



'I felt like I was licking the outside of the watermelon, but not really tasting what's inside.'

—Joo Hai Kang on attending seminary classes without an interpreter



By Bob Reeves

A language of their own

A KOREAN PASTOR ‘SPEAKS’ WITH HIS HANDS TO SHARE THE GOSPEL WITH THOSE WHO CANNOT HEAR

If members of Heritage Presbyterian Church in Lincoln, Neb., tire of watching pastor Ray Meester preach, they can instead observe sign-language interpreter Frances Beurivage, who turns his words into fascinating hand movements and facial expressions.

One recent Sunday, however, the process was reversed. Joo Hai Kang, who is deaf, delivered the sermon in sign language while Beurivage, sitting at a microphone, translated Kang’s sign language into spoken English. Thus the hearing participants gained a better idea of what the handful of deaf worshipers normally experience at Heritage Church.

Kang, a native Korean and a Presbyterian minister, is pastor of a United Methodist church for the deaf in Jacksonville, Ill. While the congregation he leads is small—fewer than 20 members—Kang has helped to inspire American churches that seek to improve their ministries to the deaf.

Meester invited Kang to preach at Heritage Church in part to demonstrate to his congregation—

and to leaders of Nebraska’s Homestead Presbytery—what a difference it makes when the person ministering with the deaf is also deaf.

About 15 deaf people from Lincoln were in church to experience Kang’s preaching, in which he combined American Sign Language with animated pantomimes to get his point across.

At one point, while describing Jesus’ miracle at the wedding at Cana, Kang walked back and forth on the platform as if carrying huge jugs of wine. To illustrate a small boy throwing a tantrum, he got down on the floor and kicked his feet.

To the deaf, it makes a difference.

When an interpreter—even an excellent one like Beurivage—translates a spoken sermon into sign language, many things, such as examples and scenes based on sounds rather than visual images, are hard to convey, signs Jan Haun, who is deaf. Kang’s message seems more real and personal to his deaf audience, she adds.

Kang’s ministry demonstrates what can happen when a pastor is a member of the deaf community and fully understands deaf culture, says

PREACHING IN SIGNS: Joo Hai Kang, pastor of Jacksonville Community Church of the Deaf in Jacksonville, Ill., signs “prayer” during a sermon at Heritage Presbyterian Church in Lincoln, Neb. He showed the congregation what a difference it makes when the person ministering to the deaf is also deaf.

DIOP AZCUIY/Lincoln Journal Star, Lincoln, Neb.

Meester, who also consults on deaf issues nationally for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

The son of deaf parents, Meester is fluent in American Sign Language and has always had a strong interest in deaf ministries. He leads a Bible class for the deaf and an interpreter (usually Beurivage) is there every Sunday to sign not only the sermon but also the hymns, anthems, announcements and every other part of the service for the half dozen deaf people who regularly attend.

A cultural minority

Most deaf people don't tend to think of themselves as handicapped, but as members of a cultural minority that speaks a different language, and, in some ways, thinks differently than the hearing community around them, says Kang.

"For deaf ministry to succeed, it is essential to get strong support from the hearing churches," Kang says. He noted that his former church in Korea grew out of a hearing church that was willing to commit financial and spiritual resources to deaf ministry. "The hearing church should be more sensitive to the spiritual needs of deaf people. Lack of sensitiveness on the part of the hearing church suffocates the growth of deaf ministry."

With Beurivage interpreting, Kang tells an interviewer he wants to encourage more churches to become accessible to those who cannot hear. Currently he believes he is the only deaf Presbyterian minister serving as a pastor—and he is in a United Methodist rather than a Presbyterian church!

'God's missionary'

When his mother discovered he was deaf at age 2, she "decided to seek God," Kang says. "She prayed, and then she heard the church bell ring. She decided to walk into that church and that's how she became a Christian."

Kang says he often teased his

parents that he was "God's missionary" to his family.

As a young child he went to church every Sunday, but "was bored to death. I couldn't hear the pastor's sermon or the music. I became restless and would wiggle about. My mom was always shushing me and pinching me to keep quiet," he says, making the appropriate gestures.

At age 6 he entered a school for the deaf and his parents finally discovered a church that had an interpreter for those who couldn't hear. "I was thrilled because I could understand what was going on," Kang says. "I felt very much at home. I loved the Bible stories in sign language."

Kang did well in school, but his teachers encouraged him to follow in

his father's footsteps and become a tailor—a career that required little use of language. Kang wanted to be a teacher, but one day, when a counselor asked him about his future, he signed the word "pastor" instead of teacher.

"I was surprised because there had never been a deaf pastor in Korea," he says.

Kang came to believe that God intervened at that moment and began calling him to the Christian ministry.

He enrolled in a Presbyterian seminary in Seoul. No interpreters were provided, so he kept up with the lectures by looking at his friends' notes.

