

Supporting Those Who Have Hearing Impairment

“Zero.” That’s the most common response given when congregations are asked how many of their members are Deaf. Though this may seem to be a fairly obvious, cut-and-dried assessment, ministry on this side of Matthew 28:19, begs us to wonder “Why?”

Here’s the basic “4-1-1:”

- Deaf are defined as those with little or no hearing who rely upon Sign Language (ASL) for communication.
- There are also some who are considered Oral Deaf (OD) who have little or no hearing and rely upon lip-reading for communication.
- Hard of Hearing (HOH) are those with a hearing loss who use hearing aids or lip-reading as a visual cue.

The ELCA has always been committed to making the church more culturally/racially inclusive and physically accessible. There are currently nine ELCA congregations that are totally devoted to deaf ministries.

Ways for your congregation to help

Here are a few ways your congregation can honor, welcome and engage the people who are deaf or hard of hearing.

- Provide written copies of audio presentations, such as Scripture texts or recorded music.
- Use a body microphone whenever possible, as it will retain the speaker’s visibility for lip-readers. When using fixed or hand-held mikes, bring the mike down to chin level so that lip movements can be followed.
- Minimize movement during sermons or other presentations to honor lip-readers. HOH and Deaf learn to position themselves in a room so that they will be able to see the main speaker. Try to avoid turning your back to the congregation for any reason. Do not stand in front of bright lights or windows. When the light source is behind the speaker, a face becomes a shadow and it is impossible to lip-read.
- Engage a Sign Language Interpreter for worship services and other congregational gatherings to honor both hearing and non-hearing participants.
- Install a TTY/TDD in your church office (have someone trained to answer calls in a TTY). A TTY can share a phone line with a fax machine.
- Install an Assistive Listening System in the nave. Infrared or loop systems help HOH people who wear a hearing aid or have enough residual hearing to converse in a quiet room without lip-reading. These systems do not require a headset or amplification for the general audience, but work in conjunction with a hearing aid.
- Be sure video resources are equipped to decode and present captions.
- When taking questions from the audience, encourage the leader to repeat the question before answering.
- When communicating with a person who is lip-reading, speak normally, perhaps a little slower—but do not exaggerate your mouth formations—this distorts the image. Speak in complete sentences—many words “look” alike and meaning is obtained only by context. Similarly, if a HOH or lip reader is having difficulty with a particular word, try another word with the same meaning rather than constantly repeating the same word.
- Go to the Deaf ministry pages on the ELCA Web site at <http://www.elca.org/dcs/epr/disability/deafministry.html> Another Web site to check out is www.hearinglossweb.com

Karen P. Smith serves on the Deaf Ministries committee at St. David’s Lutheran Church in Massapequa Park, N.Y.