

Suggestions for Hearing Accessibility in Congregational Programming

According to the Canadian Hearing Society, 23% of adults in Canada have a hearing loss. That's 1 out of every 4 adults. You might expect that the majority of those persons would be seniors. However, 70% of Hard of Hearing adults are under the age of 60. 25% are young adults or older youth. In addition, 15% of children in our society have measurable hearing loss. That's 1 in every 6 or 7 children. Since much of hearing loss is caused by noise damage, the percentage of persons with hearing loss continues to increase.

What does this mean for our congregations?

Unless all of our activities are designed to accommodate the needs of the hearing impaired, up to 25% of persons who might otherwise be active in our congregations will simply go away in frustration. 25%. 1 in 4.

Hearing loss is a socially isolating barrier. If you can't hear and understand the conversations and presentations around you, but you can see that others do, you tend to feel as if you're on the outside looking in, that you're excluded from belonging. You also wonder why you bothered to attend when not only are you getting no benefit from the activity, it's actually detrimental to your emotional well-being, because it increases your sense of frustration and isolation. By and large the Hearing Impaired won't say anything if their needs are not being met, they'll just quietly disappear. And chances are, when they disappear, so will their hearing family.

While there are some real challenges in providing programming for the minority that are profoundly deaf, there are many relatively easy things that congregations can do to meet the needs of the majority that are Hard of Hearing. Implementing these will not meet all the needs of the deaf, but will go a long way to making them feel welcome and included as well.

Understanding Hearing Loss: There are 3 major components to hearing: *volume* (how loud the sound is); pitch or *frequency* (high sounds vs. low sounds); and *discrimination* (the ability of the brain to make sense of the sounds). For persons with minor hearing loss - the type typically caused by age -- in many instances increasing the volume is all that is necessary for them to hear and understand. However, for more profound hearing loss - the type that affects children and young or middle-aged adults -- some frequencies may be lost more than others, and discrimination is also affected. Basically, this means that if only the volume is

increased, the person just hears louder babble. The brain has to work much harder to make sense of the sounds. The 3 tools to help with discrimination are:

1. **reading lips:** the brain processes the shape of the mouth along with the sounds and the result is that words actually sound louder and clearer.
 2. **slow down the pace:** the brain may actually need to "run through" or recycle what has been heard 3-5 times to insert missing sounds (e.g. vowels which are a different frequency than consonants).
 3. **provide written transcripts or captions** whenever possible.
-
- **Whenever possible, always use a microphone or sound system.** We've all been in services or activities where someone says "I don't need to use the mike, you can hear me". For the hearing impaired, that just makes us want to go home. If you've got 6 people sitting around a kitchen table, you don't need a microphone. If you're doing an activity in a sanctuary or fellowship hall, you do.
 - **Whenever you use a microphone, make sure your mouth is visible.** For the hearing impaired, if we can see your mouth move then what you're saying actually sounds louder and clearer. It helps our brains to fill in some of the blanks in the specific sounds that we didn't hear. If you hold the mike directly in front of your mouth, it's just loud babble.
 - **Remove barriers to lip reading.**
 - Men should not have facial hair anywhere near their mouths.
 - For women, it's helpful if lipstick is worn. For men, chapstick or some other type of lip gloss is helpful.
 - Take care with lighting so that faces are visible and not in shadow.
 - For small group activities (up to 10-12 people), it's preferable to sit in a circle.
 - For medium group activities (up to 25-30 people), it's preferable to sit in a semi-circle with 2-3 rows. For the hearing impaired sitting at either end in the front row, the speaker is visible and they can also read the lips of the rest of the audience/congregation. In a typical sanctuary, most persons with hearing loss have no clue what has been shared from the congregation, including the good news and prayer requests as well as announcements.
 - If speaking will be done from a platform, reserve the 1st 2 rows for the Hard of Hearing, and ensure that all speakers face this section.
 - In a setting with rows of seats, if persons from the congregation or audience will participate, they should do so facing the Hard of Hearing section, not from within the congregation.
 - The Hearing Impaired love a joke as much as anyone else. If the speaker is laughing while telling the joke, they won't be able to read

his/her lips. If others are also laughing at the same time, they won't be able to hear the speaker above the laughter. If you're sitting beside a hearing impaired person, you may need to turn to them and re-tell them the joke - preferably without laughing while doing so. If you're the speaker, you may need to pause long enough to allow this to happen before you move on.

