client from their own congregations in the context of pastoral counseling. The most prevalent patterns were then compiled in the following chart:



Question 5

The final question sought out the more personal experiences of all the pastors, regardless of being Deaf or hearing, to glean some insight. The results were divided to reflect the answers from both Deaf and hearing pastors.

Out of three Deaf pastors' answers, the following keywords were mentioned amongst all the participants: sacrificial, challenging, direct communication, painful, rewarding, beautiful, and dedication. All the Deaf pastors shared the same mindset of commitment, passion, and determination to reach their congregants.

Out of three hearing pastors, the results speak for themselves. The repeated key words were: challenging, lack of communication, strange, feeling of helplessness, words of encouragement, communication barriers, rewarding when mutually understood, and constant dependence on God in facilitating communication. Two out of three mentioned that they wished for more direct communication and they are always happy to consult, reinforce, or even advise when there is more help needed. A hearing pastor said, "In the counseling world, the hot topic is 'multi-cultural competency.' It has not come easily for us in the pastoral counseling world in regards of our Deaf congregation. It is imperative that we build bridges with the Deaf pastors, wherever they are, to build a stronger resource of pastoral counseling for the Deaf community" (Pastoral interviewee, 2018).

Concluding the results section, it is now time to shift focus from the numerical values, patterns, and comments to the interpretation of these results and the insights they provide in light of the proposed hypotheses.

Chapter Five: Conclusions/Discussion

Applying a sociolinguistic approach to this research, the primary goal is to identify patterns within Deaf congregants that could provide insight into the current state of the God-concept of Deaf individuals. The ultimate purpose of this study and results is to provide a general survey of the Deaf people group and their God-concept in the context of their relationship with their leader. With the results outlined above, we return to the three hypotheses that were proposed: 1) The perception of God of Deaf people depends on the leadership and exposure; ASL has more visual-spatial impact on the visualization of God, 2) The choice of language has a significant impact upon Spiritual formation of Deaf and perception of God; therefore, spiritual formation varies, and 3) The use of ASL and Deafhood impacts the counseling situation between pastor and client; sharing the same understanding and language crosses boundaries within the counseling situation. An implication of the interview model was the Deaf people became comfortable with the interviewer; therefore, it was clear that the Deaf people had begun to form their own theology of God-concept from their clear unadulterated answers.

Wayne Morris' research work in the United Kingdom, specifically with the Deaf people group, has been congruent with the findings of this study (2008). Deaf people have developed a unique way of describing their image of God (Rée, 2000). People all have their own unique perspectives on who God is, based from their past experiences, personal interactions, exposure to Biblical teachings, and their own life journey (Cashwell, Young, Tangen, Pope, Wagener, Sylvestro, and Henson, 2016; Davis, Moriarty, and Mauch, 2013). The first question asked was in inquiry of what they envisioned. The most popular answers were that God is abstract, omniscient, omnipotent,

and omnipresent (fig. 3). ASL being a visual-spatial language, the Deaf people used the strengths of ASL to demonstrate God being everywhere at once. As a result, the Deaf participants all seemed to be strongly aware that God is all-knowing, all-powerful, and is everywhere at once (Sthulman and Lindeman, 2015). Another observation was nearly half of the Deaf participants' mutual perspective of God not having a distinguished form (7 out of 15); most described God being on His throne, enshrouded by His Glory, face hidden by pure white light, and light is beaming forth from God Himself. Yet, some of the participants showed deep love for God by saying that they view Him as a loving Father (4 out of 15 participants). The visual-spatial strength of American Sign Language contributes greatly in communicating abstract concepts that are oftentimes condensed into words. Modern cognitive psychology has shown that the Wernicke's area and Broca's area of the brain, making up the cerebral cortex are primarily responsible for comprehending/understanding as well expressing written and spoken languages; however, this applies directly to visual-spatial languages as well (Ardila, Bernal, and Roselli, 2016). Deaf people have developed Wernicke's and Broca's areas in the context of visual-spatial comprehension and expressiveness. It is not surprising that Deaf participants in this study have expressed their God-concept in ASL. The first hypothesis proposed was, "The perception of God of Deaf people depends on the leadership and exposure; therefore, ASL has more visual-spatial impact on the visualization of God." As the result of the first question asked of the participants, it is assumed that American Sign Language does influence the Deaf people's conceptualization of God in development of their own God-concept.

The second question revealed 14 out of 15 Deaf participants expressed that they do experience a living relationship with God (fig. 4); therefore, it can be inferred that they have exposure to His Word, by the means of ASL. Understanding that the modality of language plays a large role in how Deaf people interpret His Word, Deaf people rely on a visual-spatial language with its own syntax and structure unique to the Deaf community. If the leader of the congregation is not familiar with American Sign Language, it may prove to be a challenge to be able to build relationships with the Deaf congregants, accurately teach and disciple, and to integrate them into the Church (Humphries, 1977; Hosken, n.d.; McNair, 2008; Hobbs, Fogo, and Bonham, 2016).

