

Views from the Pews - Outward and visible signs

We often forget that we have 3 official languages here in New Zealand. We can remember the first 2, but we often forget Sign Language.

For many, its use first became apparent during the Covid Pandemic, when news, and Government policy, were delivered by word of mouth at 1.00pm media briefings. Alongside the Prime Minister and Dr Bloomfield stood a third person, using their whole body to translate oral messages into Sign Language. Sign Language was used in all official briefings during the recent floods.

On Waitangi Day, the church service was instantly translated into Sign Language, translators having to convert both Maori and English, both Scripture and spontaneous speech, for the benefit of those increasing numbers of us whose hearing has deteriorated.

This is an incredible ministry. It is a genuine ministry in that it involves self-sacrifice both in the gaining of a new skill but in turning up on a wet Northland morning to ensure the Good News is not lost in translation.

The word 'Sign' must appear hundreds of times in the Bible, most of whose stories are set in a multi-lingual world where literacy (if it existed much at all) will have been confined to educated elites. God often communicates in signs, and this is true of all faiths and cultures. Rainbows, storms, lightning, rain, and sunshine are seen as means of communication to humankind, to say nothing of the renewals that signal the arrival of spring. The Sacraments are deliberately described as outward and visible signs of that which can be neither seen nor heard, let alone touched.

For many of us, the most powerful sign was that of a star that led 'Wise Men from the East' to Bethlehem. In the age of the Internet, and of near-universal literacy, we forget the power of the spoken word, its accents and inflexions, and we downplay the effect on those who have lost access to the spoken word. Subtitles are all very well but they do not occur in real time, when only the spoken word can convey urgency

in flood or earthquake.

So spare a thought for our Signers. As many of us live longer, hearing loss is becoming a (literally) silent pandemic. Churches are guardians of the spoken word, and as such, resort more and more to technology. Is Signing the next big thing? Is there someone in our community who needs funding for training to 'speak' or to 'hear' in our 3rd official language?

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