



My name is John Ford. I am a profoundly deaf person who uses speech, not sign language, to communicate. I now go to New Life Church in Milton, Ontario, Canada. I used to be hard of hearing, but my hearing deteriorated to the point that I could no longer get anything out of any public meeting even with all the best hearing aids and technical assistive devices. Church services were one of the kinds of meetings I found myself not wanting to go to. I come from a fairly active and involved church background, so it was not just a case of never really having been involved.

I am a Bible College grad who spent three years in the service of our home mission board doing youth work with violent young offenders and have always been deeply involved at the local church level. I have done my share of Sunday School teaching and superintending, youth group sponsoring, church camp directing and sitting on church and inner-city mission boards.

By the time my hearing went down to near its current level, I found that the stress and frustration of attending services just did not justify my effort. I knew very well the important value of corporate worship, but after a few months of leaving the church each Sunday so burned out that I was not able to function afterward, I just gave up. We went for Christmas and Easter kind of thing. Then it dawned on me that I could not even figure out which version of my favourite hymns were being sung and I felt so awful it spoiled Christmas.

I did not even bother going for about five years and it did not take too long for my personal Christian walk to falter without the worship service. My life was a mess. I became involved with several organizations that advocated for deaf and hard of hearing issues and sort of transferred the energy I had been putting into church work to this cause to find some fulfillment. I was providing the technical sound system to a weekend meeting at a local hospital [using the same PA system and microphones that I had used for youth coffee house ministries and such] when I happened to have coffee with the volunteer captionist who was captioning the meeting.

In the course of feeling self-pity for the lack of any real action in my life, I mentioned to her about how wonderful it would be if some church would caption their services. I think I actually asked how much it would cost to hire her for, say, one Sunday a month? I had tried to interest several large churches in Toronto [the largest city in Canada] but none were that willing to reach out to the deaf and hard of hearing.

I can only say that it was divine leading that brought the two of us together that day because this wonderful captionist also did volunteer captioning one Sunday a month for a little church in Milton. Milton is some 60 kilometers [40 miles] away from where I lived. I drove out one Sunday to see what it was like and the rest is history. Oh, WOW! What a Revelation! It was like a full technicolor conversion all over again. [I guess in a way it was!] There were tears running

down my face as, for the first time in over a decade, I could follow a hymn. I actually knew what the preacher was talking about!

For the last few years that I attended church, I was never able to follow the sermon. Do you know what it is like to sit there for 40 minutes and try to look intelligent and try to figure out when people will chuckle and so on? I used to read the passage that the sermon was based on and then try to figure out how I might have dealt with the same verses. There are very definite limits to preaching to yourself.

For the next couple years we drove 120 kilometers round trip each Sunday in all kinds of weather to get to the only captioned church in the country. My wife is hard of hearing and she also benefits from the captions. My teenage daughter jumped in with both feet to work in the Sunday School and camp program. Last fall we decided to find a home out near the church and sell our home in Toronto.

Simply put, the fact that the church is captioned has given us the lease on life and renewal of faith that turned us around. We are involved in the captioning ministry helping to encourage others to come, and trying to develop a better way to display captioning in churches that will reduce the technical headaches and cost of equipment. We are advocating for more churches and more church special events to be captioned. Have you ever sat through a foreign language church service without having a clue of what was going on? That is what we had before. Then came captioning and the light was turned back on in our lives.

I cannot encourage you enough about this. It is a very important form of ministry and outreach. Statistics tell us that only something like 2% of deaf and profound loss of hearing North Americans even have a church home. Given that a fair percentage of those 2% are elderly people who are three times as likely to be church attendees as the average North American, that gives you a frightening picture of where the 98% are at. According to a leading North American hearing aid manufacturer, 4% of North Americans have a hearing loss of sufficient severity that it negatively impacts their day to day life. That is a lot of people! How many of them can your church toss out with the trash because you are not accessible?

Did you know that the majority of the hard core movies on the late night pay-per-view cable channels are captioned? Why does Playboy Channel think they need to have captioned movies? Is the message that our churches have to offer less important to the population than the perversion of those movies? It is a well known fact in TV advertising that people retain far more of the information that they both see and hear than they do of either sense alone. That is why commercials are always flashing up words about the product while they tell you about it. They know you are more likely to remember their brand of detergent or cereal if they put the words for the product up as well. We have a message about a relationship with the one and only living God that we certainly want people to remember which church He is worshiped in.

If you start to caption your services, who will come? To be honest, it is unlikely that busloads of deafies will arrive the next week. There are almost certainly people involved in your church that will benefit. Or people who would have been there if they had not burned out and left when their hearing started to fail. Start captioning a service and you will not see the next frustrated ones

leave because it was not accessible. Others will come back slowly. People who have language problems also benefit. Children follow it and improve their reading. [If improving children's reading does not seem like a worthy church goal, think about what they are reading...the Bible passages and messages from the pulpit...not violence and smut.]

Even if there is only one person sitting there soaking up your captions, that should be enough. Go look up the Bible passage that tells us that Jesus as the Good Shepherd counted 99 sheep into the fold and closed up the gate and went out into the night seeking the one that was lost. Just one. He did not try to satisfy any bean counters that want to see results and best value for the effort extended. One, just one. That should be enough if that is what we have. There was a cute little saying a few years ago that anyone can count the seeds in an apple, but only God can count the apples in a seed. One, just one. Can we really expect better numbers than the Lord Himself? Jesus was willing to go out to find just one that was lost.

As far as the captioning ministry at New Life Church is concerned, I kind of feel like I have 'sheep number 100' branded behind my ear. They ministered with their little shorthand machines and I was found and returned to the fold. If it worked for me, it will work for others, too. If it worked for New Life Church, it will work for your church, too.

If I can be of any help in any way, please do not hesitate to e-mail me. This is just too important an aspect of His work to put off. There will be scoffers and negative feelings. If I can help fend them off, let me know and I will bury them in words of encouragement and positive proof that this is a viable ministry.

**John Ford** [kkortjford@aol.com](mailto:kkortjford@aol.com)