

“Get Looped”: Hearing Assistive Technology for Congregations – A Challenge

Three days after knee surgery in 2008, I woke up, anticipating going home that day, but something was wrong, very wrong. I couldn't hear anything. Panicked, I pushed the call button and told a nurse I was deaf and asked someone to call my spouse. I had sat through the mandated pre-surgery warning session, being told of the many risks of surgery, but no one had mentioned deafness. As the day wore on, with a succession of specialists being summoned to my bedside, each having to write out everything, my mood kept getting darker and darker, to the point that I was placed on suicide watch, with someone sitting by my bedside for the next several days while they kept me an extra week to try to find out what had happened and if it was fixable.

I was put on an anti-viral and steroids, but as the months wore on, and after a succession of alternative treatments, it became clear that I was permanently and irrevocably deaf. Half a year later I received a cochlear implant, which has allowed me to “visit” the land of the hearing. I do all right one-on-one without a lot of background noise, but I struggle in restaurants or in groups where more than one person is talking. I need captioning for our TV and am excluded from any movie that does not have captioning (in the Omaha area, there is usually only one movie at a time that is captioned).

I thought I was pretty knowledgeable about disabilities and a vocal advocate for those groups I knew about, but I was blown out of the water about my ignorance after I became deaf. I thought hearing/deafness were dichotomous, and that it could be ‘fixed’ by having an ASL interpreter at services. Boy, was I surprised! And dismayed. And saddened. Not a day goes by that I do not have to self-advocate in one form or another.”

Don't get me wrong. I am truly grateful for the hearing that I do have through my cochlear implant, but this country is so lacking of and committed to assistive listening systems in the public sphere that I am unnecessarily and summarily excluded from many places that have not invested in appropriate hearing assistive technology, such as induction loops. In Europe, virtually any public venue, including museums, public transit and airline terminals, even Westminster Abbey, have effective and user-friendly technology for the growing number of people with hearing loss. In the United States, the figure is inching towards forty million.

Ironically, since I am a newly retired minister, churches are some of the worst offenders for not responding to the needs of the hearing impaired. You see, hearing loss is mostly invisible, unlike other physical disabilities, where one might find a wheelchair ramp and wheelchair-accessible bathrooms. It is time to break the “silence” about hearing loss and the impact it has on the individual and the loss it presents to churches as newcomers are turned away or members themselves begin to drop out when the churches do not address this issue through investigating and installing appropriate assistive-listening systems.

Fortunately for my spouse and me, the church we began going to in Council Bluffs, Broadway Christian, has responded with grace and compassion. The first Sunday we went, we went early to find the minister or talk with a greeter to see if they had some assistive listening systems, such as an FM system with pocket receivers. One would have thought I was the first person to show up with hearing loss, as the minister and her husband, who was doing the AV that day, looked over

their sound equipment to see if there was a jack I could plug my private neck loop into so I could put my sound processor on its telecoil setting.

Unfortunately, we had forgotten or misplaced the extension cord, so for that first service I was literally tethered to the equipment in the back row of the church, unable to move much or even stand up.

As we began to see this church as our spiritual home, we continued educating people around hearing loss, its prevalence, its concomitant isolation, and its remediation through assistive listening technology. The few churches that have considered this issue usually have an FM systems, with personal pocket receivers, but, more often than not, they are not advertised, checked to see if they are working, or even used, since they are so obvious, and many people who have hearing loss try to hide it. This isn't counting breakage or systems that "walk" out the door with distracted users.

So, we began investigating induction loops, which are wires run around the area to be used, then connected to an amplifier that is plugged into an existing audio system. As word began to spread about this new technology being considered, one woman shared with the pastor that she had stopped coming to church because she could no longer understand enough to make it worth her while. She wanted to know when this project was finished so she could come again and fully participate.

But we have just finished installing an induction loop in both the sanctuary and the fellowship hall, all for a little over a thousand dollars, so all I will now have to do is find a seat and turn on my telecoil setting (a growing majority of newer hearing aids have a telecoil setting, and they can be installed easily and cheaply into existing hearing aids), and the microphone will feed directly into it, without all the attendant background noises that make my comprehending in a large space spotty at best.

Sheryl, my spouse, also a minister, in God's divine sense of humor, used to be an electrical engineer, and has been instrumental in learning about hearing assistive technology. We joke that we did not find this ministry, but that this ministry found us, beginning the day I became deaf, joining the close to 40,000,000 people in this country alone who have significant hearing loss.

As I close, I can picture the commercial for a cell phone that goes, "Can you hear me now?" If I come to your church to visit in the coming year, can you "hear" the voices of those who have been excluded from fellowship because you have not begun to think about or to address how to make your congregations more inclusive to those with hearing loss? If you want to take the first step, we will be willing to come to you, to meet with you, to educate you, to give you information on appropriate technologies for your congregation.

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