

Is someone missing? continued from page 1

Steve Johnson is not deaf, but he was inspired to learn more and more about ministering to the deaf over the years. ("It was one of those things where God kept pulling me through the door.") Choirs from Christ UMC for the Deaf visited his churches, and in the 1990s, his youth drama troupe from Rock Springs UMC (Kingsport District) learned basic sign language and visited the Baltimore church.

"When I landed here, I deliberately sought out deaf folks," he says of his arrival at West End UMC in 2000. He and his wife asked if anyone knew any deaf people, looked for road signs that said, "Slow, deaf child," and literally knocked on doors to invite people to church.

Today, West End has a sign language interpreter on staff (a \$2,040 addition to the church budget). About three deaf people attend the church regularly. About six to 12 participate in special gatherings like Maundy Thursday or a monthly coffee house. Johnson has collected a mailing list and sends out notices when signing is going to be offered at special events. People drive from Pulaski, Floyd, Austinville, Speedwell, and other Virginia towns, because they have learned that West End is welcoming to deaf people.

"People here have a big heart," says Carroll Thomas, when asked why he drove 24 miles from Pulaski for the Maundy Thursday service.

Hungry for community

People also drive long distances to Trinity UMC in the Big Stone Gap District -- because sign language is offered on the second and fourth Sundays, but also, because the Rev. Ronnie Mutter has been hard of hearing since birth.

Deaf people like to be with other deaf people, says Mutter, who wears hearing aids and also reads lips in order to communicate. Both of his parents were deaf.

"Because I'm deaf, people feel better when they come to my church," he says. People are hungry to be part of the community."

About eight deaf people attend Trinity regularly. Some learned about Trinity through the TV broadcast of the church's services, which reaches 40,000 homes and also features sign language.

Hiring an interpreter can be expensive and probably won't attract droves of newcomers to the pews, church leaders say.

"Having a deaf ministry is probably not going to be the cutting

edge of growth," says Johnson, "so if you're looking to help your budget, this isn't going to do it."

However, some church leaders believe that ministries for the deaf and for the hard of hearing are an untapped frontier, especially as the population ages.

"We are so far behind in communicating with hearing-impaired people," says Mutter. "We care about everyone else, but we've left the deaf people behind."

Sign language is crucial to the people who know and use it and may be a good place to start when building a deaf community, church leaders say. Sign interpreters were provided at Resurrection 2005 and at a previous Annual Conference.

But of the 28 million people with hearing loss in this country, only two million know sign language, Peggy Johnson says. Many lose their hearing later in life and tend to deny it, are unaware of assistive equipment, or don't know how to ask for help. Hearing loss affects a third of all senior citizens, according to the General Board of Global Ministries' National Committee on Ministries with the Deaf.

"Every church with members over the age of 65 could have a deaf ministry today," Johnson says. "It's a serious pastoral crisis for people. Many times it doesn't come to the forefront because of the stigma, but there are legions of people with hearing loss in every pew, every church, every conference."

What to do

Some churches or individuals are inspired to begin deaf ministries when a deaf or hearing-impaired person begins attending church or is already part of the congregation. Rather than wait for an incentive, Peggy Johnson suggests that churches form a task force to study what hearing-loss needs might exist in their congregations.

"I know that is such a United Methodist thing to do -- form a committee," she says. "But I guarantee that a study will produce people who are missing from the congregation."

Both Steve Johnson and Peggy Johnson note that Knoxville is home of the Tennessee School for the Deaf, and a deaf population exists around Knoxville churches. Because East Tennessee State University and local community colleges offer deaf education, the Tri-Cities area also has a large deaf population.

The book, "Signs of Solidarity: Ministry with Deaf, Late-Deafened,

Hard of Hearing, or Deaf-Blind People," from the General Board of Global Ministries (GBGM), will aid congregations in involving persons with auditory or optic losses, Peggy Johnson said. The book is available for \$7 plus shipping and handling by calling 1-800-305-9857. (Information is also available at the GBGM web address, <http://gbgm-umc.org/disc/deafministries.stm>, or Steve Johnson is available to answer questions at 276-223-0326.)

