

Grand River Deaf Branch
1987 — 2002
by Jeff Lewis

Isaiah prophesied about the coming of the Book of Mormon and said, in Chapter 29, verse 18:

“And in that day shall the deaf hear the words of the book and the eyes of the blind shall see out of obscurity and out of darkness.”

The Grand Rapids ward building on the East Beltline was completed for about four years when, in 1968, missionaries knocked on the door of Dave and Inez Harmon. The Harmons had four daughters; the youngest, Anita, was born deaf. She attended an oral language school for the deaf and her parents drove her by the chapel every day on the East Beltline.

After a few meetings with the missionaries, the Harmons decided to attend church. When they pulled up to the ward building, Anita got very excited. She told her parents she looked at the building every day and wondered what it was. She wanted to know more about that building.

And so the foundation for the deaf branch in the Grand Rapids stake were beginning to be laid. Sort of. When Anita was a teenager, she decided to stop going to church because she could not understand what the speakers were saying. She knew it was true, but was bored. Her parents decided to teach her sign language and Inez served as the interpreter. The family began taking sign language classes and spent Family Home Evenings learning to sign. Many of Anita's classmates were learning sign language as well, including Julie (Hatt) Wheeler, Kim (Bloom) Oom–Sprinkel, and Amy (Sutherlin) Mahoney.

As deaf membership grew, more interpreters were called. Fred Oom and Donna Knight left to serve deaf missions for the church. Dave Harmon got permission from the Lansing mission president to teach missionaries sign language. Julie Wheeler was the first to be baptized. The mission president allowed missionaries to stay in the ward for 6 — 10 months, to give them time to learn the language and teach.

Soon, the group had seven deaf members and moved from the Grand Rapids ward to the Comstock Park ward. When Fred Oom returned from his mission, he introduced a new language, created by the deaf, called American Sign Language or ASL, that was clear and easily understood by the group. After receiving formal permission to organize a deaf group, its six members attended sacrament meeting with the ward, then had their own Sunday School, Priesthood and Relief Society taught in ASL.

As members grew in the gospel, they had greater opportunities to serve. Glen Brower became the first deaf member from Grand Rapids to serve a full time mission. It was not uncommon to have up to 20 deaf investigators at a branch activity.

In 1987, the group was organized as the Grand River Deaf Branch. Scott Bloomfield was called as the first branch president. There were 8 to 10 deaf members when the branch started, along with several “adopted families” from around the stake, including Stake President Kent Price and his family. In 1989, the branch got its first deaf program missionaries. They came thinking that they would need to organize the branch’s church programs and were surprised to see that it had already been done. The branch had regularly scheduled activities, sign language classes and firesides. Jeff Garth, the ward executive secretary, became the first deaf African American member to serve a full time mission for the Church.

In 1994, the branch was blessed with the literal fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophesy when the Book of Mormon was translated into ASL and distributed on video tape. Truths that had been hard to understand were now made clear as members were able to study the Book of Mormon in their own language and “the deaf hear(d) the words of the book.”

President Bloomfield was released in 1990 and Greg Slater was called to serve as branch president for about 18 months, before he graduated from law school and left the area. Jeff Lewis was called to be branch president from 1991 through 1996. Bruch Skidmore served from 1996 to 1999 and Pat Phillips was called as the first deaf branch president of the Grand River Deaf Branch. Pat served until 2002, when changes in church policies led to the discontinuation of deaf missionaries and the recommendation that deaf members be integrated into mainstream wards.

At its peak, the ward had a total membership of over 70, including support family, hearing spouses and hearing children. There were 31 deaf members, 19 of whom were active. The branch was blessed to live in a time when the gift of tongues — and “hands” — allowed the gospel to be taught to all people.

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Please scroll down to see a copy of the front page of the Church News from October 28, 2095. It features our own Jacob Wheeler and missionary Sister Flanders sharing a song in a Primary Sacrament program

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