

Report on Deaf Ministry
The Reverend Canon Johnnie E. Ross

It has long been said of the Rochester Area that we have the highest population of deaf and hard of hearing (Deaf/HoH) than anywhere else in the country. In fact, according to a 2012 report published by National Technical Institute for the Deaf, at Rochester Institute of Technology, 3.7 percent of the area's population is Deaf/HoH, compared to 3.5 percent nationally. Further, the study notes the Deaf/HoH population to be about 42,500, with approximately 60 percent of this number being between the ages of 18 and 25.¹

As noted in the Parish Register for "*Missions to the Deaf, Episcopal Diocese of Rochester,*" ministry to the Deaf/HoH in this area began as early as 1890-91, with the visit of "the Reverend Thomas Gallaudent, D.D., from New York City,² and has existed in one form or another until the present time. Our most recent and more formal efforts to minister to this demographic, resulted in a congregation of two active members and campus ministry at NTID of somewhere between two and four, with at least one of those being the most active member of the formal congregation and one being a coordinator being compensated for expenses.

Over the decades, Ephphatha has served as the Diocese's primary program of ministry and evangelism among the Deaf/HoH. However, what was once a growing mission, Ephphatha's membership had dwindled to two and on Dec. 12, 2016, the vestry and rector of Epiphany Church, Gates, which had hosted Ephphatha for four years, determined that the program would need to relocate. Additionally, it was determined that the Rev. Suzanne Johnston, deacon, who had served as the primary coordinator to the Deaf/HoH, being appointed by the bishop, would take a step back from this assignment for an indeterminate amount of time.

Given the presenting challenges, and in consultation with those involved and our bishop, it was decided to suspend our efforts in this specialized ministry and work with those two active members in finding them an Episcopal Church where they would be most comfortable. Given the demographics as they relate to the Deaf/HoH, coupled with our most recent quantitative results in the area of deaf ministry, it begged the question of what more is there to do in ministering to the Deaf/HoH and what role do we, the Episcopal Diocese of Rochester, play in this important work? In other words, how is it that we continue to grow in Christ and be opened (*Ephphatha*) and responsive to the Deaf/HoH? How do we best serve that population? What would our vision for the future look like?

As we began to explore this new direction, we looked first at the existing Diocesan structures that might support both short term needs and a long-term vision, with the most immediate concern being the placement of the two active members of this ministry into congregations where they would be comfortable and welcomed. As it happened, just prior to Christmas, 2016, and at their suggestion, Walt and Mary began to worship at the Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Penfield. With our most immediate challenge behind us, we turned our attention to the campus ministry at NTID. In doing so, we thought it best to begin by strengthening our bonds of affection with "The Table," the Lutheran/Episcopal Campus Ministries at RIT. There, we found a welcomed embrace by the board member, the Reverend Virginia Tyler-Smith, and Lutheran chaplain, Pastor Craig Swanson. With our two major pieces now adequately in good hands, we turned our attention to considering new structures and methods for how we might expand the church's mission and ministry among Deaf/HoH.

Over the last ten months our re-imagining has included: committing ourselves anew to this ministry by seeking and calling a priest who is uniquely qualified to minister to the Deaf/HoH; someone who

understands the challenges and struggles of the Deaf/HoH community; someone who demonstrates a proficiency in American Sign Language; someone who possess an understanding of the pathologies associated with deafness/hearing loss; someone who is familiar with the accommodations that must be made in order to allow the Deaf/HoH full access to Episcopal worship, ministries, visions, and dreams; someone who would demonstrate a knowledge of, and practical competency in, assisted hearing devices and the importance these devices play in the everyday lives of the Deaf/HoH. It is to this effort and vision that we must now commit ourselves. So, it is with this wonderful history and a sense of obligation to the further, that we begin a “new chapter” in the life of Mission to the Deaf/HoH, in the Episcopal Diocese of Rochester, praying that God will indeed offer the Spirit’s guidance and that you will be praying and walking along with us.

1. Gerard Walter, Richard Dirmyer, *“Number of Persons who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing: Rochester, NY,”* <http://www.ntid.rit.edu>, (September 2012).
2. 1892-1979 Ephphatha Parish Register, Episcopal Diocese of Rochester, http://crpc.nyrgs.org/records/7/1892_79ParRegPri.pdf.