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Gestures of faith: West Side church reaches out to deaf and hard of hearing

Members preach sermons, teach classes in sign language: 'God placed it on my heart to create a place for them,' pastor says

By Lolly Bowean, Chicago Tribune reporter

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In American Sign Language, there is a finger combination for the word "love."

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There's also a sign for the word "God."

And when Melinda Gerstein beats her hand harshly against the wooden lectern as she's teaching from the Bible, her movement needs no interpretation. When she holds her arms out straight in front of her chest, her palms facing the audience of Praetorium Sign Language Church of Chicago in a gesture of surrender, the meaning is understood.

"Teaching is my passion, it's in my blood," said Gerstein, who was born deaf but has learned to use her voice and read lips. "God had a calling on my life to be a pastor, and here I can do that. I waited for years, but God led me here."

Gerstein, 55, is one of dozens of deaf and hard-of-hearing residents who dutifully file week after week into Praetorium, a Christian church especially for believers who can't hear. The West Side congregation recently celebrated its eighth anniversary, impressive for a church that started out holding services on street corners and in public parks.

Hundreds of churches, synagogues, mosques and other places of worship offer sign language interpreters or even captioning on screens for members who need it. Some have even installed magnetic systems to make sound quality better for worshippers who wear hearing aids. But more rare are churches like Praetorium where the deaf and hard of hearing preach the sermons, teach the classes, sign songs as a choir and serve as ushers, deacons and leaders in the church.

At Praetorium, the interpreters are there to voice the activities for the hearing members and visitors.

"The deaf want to see their language and they want to praise in their language," said Carole Clemons-Clark, the pastor and creator of the North Lawndale church. "At Praetorium, they get the service in their language and they are able to participate. They don't have to worry about behaving a certain way, or being misunderstood. They can be at service and feel like they can jump up and sign or sing out. They may be out of tune. They can't hear themselves, but they want to sing out in excitement and praise to the Lord."

There are no statistics on how many deaf-only religious services there are in the country, or in Chicago, experts said. But there is a growing effort among religious bodies to evangelize and reach the deaf and hard of hearing, said Kirk VanGilder, a professor of religion at Gallaudet University, a college for the deaf and hard of hearing in Washington, D.C.

"The awareness of the large numbers of hard-of-hearing people in America, particularly among those who are aging, has led to many congregations seeking ways to include and retain those members who may be silently dropping out of church involvement as a result of not being able to hear well," VanGilder said in writing in response to interview questions.

"In nearly all Christian denominations, funding for deaf and hard-of-hearing ministry remains a struggle," VanGilder said. "As many denominational bodies cut back on their budgets, in the wake of lessened giving in a struggling economy, ministries that are supported primarily by special giving efforts or apportioned funds experience a reduction in funding."

That could be why, as some churches trim their investment in ministries that accommodate the deaf, Praetorium is growing in membership.

The church was started in 2005, some years after Clemons-Clark began learning sign language at her own South Side church, she said. Once she became good enough, she began volunteering to translate the church services for members who needed it. As she worked and learned more about her deaf and hard-of-hearing Christian clients, she realized they didn't feel free to join in the worshiping and they were slightly disconnected from the full Christian experience.

"I saw deaf people would come to church, and no one would talk to them," said Clemons-Clark, who signs but is able to speak and hear. "They weren't involved in ministries. In church, sometimes their view would get blocked. God placed it on my heart to create a place for them."

After becoming ordained as a minister in 2004, Clemons-Clark started her church, she said. At first she ministered outdoors — taking her few initial members to parks and street corners to sign, so others would see them. Outside, they would gather in a circle and sign songs and pray. They would scream and jump up and down to express their passion. Eventually, the outdoor services got them noticed and word spread throughout some deaf communities.

"We were being fanatics for the Lord and showing our joy and excitement," Clemons-Clark said.

She recruited guests and members from her old church, and she told clients about her worship service as she worked as an interpreter. She told her sign-language students about her church too.

By the time the church moved indoors in 2007, there were deaf and hard-of-hearing ushers, deacons, Sunday school teachers and ministers to lead the services.

"The deaf person wants to look at the speaker and understand what they are saying," Clemons-Clark said. "At our church, it's not mandatory that a deaf person sit in front to see the interpreter. If they want to sit with their friends, they can and still see."

Felicia Thomas, 54, learned about the church through others, she said. She was working as a sign-language interpreter in the church where Praetorium also holds its services in a separate sanctuary.

As the mother of a deaf son, she was looking for places where he could connect with other minority deaf and hard-of-hearing people. She also wanted her son, Kyle Jackson, involved in a church where he could have the values she was teaching him reinforced, she said.

At Praetorium, she and Kyle, now 18, could attend together, and they didn't have to depend on each other for understanding, since they both sign.

Now he's a member of the choir, and he signs Scriptures in church.

"He wants to be in control of his world," Thomas said. "He is not ashamed. He wants to speak his language, go where he is understood. It can be very lonely in the deaf community. (But) there's nothing broken about them. They are fine the way they are."

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