The third question (fig. 5) asked of the Deaf participants was to identify their primary source of help; the researcher assumed that they would seek out their pastor for help. The result showed that the most common source of help was seeking out God (six out of fifteen participants) with the second most common being their friends (five out of fifteen participants). Pastoral leadership as a source of help was at the bottom of the list at two out of fifteen. A norm within the Deaf world is an emphasis on fellowshipping and being involved with the Deaf community (Eckert, 2010; Bauman, 2004; Delich, 2013). Investigating further, it was asked of the participants whether they liked or disliked seeking out their pastors for help; note that out of fifteen participants, ten were under Deaf leadership at their respective churches.

The result of the fourth question reveals that the most common factors were cultural identity, direct communication, communication barriers, and/or self-help. Six out of fifteen participants liked seeking out their pastor for help due to direct communication and shared cultural identity. One participant commented, "I cannot seek

out my pastor for help because he does not share the same cultural understanding as I do; therefore, I turn to my own community for help.” This is also reflected from one pastor’s view, “It is imperative that we build bridges with the Deaf pastors, wherever they are, to build a stronger resource of pastoral counseling for the Deaf community” (Pastoral interviewee, 2018). Therefore, there is some truth to the idea that communication and cultural barriers do play a role in hindering counseling situations (Watts, 2012; Wright, 2015; Gomes, 2012; Eriksen, Marston, and Korte, 2002).

The fifth question asked of the participants resulted with nine out of fifteen participants with confirmation that they do understand their pastor clearly (note: these participants are under Deaf leadership); six out of nine said that they do not understand their pastor when counseled (five are under hearing leadership). Another factor to consider within this research is the fact that most of the Deaf/hearing counseling situations are facilitated by the means of interpreting services. An implication of the interpreting service is that the original message intended by the counselor can be interpreted differently by the interpreter then conveyed to the Deaf individual; this creates a situation where there are more challenges to circumvent for the sake of clear communication.

The second and third hypotheses aimed to shed insight into the fact that the cultural and communication barriers do impact how Deaf people grow spiritually and their perception of God. The research conducted is not holistic; therefore, it should not be considered definitive. However, if one examines the results, it is quite clear that those who are under hearing leadership suffer a lack of access to their pastoral leadership, which causes more distress and spiritual deprivation (Fitch, 2000; Johnson, 2007;

McIlroy and Storbeck, 2011). Examining the results from the pastoral interviewees' answers, it becomes clear that having the shared cultural understanding and utilizing the native language creates a much deeper bond, potential discipleship situations, and allows the pastor to be able to have access to their congregants rather than marginalizing them due to communication and cultural barriers (Brown and Sandage, 2015). Taking an overview of all the results of the participant's interviews, the following conjectures can be made about each hypothesis proposed.

Hypothesis 1: The perception of God of Deaf people depends on the leadership and exposure; ASL has more visual-spatial impact on the visualization of God.

Conclusion: The perception of Deaf people of God is dependent on the modality of language and cultural understanding of the leader.

Hypothesis 2: The choice of language has a significant impact upon spiritual formation of Deaf and perception of God; therefore, spiritual formation varies.

Conclusion: Those who were under the leadership of the hearing pastors showed the most struggles and it was reflected in their answers. Most sought out self-help and/or their friends for advice; they did not have direct access to their pastors. In terms of God-concept, the results were essentially similar across both groups; however, the depth of understanding and comprehension was more evident in the participants who were under Deaf leaders.

Hypothesis 3: The use of ASL and Deafhood impacts the counseling situation between pastor and client; sharing the same understanding and language crosses boundaries within the counseling situation.

Conclusion: As the fifth question asked of the pastors, the keywords reflected from the hearing pastors' answers, "challenging, lack of communication, strange, feeling of helplessness, words of encouragement, communication barriers, rewarding when mutually understood, and constant dependence on God in facilitating communication." This revealed a mutual feeling that the counseling situations are not always effective when it comes to the Deaf/hearing situations. In comparison to the common keywords from the Deaf pastors, "sacrificial, challenging, direct communication, painful, rewarding, beautiful, and dedication," it becomes clear that the counseling situations between Deaf/Deaf prove to be more reflective of successful counseling and more positive prognoses.

