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Altering Worship Spaces to Accommodate Elders With Hearing Loss: Key Issues, Basic Solutions

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Accommodating elders and others with hearing loss in places of worship involves altering the environment so that both visual and auditory access are improved. Easily made with minimal resources, such alterations will greatly enhance the ability of elders with hearing impairments to participate in worship services. Following is an overview of the key issues and basic solutions for congregations:

Visual Access. Visual access is important for all people, but it holds particular importance for people with hearing loss. As hearing loss increases, dependence on visual cues—facial expression, body language, gestures and movements—also increases. Both lighting and seating arrangements are key to ensuring visual access. Overhead, directional, full-spectrum lights are best for enhancing visibility, and presenters should avoid shadowed or darkened areas.

In terms of seating, the ideal configuration is graduated seating that enhances visibility for all participants. If such seating is not available, the next best solution is to provide reserved seating near the front of the worship space for people with hearing loss. For discussion or dialogue, seating should be arranged in either an oval or horseshoe shape to allow good visibility for everyone. Avoid using long, narrow tables or linear rows of seats, which preclude adequate visibility.

Auditory Access. Auditory access typically falls into two categories: amplification and assistive listening devices. Amplification systems, which use a microphone and speakers, increase the overall volume for all participants. When using amplification systems, it is important to consider speaker placement, volume levels and microphone access, since these systems do not have the ability to exclude ambient and background noise. Costs for amplification systems vary, starting at about \$200.

Assistive listening devices differ from amplification systems in that they are individually controlled by the users. Consisting of microphones, transmitters, and receivers or headsets, these systems provide auditory access by tapping directly into the desired sound source, clarifying sound by reducing or even eliminating unwanted noise. Assistive listening systems come in four types, each of which has its advantages and disadvantages and should be matched to the needs of the worship space and the participants:

- Hardwire systems are useful for people who use hearing aids with telecoil (T-switch) sys-

tems. Most hearing aids made after 1990 include this technology. Hardwire systems can either be placed permanently inside furniture or the building, or they may be highly portable and used only when needed. These systems are durable, easy to operate and capable of producing relatively high levels of acoustic output with low levels of distortion. Hardwire systems cost approximately \$500.

- Induction loop systems can be used both with hearing aids with telecoil technology and with headsets similar to those found on portable music players. These systems transmit sound from microphones via radio waves, amplify it, then send it from large directional antennae. Such systems are not conducive to being used in multiple settings that are geographically close because transmitting multiple radio waves will cause interference. An induction loop system costs about \$1,000, and the headset receivers cost about \$75 each.

- Infrared systems are similar to loop systems but do not use wires. These systems amplify sound from a transmitter to the user via infrared light waves, which require that the receiving headset be in the line of sight of the emitter. Infrared systems require headsets because they do not transmit sound to hearing aid telecoils. These systems cost approximately \$1,800.

- FM loop systems operate like personal radio stations. The Federal Communications Commission has established 40 channels for use with these systems. Equipment includes wireless neck loops, bone oscillators, button earphones, FM cables and headsets. The components can be set up in any area of a room and they provide direct, uninterrupted sound. FM loop systems have a range of transmission that varies from 20 to 200 feet, depending on the system. These systems cost about \$1,500.

MAKING SERVICES ACCESSIBLE

Altering worship spaces to accommodate people with hearing loss involves improving both visual and auditory access. Ensuring appropriate lighting, seating and amplification, as well as providing assistive listening devices, can make worship services more accessible and enjoyable for elders with hearing impairments. ■

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