

Hearing the Word

By David G. Myers, PhD

Introduction

Few hard of hearing people elect the hassle and embarrassment of special receivers and headsets. They prefer what's now available in most British and Scandinavian churches---having customized sound broadcast directly through their hearing aids. There is good news on the horizon for hard of hearing worshipers. Assistive listening for America's 28 million hard of hearing persons is today about where home lighting was before Edison—poised for a revolution.

The concept is simple: Our prevalent assistive listening technologies typically require people to locate, check out, wear, and return conspicuous headsets, which few people will do. In the future (actually the present in many European and west Michigan churches) assistive listening will become hearing aid compatible. People's hearing aids will also serve as sanctuary loudspeakers, delivering sound customized for their own hearing loss.

Today's technology for hearing aid compatible assistive listening is the modern "induction loop" system, which delivers a magnetic signal to a tiny, inexpensive hearing aid receiver. Check-out assistive listening devices will likely become a thing of the past.

Today's Hearing Aid Incompatible Assistive Listening

What is most striking about our existing U.S. assistive listening systems is how seldom one sees them in use. At my church a year ago, one profoundly hard of hearing person used one of our infrared receiver/headsets. The rest of the headsets sat, with aging batteries, gathering dust on a closet shelf. Church building committees and technology managers surely mean well; they just don't appreciate the hassle and embarrassment required to use them.

I have occasionally used infrared or FM assistive listening devices when attending a darkened theater. But like nearly all other hard of hearing people in my church—and probably yours—I deigned to use my church's check-out assistive listening units. They are a hassle. They are unfriendly to my hearing aids (which I must remove). They produce generic sound rather than sound customized for my hearing loss. They require my taking the headset on and off during various phases of a service. And they are conspicuous and therefore, to many image-conscious hard of hearing people, a tad embarrassing. As one of my fellow parishioners remarked, "My mother-in-law would never be caught dead in church looking like a World War II aviator."

Happily, there is a more user-friendly

alternative, one that many knowledgeable hard of hearing Americans are now recommending for every congregation. I first discovered the joy of more convenient and invisible assistive listening in Britain. I was already aware that with a simple push of a button my hearing aids activate a “telecoil” (T-coil) receptor that receives the magnetic signal transmitted by most post-1989 telephones and, under a new federal mandate, by many future digital cell phones. (The nifty result is clearer, stronger sound.)

But I was unprepared for an ear-opening experience while worshipping within the high stone walls of Scotland’s Iona Abbey. Loudspeaker sounds were muddy after caroming off walls. Then my wife, Carol, noticed a sign indicating a loop system and cuing me to switch on my T-coils. When I did so and started receiving the magnetic energy through a wire looping the seating area, the result was breathtaking. The speaker’s crystal clear voice now seemed to come from the center of my head. I was in ecstasy.

In our subsequent sojourns in Britain, my hearing aids have become personalized loudspeakers in virtually every worship place I have visited, from village parishes to the great cathedrals. Other hard of hearing American visitors have likewise thrilled at such ear-opening experiences in Europe. One hard of hearing advocate recalls visiting York Minster: “My wife and I sat in one of the back pews and could just barely hear sounds from the service. When I switched on my T-switches, I could hear perfectly!”

Looping a demonstration community

To demonstrate the feasibility and

effectiveness of direct broadcast to hearing aids, Holland-Zeeland, Michigan, has, with support from its community foundation, become America’s model community for supporting hard of hearing persons. During 2002 and 2003, some dozens of facilities have been looped, including most large worship centers, most Hope College public facilities, most public auditoriums, most senior citizen center facilities, and even some businesses.

Worshippers Respond

Two months after my church’s \$2000 loop system was installed, ten people were benefiting—all of them inconspicuously, with the subtle touch of a switch. One woman who could have used our old headsets, but didn’t, says “It is actually fun to go to church and hasn’t been that way for a long time.” Another, the lone headset user, reported that “The experience of actually hearing such clear sounds was thrilling and hard to describe. One has to experience the improvement. It seemed overwhelming.”

Similar reports are coming in from other congregations:

- One woman, after switching on her telecoil and hearing sound “like I hadn’t heard in years” broke into tears of joy and could not stop crying. Awakening at 4 a.m. the next morning and reflecting on what she had experienced, she cried some more.

- One of our first churches to install a loop system initially was disappointed to have no known users. Eight months later, the happy pastor told me they now have six users. Three are hard of hearing members who had stopped attending and returned after the loop installation. Three others were now attending his church because it was a

place where they could hear.

- A larger congregation held an informational meeting and guessed that four or five of their worshipers might be interested in assistive listening. To their astonishment, 36 reportedly showed up, half of whom were hard of hearing members who had stopped attending services. One year after a loop installation, another large congregation, which had averaged about one person a week using their former hearing-aid-incompatible assistive listening system, now knows of 17 people per week using their loop system (not counting others unknown to them who are subtly switching their hearing aids to loudspeaker mode).

The audio engineer whose firm did some 100 area loop system installations in our area and beyond, reports that in his own place of worship:

“Since the installation of the loop we have had about 14 members using the loop. The coolest part is that four couples have rejoined the church because the spouse wants to go now. Until I did loop systems I never appreciated the joy we could bring to individuals with our profession.”

Some West Michiganders are also looping their homes. My TV not only broadcasts through its speakers, but also directly through my in-the-ear loudspeakers. My office is looped, which means I hear phone conversation through both my hearing aids, with much greater clarity than the one-eared sound otherwise delivered by my assistive listening telephone.

When a church installs a loop

system, its members who most need hearing assistance are also the people most likely to immediately benefit (because their hearing aids are likely already to have telecoils). One sound engineer reports that, “Slowly the members of our congregation have been updating their hearing aids and in [four months] we’ve gone from one user originally to over ten now. Several members have commented on the clarity and ease of use.” If you build it, they will come.



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