

PARISH FEATURE

Parish for the deaf nurtures sense of community

Parish Profile

Emmanuel Church of the Deaf, Rochester



By Lee Strong
Senior staff writer

At the beginning of Mass on the first Sunday of Advent, Father Raymond H. Fleming noted that the name of the parish — Emmanuel — is tied to the season because it means "God is with us."

Only, Father Fleming conveyed that message without saying a word.

And his congregation understood.

The priest is deaf. He celebrates the Mass entirely in sign language. And the congregation of Emmanuel Church of the Deaf consists of mostly deaf individuals and their families.

Meanwhile, in a reversal of the standard role for interpreters at other parishes, the Mass is interpreted into spoken words for those who do not know sign language.

First-time visitors to the parish's 10 a.m. Sunday Mass will also notice other differences at Emmanuel Church of the Deaf, which holds its weekly Masses at Our Lady of Good Counsel Church, 75 Ernestine St. (Although Good Counsel is part of the Roman Catholic Community of the 19th Ward, the deaf parish "has a spiritual relationship, but not a canonical one" with the cluster).

Emmanuel Church has no bells, no musical instruments, no singing — unless someone is celebrating a birthday, as was the case Dec. 4. The sign of peace is lengthy, as most of the people in the small congregation take ample time to greet one another. And the prayers of the faithful include prayers for distant relatives and friends.

"People know one another," explained Gerry Buckley, a parishioner at Emmanuel for the past four years. The Mendon resident noted that the parish's small size helps foster the sense of community. "We all know each other's problems," he said.

In addition, the weekly Mass offers an opportunity for parishioners, who come from all over the diocese, to catch up with one another, Buckley explained.

"It's like a family," added Gerry's wife, Judy Buckley. "You don't find that often in a church — to that depth."

"Church is important because it's the one time we all come together," Father Fleming explained. "Most of the folks work in an environment where they are different from everybody else. So when we come together, we are all the same, we are one community."

The parish has been known as Emmanuel Church of the Deaf since 1991. The community has existed under different names and at different sites since 1926, when then-Bishop of Rochester Thomas Hickey named Father Charles Burger, CSSR, diocesan moderator of the deaf. A monthly Mass for the deaf was celebrated at St. Joseph's Church on Franklin Street.



S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer

Father Raymond H. Fleming, pastor of Rochester's Emmanuel Church of the Deaf, wishes 4-year-old Kaylee Finton a happy birthday after the Dec. 4 Mass.



S. John Wilkin/Staff photographer

Christopher May receives a boost from his father, Michael, as he snuffs out the Advent candles.

The deaf community soon began celebrating weekly Masses in St. Francis de Sales Chapel, which they constructed inside the Franklin Street parish's school building.

Father Burger was succeeded by Father William Doherty. Then in 1943, Father John Gallagher served as moderator of the Rochester chapel while he also served St. Mary's Church of the Deaf in Buffalo.

Charleen and Vincent DeWindt recalled Father Gallagher and the days when the chapel was the only church in the diocese to meet deaf people's needs.

Charleen, whose father first took her to the church, found it a welcome change from her home parish.

"At our home church, we didn't understand," she explained.

Vincent noted that he attended

SNAPSHOTS

Emmanuel Church of the Deaf,
75 Ernestine St., Rochester
Ministerial staff:
Pastor: Father Raymond Fleming
Parish Office Administrator:
Carol Botticelli

churches for the hearing until age 15. "I didn't know what was going on. For so many years I'd just sit there doing nothing," he said.

But now, Charleen observed, "We have a deeper understanding. It's more of a spiritual understanding."

The community remained under Father Gallagher's guidance until the priest died in 1960. A succession of priests assisted the community over the next eight years. Father Thomas Erdle, one of those priests, was ultimately named chaplain to the deaf in 1968. He not only served members of the deaf parish, but also the community at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf at Rochester Institute of Technology, and at Rochester School for the Deaf. The community's chapel was moved to the Pastoral Center on Buffalo Road.

In 1981, Father Erdle was named pastor of St. Mary's Church of the Deaf, which was then located in the basement of St. Mary's Church in downtown Rochester.

Father Erdle left the community in 1985 to become pastor of St. Mark's Parish in Greece. Father Fleming became the church's pastor. When the community moved to its current home in 1991, it was renamed Emmanuel Church of the Deaf — a name selected by the community and approved by Bishop Matthew H. Clark.

Father Fleming said the community welcomed the move and the name change and noted that the parish is growing. Over the past three years the average weekly attendance has increased

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from 50 to 70. And the priest estimated that between 100 and 200 families are now involved with the parish.

Although Emmanuel currently offers sacramental preparation, it has no formal religious education program at this time. Instead, parishioners send their children to parish programs in the area. In addition to offering a 12-step program to assist deaf individuals with alcohol problems, the parish sponsors the Deaf AIDS Core, which reaches out to individuals with AIDS and their families.

The parish does not have any service groups or clubs, and no longer has a formal parish council. Instead, in keeping with its community approach, parishioners each year hold two parish-wide meetings to discuss issues and make decisions, Father Fleming explained.

"I would say there's a great deal of shared responsibility," Jerry Buckley acknowledged. "People volunteer, people take responsibility. I think a lot of that goes on, but I don't think it's a formal thing the way it is in other churches."

"I think the whole atmosphere is informal," noted Carol Botticelli, the parish's office administrator for the last seven years.

Botticelli pointed out that even though she can hear and she has not been able to master sign language, parishioners have always made her feel welcomed.

"They all go out of their way to read lips, write notes," she observed. "They go out of the way to make sure I'm not left out."

Father Fleming acknowledged that many hearing parishes have made attempts to make the deaf feel welcome. Since he first came to the diocese in 1978, the pastor observed, at least a dozen parishes in Monroe County have added interpreters. Other parishes have installed systems to meet the needs of people with hearing aids.

Father Fleming said he does not see these efforts as a threat to his parish.

"I'm not seeing people pull away," he said. "I'm seeing people have choices."

"Personally, I'm delighted with that," Father Fleming added. "In a perfect world, people would be able to go where they wanted."

Still, even if every diocesan parish provided interpretation for the deaf, the need would still exist for a parish such as Emmanuel, Father Fleming continued. Increasingly, "deaf culture" is being recognized as a distinct culture, he said.

"People who identify with Emmanuel Church of the Deaf do so not because they have a loss," Father Fleming said, "but because they want to identify with a deaf community, deaf culture."

"Merry Christmas to the parish of Emmanuel Church of the Deaf. Thank you for your patronage"



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