Implications of this Study

With the general survey and overview of fifteen Deaf participants, three Deaf pastors, and three hearing pastors' answers in light of their God-concept and counseling experience, the implications should be discussed in context of counseling ministry. The importance of this study contributes to creating resources for the Deaf people group to have access to counseling services and most importantly, the opportunity to further develop their Spiritual lives with God, in their heart language. For example, Bradshaw and Hoffman (1996) provide a great comprehensive work focusing on the Biblical life-cycle; they outline great emphasis on spiritual formation in terms of catechisms, holy days, rituals, marital ceremonies, and many more; the Deaf people group may need some adaptations to these rituals to fully contextualize it to their culture. With little to no access to their native language, a Deaf person immersed in a hearing world will find themselves spiritually constricted, possibly stunted, based on the fact they may be unintentionally

marginalized by the Church. The Church needs to be educated on the needs of the minorities found within their ranks, especially the Disabled community. The Church is not perfect due to the incredible amount of sinners who are involved; Crabb (2007) paints the picture of the Church being a community where we face one another in love, walking alongside each other, ensuring that all people involved experience the holistic community of God's grace, love, and mercy and the sanctification process of becoming more like Him. The Deaf people group should not be neglected by the Church; this research aims to contribute essential information to pastoral leaderships, ministers, ministry leaders, and congregants alike to develop a better understanding of what the Deaf Christian community needs (Murren, 1999). Perhaps this requires a re-evaluation of the ministries involved to make improvements or increased contribution from the Church in partnership. Deaf people can contribute to the Church in ways that other people groups cannot; more specifically, the Deaf people group has potential in expanding the God-concept of Judeo-Christianity from an audiocentric perspective and including a visual-spatial aspect (Hermann, 2008). As the literature review shows, history reveals that the Deaf people group have persevered throughout centuries of marginalization, oppression, and misunderstanding (History, n.d.). Within the counseling world, it is hoped for a discussion and development of ethics regarding how to appropriately engage in a counseling situation with a Deaf client, specifically within the pastoral counseling context (Sanders and Newton, 1997; Schermerhorn, 1978). In light of the modern world, the profession of clinical counseling and psychology oftentimes overlooks the importance of having someone who has the same background and shared language for the sake of the client's holistic health (Shults, 2012; Worthington and Sandage, 2001; Zhender, 2011).

Multi-competency within counseling is important but there is a great need for recognition when the situation requires someone more qualified; furthermore, when someone's soul depends on effective communication and counsel (Tsjsseling and Tellings, 2009).

Pastors need to keep in mind that the Body of Christ is better united when all parts are working together, fully respecting the authority and purpose of each part; therefore, pastors ought to work closely with the Deaf people group and Deaf counselors who can better contribute to the spiritual formation and development (Wilson, 1995). This research study shows the necessity of the integration of theology with partnership from other professions, when appropriately filtered and compatible with God's Truth (Stokes and Lewis, 1999).

Recommendations for Further Research

In the same manner as Dr. Wayne Morris presents his study and research, this study is not holistic nor is it representative of the entire Deaf people group but rather becomes a framework upon which other researchers may build. It is recommended for future research to expand their participant pool to include a minimum of twenty participants and five pastors for both Deaf and hearing. The research questions provide enough guidance to accomplish the questions, but be prepared to ask more clarifying questions keeping in mind the hypotheses proposed.

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Appendix A

Indexed Answers

		Question #1	Question #2 Yes/No	Question #3 Community, God, friends, inventor, or Self	Question #4 Like / Dislike	Question #5 Understand Yes/No/Why?
14/15 - 93%	1	Father, Spiritual Form Abstract, Personal	yes	Community, Friends, Christians	Cultural Identity, Border, (Dislike) D	With Shared identity, yes. W/out: no
	2	Sovereign, Father, Omnipotent, Potent	yes	Peers	Support group, Shared mentality (Neut) H	Yes; generally
	3	No Form, bright light, Father, Personal	yes	Mentors, against Community	Experienced People: H Wisdom & Knowledge	Yes; generally
	4	Indescribable, Spiritual omnipotent, Potent, & Present	yes	Community	Communication barriers, Pastor (neut) H	No; Comm. barriers Lack of relationship
	5	No words, Spiritual, Image Dei.	yes	God first then Pastor	Like, Direct Communication D	yes; Direct Comm.
	6	Spiritual, holy, image of Artistic Inspiration.	yes	God first then Pastor	Like, Direct Communication D	Yes; Direct Comm.
	7	Powerful & holy, mysterious, Omnipotent	yes	Pastor then friends	Like, Direct Communication D	Yes; Direct Comm.
	8	Transcendent, abstract, Powerful	yes	God, wife, maybe friends	Like, Direct Comm. D	yes; Direct Comm.
	9	Image Dei.	yes	Community God	Dislike, Comm. Barriers H	Yes if direct; Not through interpreter.
	10	Father, overshadowed by Glor. Transcendent	yes	God Community	Like, Direct Comm. D	Yes; Direct Comm.
	11	Majesty (Powerful), Abstract, Omni-all	yes	Self God	Neut. Comm barrier H	No; Cult & Comm barriers
	12	Transcendent, Spiritual System, abstract	yes	Self	Neut. Self D	No; Lack of relationship.
	13	Omnipotent, Transcen- dent, incarnate	No	Self; indirectly his friends	Neut. Self D	No; not directly
	14	Everywhere, all of it is God.	yes	Self	Neut. Self D	No; no pastor.
	15	On throne; Sovereign Surrounded by Glor.	yes	God, then Community	Like, Direct Comm. CoPA	Yes; Very clearly Comm. & Rel.

