

## Sister Rita Ann Wigginton (Mary Lisa), Deaf Ministry

BY KATHY WILLIAMS



*Sister Rita signing with a member of the deaf community at St. Stephen Martyr Church*

Sister Rita Ann remembers exactly when she knew she wanted to become a religious sister—it was in the eighth grade at St. Clements School when a Maryknoll priest came to class to speak about missionary work in Africa. She had wanted to become a doctor, but decided against that after working in a hospital as a candy striper! However, the missionary life still attracted her, and the Ursuline Sisters who taught her at St. Clements and Angela Merici High School in Louisville influenced her decision to join their order after she graduated from high school.

Sister Rita Ann's father was in the Army, and the family had moved around a lot until she was ten. In fact, she was in seven different schools in eight years! When she eventually encountered the Ursuline Sisters in Louisville at age 11, their stability and discipline impressed her. "Sister Victor Waller was such a good teacher," said Sister Rita Ann, recalling sixth grade at St. Clement School. "She was strict

but fair and you knew where you stood with her." At Angela Merici, Sister Jo Ann Jansing was one of her teachers, and she ended up being a great support to her when she made the decision to join the Ursulines.

So, Sister Rita Ann, who had found her vocation in eighth grade, then found her life's ministry while visiting Sister Barbara Bir's family as a junior professed Sister in 1969. There were

six girls in the family, and five had been sent to Catholic schools, but the oldest, Jo, who was deaf, had not. The Catholic schools did not provide services for the deaf, so the family enrolled her in Louisville Deaf-Oral School, where she was educated, but

did not learn sign language until she was a teenager. Excellent at lip-reading, Jo was able to cope at school and at home, but she felt marginalized in both environments.

At the same time Sister Rita Ann had this experience visiting Sister Barbara's family, questions started being raised in the larger Church as to why the Catholic Church wasn't doing more for the deaf. Sign language was coming out of a closet; it was being recognized as a true language. Prior to the late 1960s, if you signed, you got your hands slapped in schools. Educational theory had changed on signing by the '70s, so, all at once it seemed, there was a need for the Church to take on an active role in ministry with the deaf.

In the course of talking with Sister Barbara and Jo's parents, Sister Rita Ann learned they felt that they had failed in passing on the faith and wished they had all learned American Sign Language (ASL) in order to be closer and to more fully share the faith with Jo. They gave Sister Rita this advice: "If you're going to work with deaf people, you need to learn to sign." So, learned to sign she did. And not

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only did she learn to sign, she delved into a new culture, the culture of those who are deaf.

While most of her fellow Sisters were getting teaching degrees, Sister Rita Ann asked, "What about these deaf people? Can I get an advanced

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degree in something to work with deaf children in religious education?” With her superior’s blessing, Sister Rita Ann sought post-graduate training in Deaf Ministry. She earned a master’s degree in Deaf Education from Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C., and later went to Boston College, where she earned a Certificate of Advanced Educational Specialization in Religious Education.

Her goal was to get a job in the public school system, teaching children who were deaf during the week, and also as a catechist, teaching religion to children who were deaf on the weekend. But, God is full of surprises! Father Charlie Dittmeier (now in Cambodia), who had been working with the deaf, contacted her to ask if she would work with the deaf in pastoral work. This work was with the Catholic Deaf Office of the Archdiocese of Louisville. At that time, the Catholic Deaf Office was the only place where people could come for an interpreter, secular or religious.

Sister Rita Ann worked in Louisville for five years, then went to pastoral positions with the Diocese of Toledo, Ohio as Director of Ministry for Deaf; Catholic Charities Deafness Services Director in Brooklyn, New York; the Diocese of Covington, Kentucky as Director of Ministry for

the Deaf, and a stint as Co-Vocations Director for the Ursuline Sisters.

In 2008, she was elected to one term on the Leadership Team. She served part time in Leadership while at the same time moving into a part-time position with the Ministry Formation Program (MFP) based out of Chicago, Illinois, and continues to serve the deaf community in this capacity.

The Ministry Formation Program is a four-year program of education and formation for Catholic deaf and hard-of-hearing women and men to acquire and develop ministerial skills necessary to serve as active Catholic lay ministers in a deaf community. Its students come from dioceses all over the country. It welcomes hearing

six weekends a year: three in the fall and three in spring. They arrive Friday afternoon and the session ends at about noon on Sunday.”

Of her ministry over these nearly fifty years, Sister Rita Ann says, “I always retained that desire to help. Deaf ministry IS missionary work; work that is not being done. You go in and get enculturated with the people, you learn their language and work with them, adapt to their culture. It’s a very invisible culture. The missionary piece is still there. The doctor piece is still there from a spiritual aspect—helping people.”

For her, it is a great privilege to be able to communicate her faith with this linguistic minority and to be able to hear what the deaf want to tell her.



*Sister Rita signing during Mass at St. Stephen Martyr Church*

adults who have skills in signing and communicating with deaf persons.

The four-year curriculum is demanding, but rich in opportunities for development in many disciplines, including Adult Education, Family Ministry, RCIDA, Social Service Ministry, and Youth Ministry. “Each student attends classes in Chicago

“The deaf community is a culture, not a handicap or disability.”

*For more information on the Ministry Formation Program (MFP), visit: <http://www.mfpchicago.org>, or contact Sr. Rita Wigginton, Director, at 502-640-4957 voice and text, 502-416-0126 Video Phone or by email: [mfpdirectorchicago@gmail.com](mailto:mfpdirectorchicago@gmail.com)*