



September the 25th 2017

Dear IVSS Churchear members!

Autumn has already arrived here in the northern part of Sweden, where I live. The evenings are getting darker and colder; the leaves are falling from the trees, and everybody are back from their summer vacations. Daily life is back; the tourists have left our villages, and we, the locals, find it a blessing to be back in our normal life and our tranquility.



Sunday September the 3rd was, according to our liturgical calendar, the 12th Sunday after the feast of the Holy Trinity, and the Sunday's theme was "The freedom in Christ". How is it actually to attend church events when you are hard of hearing? The following little story may give you an image of it:

The parish ladies' group comes together. Someone tells a story, and everybody burst out in laughter – everybody but Astrid who didn't hear the story. She wonders if she is the object for the laughter, since everybody look in her direction. She feels rather lonely midst among all the others. Trying to converse with the others is out of the question. The hearing devices receive all voices equally loud, and she is no longer able to differ one voice from another. She has therefore become increasingly silent and isolated, and nobody seems to care much about it.

Being hard of hearing we see a lot of situations where we feel excluded and misunderstood. Having asked for the third time someone to repeat, still having failed to hear, it may seem easier to murmur a vague "yes" or "indeed", pretending to have heard. They don't *always* see through you!

In the Gospel for the above mentioned Sunday we read about Jesus and a large crowd of people. Within this crowd there is this deaf man "who had difficulties speaking" – within the crowd, and still outside. Somebody who had heard that Jesus could heal all diseases, had brought him there.

Apart from the fact that Jesus physically heals the man, there are some quite interesting aspects about this event:

Jesus touches the deaf man. He leads him away from the crowd, to a place where they could be alone, thus showing to him how lonely he has been until now. Due to his impairment he has so far been unable to communicate with people around him. Until now he has been pushed aside; now he has the full attention. Jesus is there for him alone. It's the first time that someone sees him as he really is, not only as a deaf person who cannot speak clearly, but as a full human person.

After having got the ability to hear, and to speak clearly as well, he is led by Jesus back into the community. Now he is given the possibility to develop his self-esteem and a new way to understand himself. Now he is given the possibility to discover his true identity. Now, that is healing!

In 2006 I attended my first IVSS Churchear conference, in Germany. I got into a conversation with a man telling me that he recently had started thinking about the issue of identity. Who was he really, and what impact had his hearing loss had for the development of his own identity? What could be said to be survival strategies when unable to hear, and what was the "true" personality? He had discovered that he was far from the humble and shy person he had regarded himself to be, but that this had merely been a strategy for concealing that he was unable to follow a conversation.

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Jesus is the one who opens up and liberates. Hardly any hard of hearing expects to be healed the way the man whom Jesus met, was healed. Many, however, feel being torn and set aside – from Worship and church events as well as from social ones. Being healed means being relieved from the burden of exclusion. This is an reachable option when we jointly and severally open our eyes and ears to learn from each other.

This perspective, as well as several others will be highlighted at the 2018 IVSS Churchear Conference in Strasbourg. The conference program is attached to this letter – and will within short time be sent to all our member by post.

The conference theme “Who am *I*? – Where do *you* stand?” is to a large extent a question about identity, whether we are allowed to be the ones God planned us to be, or whether disability or even the attitude of those around us prevent us from being ourselves. It is a matter of what we can do to help people to be themselves as far as ever possible.

The intention of IVSS Churchear as an organisation is to provide help and support along the way, to all those in our different churches, who work not only for the inclusion of our hearing impaired members into the parish community, but even for raising and freeing us all, above all from the prejudices we hold against each other. We hope that you as a member of IVSS Churchear will also find that you have an important role in this work. Together we can make a difference!

Please write to me, if you have thoughts or ideas about what IVSS Churchear should work for. What kind of support could you wish for your important task? How do you wish to contribute? Or do you wish to share an important event in the field of hearing within your churches or society? You may write to me in English or in German.

With my best regards in Christ

Maria Ståhl