

“That All May Hear”:

A Guide to Radical Hospitality for the Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing By Rev. Mary Heron Dyer

The Issue of Inclusion:

Does a Tree Falling in a Forest Make a Sound If No One Is There to Hear It?

Whom are we talking about here? An occasional elderly relative or friend? No. The latest data show that there are over 38,000,000 adults in the US who have some hearing deficit, from moderate hearing loss to deafness. As the population “grays,” this will increase exponentially.

If we don’t notice these people in our midst, does that mean there aren’t any? Even if we don’t know anyone in our group that has a loss of hearing, does that mean that they simply do not come because of *de facto* exclusion? People with mobility issues are visible. But hard-of-hearing and Deaf are often invisible. Yet, if we dare to acknowledge how our ignorance has led to perhaps unintentional but also avoidable exclusion of a large part of the population, what are technologies that can help us bring this group to the fullest possible inclusion?

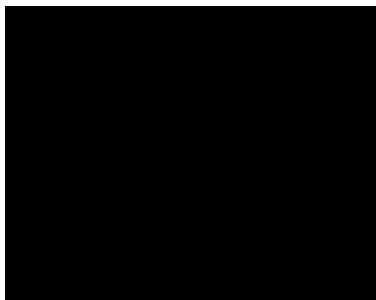
Overview of Communication Access

When we see someone in a wheelchair, their accessibility needs seem simple: ramps for physical access, wide doors, lower drinking fountains, retrofitted bathrooms... Yet the issues confronting hard-of-hearing, late deafened and Deaf adults are more complex. People born **Deaf** are most likely to have American Sign Language (ASL) as their first language or be bilingual with ASL and English. Here the “remedy” is to have ASL interpreters at public events, meetings, etc., plus encouraging hearing adults to learn basic signs and have notepads available for written communication.

With **hard-of-hearing** and **late deafened adults** it is different story. A late-deafened adult is not able to suddenly lip read or understand ASL. Many of those who have lost hearing over time have learned to minimize or deny the extent of their hearing loss, to even try to “pass” in the hearing world as long as they are able. At some point, however, this becomes a barrier which effectively marginalizes them, causing them to withdraw from social interactions.

So, for this very wide spectrum of people with varied communication issues with the hearing world, there are a number of ways to address these issues.

Communication Technology



There is so much developing in communication technology that it can be truly overwhelming for the neophyte, especially if they have not had to deal personally with communication issues. So the issues of “Where to begin?” and “How do we pay for it?” initially loom large. Let us first do a brief overview of what kinds of communication support the Deaf and hard-of-hearing might need to feel fully included in a welcoming congregation.

I. Audit of audio system:

For the hard-of-hearing, who may or may not have hearing aids, the first place to begin is an audit of the communication system. Is there amplification? Is it adequate? Is it routinely used? Are people trained properly to use the mikes?

II. Assistive Listening Devices:

These may take the form of an audio loop in the sanctuary, a portable audio loop for classrooms and meeting rooms; assistive listening devices placed in the back of church that people can use coupled with their hearing aids or cochlear implants; neck loops that can be directly connected to an audio system, etc.

III. American Sign Language Interpreter:

For those who are culturally or born Deaf, as well as adding a wonderful richness to services for those who are hearing.

IV. Real-Time Captioning:

For the very small number of those who are newly deaf and who do not know ASL.

Where do we begin?

We first begin by stepping out in faith by making a commitment to become a truly radically inclusive congregation. We begin by educating ourselves about communication issues. We then begin to assess and implement the first of the four-step process listed above for audio access, accompanied by training greeters, ushers, and church leaders, and educating the entire congregation. We then start to become “visible” as we reach out through word, newsletters, bulletins, that our words of “welcome” to those with communication challenges are not simply words, but accompanied by actions.