- **Slow it Down.** For most Hard of Hearing persons, their brains may have to process each sentence 3-5 times in order to fill in the gaps and make sense of what has been seen and/or heard. If you're speaking quickly, it just sounds like gobbledygook. Watch the professional speakers (e.g. Obama, Clinton, Harper, etc.) They enunciate, they project their voice, they speak at a measured pace, they have slight pauses between sentences or thoughts; they hold their heads up so their mouths are very visible.
- **Use Captions for audio-visual.** If you will be showing a movie clip or you-tube clip and there are no captions or sub-titles, the hearing impaired will not understand it. If you will be showing a power-point visual and there are no captions, the hearing impaired will not understand it. (For programming with children who cannot yet read, movies and audio-visual are even more of a challenge.)
- **Have transcripts available for special music or non-captioned audio visual.** Even if you have a live musician who stands at the front of the congregation, lip-reading music is especially difficult, because the mouth is held differently for music. Without breaking any copyright laws, wherever possible have the words to the music printed in the bulletin or as an insert/handout.
- **Incorporate written words wherever possible.** Have the scripture(s) printed in the bulletin or on a handout. Use a power-point along with the sermon, one that captures the essence of the message in text. Or, if the speaker has an outline of a sermon or talk done on a computer, print out an extra copy (or copies) to handout at the beginning of the service to any hearing-impaired persons in the congregation.
- **Avoid extremes of volume.** Most hearing impaired persons wear hearing aids, which amplify all sounds going into the ears. These instruments are very sensitive. Sudden loud noises are not only physically painful, they're also further damaging to what hearing is left. Dropping the voice to a whisper may be a great dramatic effect for the hearing, but hearing impaired persons can't understand whispering. If there are going to be loud noises, warn people ahead of time, so that hearing aids can be turned down or off.
- **Minimize background noise.** If there's background music being played while someone is speaking, the hearing impaired will not be able to discriminate what is being said. If there's a noisy fan in the background, the hearing impaired will not be able to discriminate what is being said. If there's more than one

conversation taking place in the same room, the hearing impaired will not be able to discriminate what is being said.

- **Understand that the hearing impaired will not be able to visit in noisy environments.** Wearing hearing aids in a noisy environment (such as in most congregational foyers after the service where multiple conversations are going on, or in the fellowship hall at a potluck supper) is a lot like listening to feedback from a sound system. It's physically painful. It takes intense concentration. In most cases, there's so much background noise (which also gets amplified by the hearing aids), that it's not possible to understand what is being said even by the person directly in front of you. It's physically and mentally wearying from the sheer effort of trying to make sense of it. First, understand that the hearing impaired will not choose to linger in any noisy environment. They're not being anti-social; it just doesn't work for them. Second, if possible, find ways to provide visiting in a quieter environment.
- **Understand that music may not be meaningful to the hearing impaired.** For the hearing, beautiful music can be inspiring and bring delight to the soul. For the hearing impaired, it may be physically painful and jarring, or it may be empty space, or it may be babble. Further, the voice cannot sing at frequencies that cannot be heard. Depending on the type and degree of hearing loss, the hearing impaired may not be able to participate in congregational singing.
- **Understand that balance loss typically accompanies hearing loss.** This is especially important in programming for children and youth, but also for adult ages. If you plan to do volleyball or other physical activities, try to have alternate activities available that don't require good balance.

The hearing impaired do not expect that they will be able to participate fully in all components of an activity. However, unless they can understand and follow a significant portion of the activity, they will simply not keep coming.

If you would like to learn more about meeting the needs of the hearing impaired in your congregation, please email (do not call on the phone) any of the following:

John Nichols - jnichols@cyg.net

Joan Thompson - joantcanuck@hotmail.com

Susan Lee Hare - markhare@mountaincable.net

(note that Susan has experience with hearing loss in children)