

# TECHNOLOGIES FOR WORSHIP®

## HEARING THE WORD

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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 worshippers. Today, assistive listening for America's 28 million hearing impaired is approximately 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 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. Tomorrow's, thanks to micro electronics now under development, may be ultra wide band radio frequency transmitting to miniaturized low-power receivers embedded in hearing aids.

Regardless, check-out assistive listening devices will likely become a thing of the past. As Terry Portis, the executive director of Self-Help for Hard of Hearing People surmises, "Our country will never be

accessible for people who are hard of hearing unless we make hearing aid compatible assistive listening a reality.” That day is on its way.

#### Today’s Hearing Aid: Incompatible Assistive Listening

What is most striking about assistive listening systems is how seldom one sees them in use. At my church two years 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. Susan Matt, a past-president of Self-Help for Hard of Hearing People (the national hard of hearing person’s organization), told me the same is true at her synagogue. She alone uses the available system and all the other hard of hearing people don’t bother.

I have occasionally used infrared or FM assistive listening devices when attending a play or movie. However, like nearly all of the other hard of hearing people in my congregation, I have never used my congregation’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, embarrassing. As one of my fellow parishioners remarked, “My mother-in-law would never be caught in church looking like a World War II aviator.”

#### Tomorrow’s Hearing Aid: Compatible Assistive Listening

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 hearing aid compatible 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 nearly all post-1989 wired telephones and, under a new federal mandate, by many future digital cell phones. (The nifty result is clearer, stronger sound.)

I was unprepared for an ear-opening experience while worshiping 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 cued me to switch on my T-coils. When I did so, the result was breathtaking. The verbal fog instantly cleared. The speaker’s crystal clear voice now seemed to come from the center of my head. I was in ecstasy.

In my most recent visits to the UK, I’ve noted loop systems broadcasting directly to hearing aids in marked ticket, banks, post office windows, and tourist information counters. Indeed, the UK has mandated that by the end of 2004, “Any business or organization providing a product or service to the

general public must have an Induction Loop System fitted wherever information is verbally provided.” Under recently announced mandates, all London taxis and all London Underground ticket stations are being looped.

Writing from Denmark, the world center for hearing technology, the Rev. Jan Gronborg Eriksen, president of Churchear, tells me that “Here we can just install a good loop system in a theater, a church building or any meeting room (and we do- our churches are almost 100% covered now), and ask hard of hearing attendants to switch to T-position.”

Moreover, many hearing aids have- as all hearing aids now should- not only a microphone (M) setting and a telecoil (T) setting, but also an M/T setting that enables one to hear surrounding conversation or singing, while also hearing sound that’s broadcast through one’s personalized loudspeakers.

#### Looping a demonstration community

To demonstrate the feasibility and effectiveness of direct broadcast to hearing aids, my community, Holland-Zeeland, Michigan, has, with support from its community foundation, become America’s model community for supporting hard of hearing persons. 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. Moreover, response from hard of hearing people has been gratifying and revealing.

Two months after my congregation’s \$2000 loop system was installed, ten people were benefiting with the subtle touch of a switch. One woman who could have used the old headsets (yet never did), said: “It is actually fun to go to church and it hasn’t been that way for a long time.”

Our community initiative is now spreading to other communities in Michigan. The Board of Michigan’s hard of hearing person’s organization has unanimously adopted a resolution advocating that Michigan’s churches, auditoriums, theaters, courts, airports, and other venues where sound is broadcast install assistive listening systems that broadcast sound directly through hearing aids. Its sister state organization in California has concurred by requesting that in all new and extensively remodeled buildings, wherever there is a public address system, a loop should be permanently installed.

More and more new hearing aids are coming with the inexpensive telecoil receiver built in. In Holland, Michigan, audiologists are outfitting nearly all new hearing aids with telecoils (except for the few who insist on the miniaturized, completely-in-the-canal aids, which cannot accommodate the part).

When a church installs a loop system, its members who need hearing assistance the most are also the very people most likely to benefit immediately (because their hearing aids are likely to already have telecoils). Other hard of hearing members will come to use it as they purchase new or replacement aids.

#### A vision for the future

I can now envision an American future where hearing aids will become so appreciated and effective that most people with hearing loss will use them. As usage increases, the stigma of hearing aids will diminish. With the hearing-loss prone population (slated to double in the next 30 years) this could improve the quality of life for tens of millions.

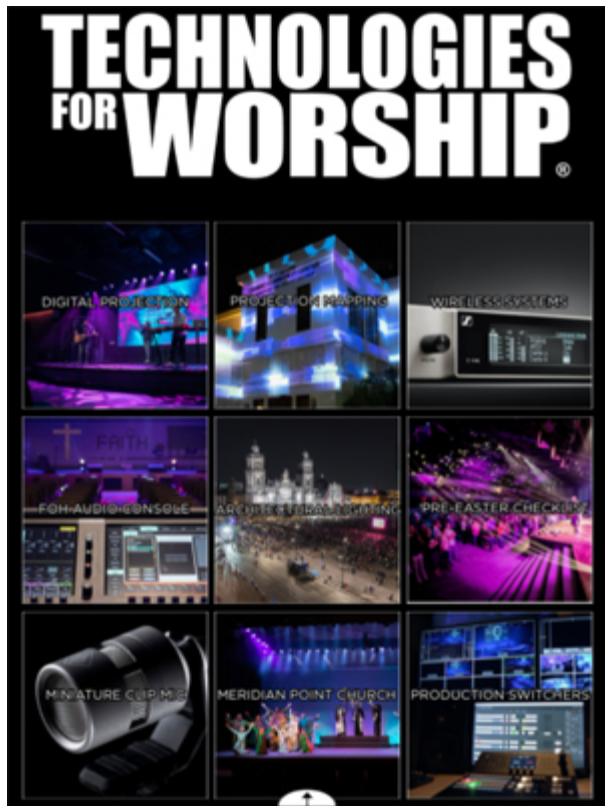
Today's electrical engineers are already dreaming tomorrow's technology. One possibility, thanks to developments in micro electronics, is the application of ultra wide band frequencies to transmit information to earbuds. These could function as MP3 receivers for music buffs (replacing today's wired headsets), as miniature loudspeakers for normal hearing people in noisy situations (at work, in airports, on flight crews), or as an integral part of future hearing aids.

In the present, churches serve America's aging and increasingly hard of hearing population. Having already installed ramps to make worship places accessible to the physically challenged, why not install today's loop systems to more effectively support the auditorially challenged? As with the widespread introduction of any such technological innovation- radio, television, cell phones- somebody must lead the way. Why not the church?

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