Appendix B: Consent Form

Study Title: *An Exploration of the God-concept through Deaf Eyes: Impact on Spiritual Formation and Implications for Counseling*

Researcher: Jackson Brown

What is the purpose of this research?

I'm hoping to understand more of your perspective of God and how that impacts your relationship with your pastor or fellow church members. My goal is to explore whether having a Deaf leadership/counselor or lack of one impact the way you grow spiritually and how you get along with your pastor and/or other church members. I am interested to see if there is a pattern or unique perspectives to consider when working with the Deaf people group in a church setting.

Participation is voluntary

It is your choice to participate in this research or not. If you choose to participate, you may change your mind and leave the study at any time. You may skip any questions you do not want to answer. Refusal to participate or leaving during the interview will not get you into trouble and no one will be angry. Also know that if you choose to leave the interview, your relationship with CBU will not be harmed in any aspect.

How long will I take part in this research?

This interview will take approximately 45-50 minutes but has no time limit if you choose to share more information.

What can I expect if I take part in this research?

As a participant, you will be asked five questions survey telling me about your background and understanding of God and your relationship with your pastor. The questions will not identify you. The interviews will be recorded for accuracy only. No information will be provided such as names of the people in the group/interview. What you say will be kept confidential.

What are the risks and possible discomforts?

I do not foresee any risks to you as participant in this research project. If there is anything that makes you feel uncomfortable by answering any of the questions, you can skip any question you don't want to answer. It is your right to privacy and information; I will respect that. Please note that your participation is voluntary and will not affect your relationship with me.

Are there any benefits from being in this research study?

By your participation, we could potentially uncover a wealth of perspective, patterns, experience, suggestions, guidance, and strategy for how to grow and strengthen Deaf churches and ministries and counseling approaches for Deaf clients. My goal is to explore whether having a Deaf leadership/counselor or lack of one impact the way you grow spiritually and how you get along with your pastor and/or other church members.

Will I be compensated for participating in this research?

There is no payment for your participation but depending on the location, I would love to provide coffee/beverage of choice and a snack for your time.

Informed Consent

Although I do not anticipate any risks greater than what you experience in daily life, we are talking about topics such as your relationship with your pastor, other congregant members, and potentially past history involving other churches, and you may become a little worried or stressed out. If you experience discomfort, you may contact me (the researcher), or the CBU Counseling Center (951 - 689 - 1120, <https://www.calbaptist.edu/counseling-center/>).

If I take part in this research, how will my privacy be protected? What happens to the information you collect?

Your name on this form will be kept in a secure location under lock and key; only to show your permission for this interview. For your protection, the video recording will be kept on a

stand-alone hard drive, kept under lock and key and encrypted with a password known only by me. After the interview, an unbiased interpreter will be working alongside me in transcribing the interviews for the sake of accuracy; this interpreter will not know your name and will not have personal access to information.

If I have any questions, concerns or complaints about this research study, who can I talk to?

The researcher for this study is Jackson Brown [who can be reached at jabrown@calbaptist.edu, and/or at 951-830-2106 (text only)]. Also, Dr. Carol Minton [faculty advisor] is available for contact at cminton@calbaptist.edu. Please feel free to contact me and/or her if you have any concerns, or complaints such as

- If you would like to talk to the research team,
- If you think the research has harmed you, or
- If you wish to withdraw from the study.

This research has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board at California Baptist University (IRB # 032-1718-EXP). They can be reached at by emailing irb@calbaptist.edu :

- If your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by the research team,
- If you cannot reach the research team,
- If you want to talk to someone besides the research team, or
- If you have questions about your rights as a research participant.

Statement of Consent

I have read the information in this consent form. All my questions about the research have been answered to my satisfaction. Please select one option below and fill in the date.

Name _____ (Print please)

- ☐ **Yes, I consent to participate. I understand I can change my mind**
- ☐ **No, I do not wish to participate in the study.**

Date ____/____/2017