Wayne Morris, *Theology without Words: Theology in the Deaf Community* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2008) 180 pp. £34.95 (hbk); £17.99 (pbk). ISBN 978 07546 6222 8 (hbk); 978 0 7546 6227 3 (pbk).

This study, an important addition to the Practical Theology series, is also a valuable contribution to the field of Disability Studies. The author, himself a hearing person, is very conscious of the pitfall of depriving of voice the very people he is writing about: so he adopts the principle of solidarity to overcome this, choosing to make central the voices of Deaf People and their communities (the uppercase here is deliberate).

Therein lies the first difficulty, and the reason for taking two thirds of this lucid and readable book to explain method and approach. Inevitably the author is *writing about* the Deaf community in Britain (between 50,000 and 100,000 people), which has unfortunately hardly ever been the subject of specific theological reflection – with the exception of the PhD thesis of Hannah Lewis, also published in this series, yet this is a community whose chosen form of communication is BSL, or British Sign Language. Thus the spoken word and the whole world of music in liturgies are at best an irrelevance, at worst a source of embarrassment and humiliation.

The category of deafness that is here the focus is the social not the medical model, where problems for Deaf people are created by social inequalities and the search for a cure can have devastating consequences. Morris shows how BSL is itself an authentic language, complex in form and structure, yet has not always been recognised as such. It makes far more use of space and body language. It is painful to read of the attempts to suppress BSL – and now conversely, fortunately, the efforts to reverse this. He stresses that children need an early introduction to BSL. In his efforts to create an effective methodology – with almost no material to work with – Morris discovered questionnaires to be of no value, interviews of limited value, and participant observation his chosen method. An impressive range of contexts has been included: the principle setting is the Anglican Church of Deaf People in Birmingham – but the author’s experience in Zimbabwe enriches the field of research. He describes his approach as an immersion into the world of Deaf People, keeping a personal journal and using Green’s Pastoral Cycle to aid his analysis. This immersion is one of the methodological strengths.

But the strongest feature of this book is the willingness to use a variety of conceptual tools as appropriate (especially that of various Liberation Theologies), but always discarding them when not, and returning to the specific quest: what is the right approach for a theology not based on words?
So, it is not adequate to insist on an oral instead of written theology, if the oral is still dependent on written texts. Thus ‘Hearing Theology’ is criticised for its dependence on the power of written texts, (the Bible and the Church’s teaching): ‘Theology must free itself from Literacy’, because literacy = power (p. 83). What does it mean for Deaf People constantly to hear the Gospel message ‘He who has ears to hear, let him hear’? A similar impact on blind people is experienced by the metaphorical use of blindness as obduracy and refusal to believe. Indeed, John Hull’s re-reading of the Bible from the perspective of his own blindness is of great value in Morris’s quest.

Instead of the intellectual ‘faith seeking understanding’ as basis of faith, he proposes ‘faith seeking life’ as a starting point for Deaf Communities. From his participant observation stance he has seen how Deaf People move deeper into relationship with God as a result of life and experience. The Bible can be a resource, but a living one, and not a closed text: thus narrative and drama are key sources for liturgy. In fact, familiarity with the Biblical narrative enables Deaf People to turn stories back into oral mode and to ‘read the gaps’ (pp. 110-111). Only in the last 40 pages does Morris offer an ecclesiology: the Deaf Church is one of inclusion, where the Church as the Body of Christ is a defining focus. The significance of touch is stressed – the Sign of Peace is an important moment – and the sense of sacred space is one where Deaf People want to be involved. Instead of ‘translating’ or interpreting ‘Hearing texts’, if the church is to move on from its negative treatment of Deaf People, there must be a greater freedom for BSL liturgies and a movement away from authorised texts. In his final chapter, Morris discusses the question of Deaf People in the image of God. Can God be Deaf, as it is claimed God is Black, Red or Female? Wisely, he moves away from the idea that God could be spoken of if as physically Deaf (and there is insufficient evidence that Jesus was so); but he suggests that we should think of God as culturally Deaf, in the sense that God understands Deaf Culture, uses Sign Language (many examples in Scripture) and touches the lives of Deaf People as a friend.

I found that the most significant achievement of this book (apart from its sympathetic understanding of the experience of Deaf People) is its stress on a theology of Incarnation – important for all believers. Its final two chapters are so insightful, that I wished that some of the methodology had been presented as Appendix, and that these excellent theological insights had been further developed. Yes, the demands of a PhD caused this (and I noted that a few errors still needed weeding out: Ruether not Reuther, p. 107; Irenaeus, p. 145; and on p. 106 it should be Patrick and not Peter Kallilombe). My other concern is that in the effort to stress the vernacular, oral methodology and