Other than interpreters, churches may consider investing in assistive listening devices for the hard of hearing. These hard-wired or wireless transmitting and receiving devices send sound from the microphone directly to the listener, minimizing the negative effects of distance and noise. Next month, assistive listening devices will be made available for participants of the Holston Annual Conference in Lake Junaluska, N.C.

Congregations can also help the hearing-impaired by making worship services more visual, with Power Point presentations and good lighting, Peggy Johnson said. Another option is "computer assisted notetaking," a system in which a typist transcribes a summary of the spoken words, which are then projected on a laptop or screen.

Congregations may also consider deaf ministry as a form of outreach, since "it takes a lot for a deaf person to walk into a church," said Peggy Johnson. Being deaf in itself is isolating, so deaf people who are in prison, hospitals or other institutions tend to be "doubly isolated," she notes. "We need to go to them."

Finally, it's important for congregations to be welcoming to deaf people just as they should be to all people -- while recognizing that communicating with deaf people is intimidating or even frightening to many hearing people. Deaf people are hurt or feel shunned when hearing people won't make eye contact or otherwise avoid them, according to Steve Johnson and Mutter.

The goal is to foster a community like the one at West End, where the adult and children's choirs have learned to sign a few hymns and members make an effort to include the non-hearing in activities such as a Maundy Thursday drama.

"We really do try hard not to separate them, to make them feel as welcome as we can," says Steve Johnson. "We want to make them feel like they're part of the family." ■

HOLSTON EVENTS & DATES

MAY

- 22:** Peace with Justice Sunday
- 22:** Heritage Sunday (changed by General Conference, previous date was April 23)
- 29:** Holston Home Fifth Sunday offering

JUNE

- 4:** Children's Day -- Buffalo Mountain Camp, Camp Blackmore, Camp Dickenson, Camp Lookout
- 11:** Camp Dickenson Benefit Golf Tournament, Draper Valley Golf Club, Draper, Va.
- 12-15:** Annual Conference, Lake Junaluska, N.C.
- 18-26:** Youth in Mission: Hurricane Disaster Recovery in Florida
- 22:** Moving Day for transitioning pastors

JULY

- 5-9:** Senior High Assembly, Emory & Henry College, Emory, Va.
- 18-22:** Junior High Assembly, Hiwassee College, Madisonville, Tenn.
- 18-22:** Worship Arts Ministry, Hiwassee College, Madisonville, Tenn.
- 24:** Holston Conference Night at the Ballpark, Smokies Ballpark, Kodak, Tenn.
- 28-30:** United Methodist Women's School of Mission, Johnson City, Tenn.
- 31:** Holston Home Fifth Sunday Offering

AUGUST

- 12-14:** MK/PK Getaway, Camp Dickenson, Fries, Va.
- 19-20:** United Methodist Men's Conference Gathering, Munsey Memorial UMC, Johnson City, Tenn.

SEPTEMBER

- Open House Month
- 10:** Camp Lookout Benefit Golf Tournament, Bear Trace, Chattanooga, Tenn.
- 11:** Christian Education Sunday
- 17-18:** Holston Conference United Methodist Women's Annual Meeting
- 23-25:** Youth Pilgrimage on the Appalachian Trail
- 24-25:** The Gathering, Native American Ministries, Tellico Plains, Tenn.

OCTOBER

- 2:** World Communion Sunday
- 9:** Children's Sabbath
- 10-16:** Clergy Sabbath Experiences (in nine locations)
- 14-16:** F.U.E.L. Sabbath Retreat for youth workers, Gatlinburg, Tenn.

NOVEMBER

- 6-8:** Clergywomen's Retreat, Buffalo Mountain Camp, Jonesborough, Tenn.
- 24:** Thanksgiving
- 27:** United Methodist Student Day
- 30:** Holston Home Fifth Sunday Offering

JANUARY

- 13-15:** Resurrection, Gatlinburg, Tenn.
- 20-22:** Resurrection, Gatlinburg, Tenn.
- 20-22:** Divine Rhythm, Pigeon Forge, Tenn.

For more information on these events, visit <http://upcoming.holston.org>. For corrections or additions, e-mail thecall@holston.org or call Annette Bender at (865) 690-4080.