

Fortune, Roma Coxey ^[1]

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by Lawrence F. London, 1986

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Roma Coxey Fortune, Episcopal priest, son of John L. and Mary Coxey Fortune, was born in Black Mountain. Having lost his hearing at age eight after a severe case of scarlet fever, he received his education at the North Carolina School for the Deaf ^[2] in Morganton. In 1906, he and his family moved to Durham to join other deaf persons who had gone there seeking employment in the textile and tobacco industries. Fortune worked first for the Durham Hosiery Mill ^[3] and later for the American Tobacco Company ^[4].

Because of the large number of deaf persons living in Durham, the Reverend Oliver J. Whildin, Episcopal missionary to the deaf in the southern states, went there in early 1906 to begin a mission for the deaf. Working with the Reverend Sidney S. Bost, rector of St. Philip's Church, Whildin organized and taught a group of deaf persons who displayed an interest in the Episcopal church. After several weeks of instruction, he presented to the bishop for confirmation a class of seventeen deaf people who were confirmed on 20 May 1906. One of the members of the class was Roma C. Fortune. From that time on Fortune took an increasingly active part in the development of his church's work among the deaf.

Following Whildin's commencement of the mission in Durham, the Reverend Mr. Bost organized a Bible class for the deaf and held services for them at St. Philip's Church each Sunday afternoon. Fortune assisted him by interpreting the services in the sign language. The extent to which members of the congregation participated in the liturgy of the Episcopal church appealed to the deaf. They made all the responses, read the psalter, and sang the chants and hymns in the sign language. As the deaf congregation grew, Fortune relieved Bost by teaching the Sunday school and by being licensed as a lay reader. After working for several years as a layman, he decided to study for the ministry. Both he and Bost felt that the deaf needed one of their own to serve them. Fortune read theology under Bost's direction and on 13 February 1917 was admitted as a candidate for holy orders. On 5 May 1918 Fortune was ordained to the diaconate by Bishop Joseph B. Cheshire ^[5] in St. Philip's Church. The bishop placed him in charge of the deaf work in Durham under Bost's guidance and authorized him to extend his work to other parts of the diocese. He was also permitted to hold services in the two neighboring dioceses if they requested his assistance.

At the end of his first two years in the ministry, Fortune reported that he had visited ten places in the diocese and delivered 144 sermons and addresses. In 1924, he regularly officiated in fourteen stations in the state; he preached to "over a thousand people, and ministered to them in other ways." In eight of the stations he organized Bible and Sunday school classes with "about 200 members of various denominations attending," the majority of them Episcopalians. However, Fortune welcomed the deaf of other communions as well as those not affiliated with any church. During the years he was caring for his widely scattered mission posts, he continued his theological studies under Bost. On 27 January 1929 he was ordained a priest by Bishop Cheshire in St. Philip's Church, becoming the first deaf Episcopal priest in the southern states. The ordination service was interpreted to the deaf people in the congregation by James R. Fortune, a son of the candidate.

From the time the Episcopal church began working for the deaf, services and Sunday schools were held in established churches for the hearing on Sunday afternoons or evenings. The plan worked well in most places, but in Durham the deaf congregation had grown large enough to justify a church building of its own. Fortune felt that they had imposed long enough on the goodwill and cooperation of the rector and members of St. Philip's parish. In May 1926 he addressed the annual meeting of the Episcopal Church Women on the need for a separate church building for the deaf of Durham. The church women responded to his appeal with a pledge of \$3,000 toward a building. With the additional assistance of other Episcopalians throughout the diocese, a neat brick structure seating two hundred persons was completed five years later. It was consecrated on 17 May 1931 and given the name Ephphatha ^[6], the Aramaic word meaning "be opened," used by Christ when he healed a deaf mute. This church was the first in the South and the fourth in the nation to be built for the use of the deaf. Fortune became priest in charge of the mission as well as having responsibility for all the deaf work in the diocese.

Three years after the consecration of Ephphatha, the deaf congregation of Burlington acquired a church building of their own, St. Athanasius. It was an unused church building belonging to the Church of the Holy Comforter, whose vestry remodeled it and presented it to the deaf of Burlington. Under Fortune's care the deaf work in Burlington had grown steadily since the beginning of his ministry. When St. Athanasius was reconsecrated in 1934, the deaf congregation of Burlington was ready for a church of its own.

From the beginning of his ministry to deaf people, Fortune did not limit his efforts to their spiritual needs but tirelessly assisted them in their everyday social and economic life. He made them feel free to call on him for advice and help with personal and community problems. In this way he inspired and won the affection of his congregations. In a tribute to him

Bishop Edwin A. Penick remarked: "Considering the handicap under which he labored, Mr. Fortune's ministry was not only dramatic and appealing, but far reaching in its extent and substantial in results. We honor him as one of the outstanding pioneers of the Church. . . . We never heard the sound of his voice, but we never failed to catch the muted sweetness of his personality."

On 17 October 1900 Fortune married Elsie Carter, of Kinston, a classmate at the North Carolina School for the Deaf. They had seven children: Robina (Mrs. R. E. Register), Maude Addie (Mrs. A. L. Thompson), Robert F., Sidney C., Roma C., Jr., James R., and Edward L.

He was buried in Maplewood Cemetery, Durham.

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