"I felt like I was licking the outside of the watermelon, but not really tasting what's inside."

In search of education

Seeking a college for the deaf, he traveled halfway around the world to Washington, D.C., to study at Gallaudet University. There all the classes are taught in sign, but it is American Sign Language, which is unlike that used in Korea, so he had to learn a new sign language.

He then studied at Central Bible College in Springfield, Mo., an Assemblies of God institution that provides interpreters, and completed his religious studies at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C., which has a program for deaf students.

The scarcity of Bible and theology programs for the deaf is one reason that so few deaf people go into the ministry, Kang notes.

After receiving a master of divinity degree in 1982, Kang returned to Seoul, was ordained as the first deaf Presbyterian pastor in Korea and served seven years as associate pastor in the church in which he grew up. He returned to Gallaudet in 1990 to get a master's degree in deaf education, then for 10 years was pastor of Youngnak Presbyterian Church of the Deaf,

INCLUDING THE DEAF

TO LEARN MORE

■ **Joo Hai Kang** is serving on a Presbyterian task force on disabilities that is scheduled to make recommendations to the 2006 General Assembly. For more information contact him at lordseakang@hotmail.com. To learn about the task force, visit www.pcusa.org/acswp/wwd/wwd-disabilities.

■ **PCUSA disability consultants** (for contact information see www.pcusa.org/phewa/consult): Raymond Meester—hearing Sue Montgomery—mobility/accessibility Rick Roderick—visual Milton Tyree—developmental

■ **Access Sunday**—Resources for planning a special worship service around disability awareness are available at www.pcusa.org/phewa/pdc-resources-asr.



DIOR AZCUIV/Lincoln Journal Star, Lincoln, Neb.

UNDERSTANDING DEAF CULTURE: Kang feels called to ministry with the deaf, more than 90 percent of whom are “unchurched.”

interpreters and others who work with the deaf and those with hearing impairments—who can offer resources and referral to local churches.

“It’s not always a matter of just getting an interpreter, but understanding (the deaf) culture,” Meester says.

He cautions against using volunteers. Interpretation for the deaf is a special skill that requires considerable training. But hiring a qualified interpreter isn’t cheap: “A good interpreter can cost \$35 to \$40 an hour.”

The Presbyterian Church in South Korea has 25 ordained ministers who are deaf. According to the Korean Association of the Deaf, there are about 350,000 hearing impaired people in South Korea, a nation of about 50 million. The number of deaf people is about 120,000, about the same proportion as in the United States, says Joo Hai Kang.

Some PCUSA churches are making an effort to reach out to the deaf. For example, Winnebago Presbytery in central Wisconsin established the ecumenical Hands of Christ Deaf Ministry in 1997 with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, United Church of Christ, United Methodist and Episcopal churches. Gisele Berninghaus, an ELCA hearing minister who knows sign language, interprets and leads worship in participating churches.

Such ecumenical programs demonstrate how churches can pool resources to meet the needs of the deaf, Kang says. But some deaf people feel they should have a choice of worship styles and theological approaches, just as hearing people do.

Having a deaf congregation with a deaf minister is the ideal, Kang says, but because of the small numbers of deaf people and the very few deaf pastors, that is unlikely to happen in most places.

—Bob Reeves

A wide-open mission field

While many churches provide headphones to amplify sound for the hard of hearing, few provide interpreters for the deaf. That may be the reason that more than 90 percent of the nation’s deaf population (estimated at between 500,000 and 1 million) is classified as “unchurched.”

Congregations seeking advice frequently contact Ray Meester, pastor of Heritage Presbyterian Church in Lincoln, Neb., and a national consultant on ministry to the deaf and hard-of-hearing for the denomination.

Often church leaders become aware of the need when a member has a deaf child or relative, he says. But churches tend to pay less attention to the needs of deaf people in general. And those churches that do want help, especially in smaller cities or rural areas, often don’t know where to turn.

“So many of these churches feel so isolated. They don’t know anyone else who’s doing this and they want some help.”

Meester has contacts around the country—deaf

which grew to more than 500 members under his direction.

Kang loved ministering to the growing congregation, but his son wanted to attend high school in the United States. A friend in the states told Kang that the United Methodist Church was looking for a deaf pastor to start a church for the deaf in Jacksonville, which also is home to

the Illinois School for the Deaf.

In addition to preaching each Sunday in Jacksonville, Kang travels to four other churches in central Illinois, where he leads Bible studies or worship. The programs attract deaf people from other backgrounds—Lutherans, Baptists—even Catholics, Kang says.

His five-year contract with the

Methodists is drawing to an end, and Kang says he and his wife, Eunhee, often feel homesick for Korea. But he adds that he also feels called to stay in America and to try to encourage deaf ministries to grow. □

Bob Reeves is the religion and values reporter for the Lincoln (Neb.) Journal-Star.