

Many Congregations Reaching Out to the Hard of Hearing

by Stephen O. Frazier and Rev. Dr. Peter Frazier-Koontz

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be looped for \$5,000 to \$6,000.”

In Mark 4:9 Jesus said, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear” and in the book of Revelation we read “Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.” (Rev. 2:29, NRSV).

The preaching and hearing of the gospel is central to the Reformed Faith. However, for a growing number of the faithful, more than simply having an ear is needed to hear the word. It’s estimated that over forty million Americans have some degree of hearing loss and, contrary to popular belief, more than sixty-five percent of them are under retirement age. More than half of those over 75 have a hearing loss but there is a significant portion of the nation's teenagers who are also hard of hearing.

Although the hard of hearing may still be able to hear in one-on-one conversations and some other settings, hearing and understanding in churches - especially those that are large and have considerable reverberation- can be difficult or even impossible for them. Hearing aids and a good PA system may help some but, for others, they just don’t cut the mustard and something more is called for.

For a growing number of Presbyterian congregations around the country that something more is a hearing loop. In New Mexico the leadership of of Saint Andrew and Rio Rancho Presbyterian have reached out to their hard of hearing members by installing hearing loops. The Placitas church is the latest of several Presbyterian congregations in Greater Albuquerque that have installed or are planning to install a loop in the sanctuary.

In Wisconsin the number of looped churches is nearly three hundred and includes the Presbyterian churches in Appleton, Fond du Lac, Kiel, Marshfield, Neenah/Menasha, Omro and Racine. On the Western shore of Michigan the number of looped churches nearly as high. The greater Chicago area has recently become a hotbed of hearing loop activity while in Nebraska, Eastridge Presbyterian in Lincoln and Dundee Presbyterian in Omaha were the state's pioneers of the technology.

A recent addition to the list of looped churches is The First Presbyterian Church in Fort Wayne, Indiana. Church leaders there followed the advice of the Hearing Loss Association of America (HLAA) to “Get In the Hearing Loop” (www.hearingloss.org/content/get-hearing-loop) when they installed a loop in their sanctuary, replacing an existing assistive listening system that was seldom utilized.

A hearing loop is nothing more than a thin, insulated copper wire that surrounds the sanctuary or, in a larger church, is placed in a grid pattern throughout the sanctuary. Installation can be under the mop board, under the carpeting, or hidden in a variety of other ways. It is connected to an amplifier plugged into the church's existing sound system or, if no sound system previously existed, can become that system. That wire loop silently transmits the sound emanating from the various microphones in the church as an electromagnetic signal that goes directly to the telecoils in most hearing aids and cochlear implants where it's turned back into sound.

This system frees users from having to remove their hearing aids and don a borrowed headset (and often an embarrassed look) as the FM or infra red systems found in many churches do. They also don't have to track someone down after the service to return the headset – their hearing aids are their headset. The user's hearing aids also correct the sound being received to match the pattern of his or her specific audiogram rather than providing the same amplification to all frequencies - something headsets cannot do. For those who don't have telecoil equipped hearing aids there are receivers with headsets available just as there are with FM or IR systems.

Right now many hearing aid wearers may not even know if they have telecoils. Most of them are so equipped as they are usually included when most hearing aids are manufactured but they may never have been activated by the dispenser because there was little local opportunity to use them. That has changed. With the growing popularity of hearing loops, more and more facilities around the country display the symbol indicating they are equipped with a hearing loop and, though far from complete, web sites such as www.hearinglosshelp.com/loopedbuildingsbystate.htm list many known locations.

In the 2014 Consumer's Guide to Hearing Aids, with the exception of 51 styles of “invisible” completely in the canal hearing aids, over 80% of the remaining 401 styles from all manufacturers have or can be fitted with telecoils. Any dispensing audiologist or hearing aid specialist can fit people with this technology.

In response to the growing popularity and use of telecoils, manufacturers are even adding that capability to some of the very small hearing aids that simply can't contain even the smallest telecoils. Some manufacturers have added telecoils to what are called gateway devices or “streamers” that pick up and transmit sound to hearing aids via a new Bluetooth technology thus allowing users to access the loop signal in church, the opera house, the city council chamber and even, soon, in the U.S. Supreme Court chamber.

Some churches have reported that only a few hearing aid users initially used their loop system but that as word spread more and more members of the congregation got hearing aids and ensured that they had telecoils. A church in Los Alamos, NM has considered removing their old Infra Red listening system after members abandoned it for the new loop system and, in Las Cruces, NM, some members of the Hearing Loss Association of Las Cruces reportedly changed churches in order to attend one with a hearing loop.

Ginny Will, a big fan of the Fort Wayne installation, explained to the local newspaper that, “What happens is the only sound you get is what the speaker is saying into the system - no echoes, no people sneezing or coughing. That's what makes it so good. That's the experience of users of hearing loops across the country, whether attending services at Greenlake Presbyterian in Seattle or Grace Presbyterian Church in Gainesville, Florida and the many other churches in between that have installed this technology.

Octogenarian Othel Moore moved to Albuquerque, NM to be near her children. For several years she attended services at Christ United Methodist Church because she was comforted by the sense of fellowship it gave her but, she said, “I never heard anything in the service.” After that church was looped Mrs. Moore reported, “It's fantastic - I can hear everything going on.”

The cost of looping a church can vary greatly depending on whether it supplements an existing public address system or is a first-time investment in microphones, loudspeakers and all of the other accoutrements of a fully functional assistive listening system. It can be the church's only system or it can supplement an FM or an Infra Red system. The best time to make an installation is during actual construction or during a remodeling but most installations have been made by adapting the installation to existing conditions.

The Fort Wayne installation reportedly cost \$22,000 but Will Clark, the church member who convinced church leaders to install the loop using funds from the church's capital improvement fund, told the reporter for the local Journal Gazette that, “An average-sized sanctuary could probably be looped for \$5,000 to \$6,000.” The Loop New Mexico initiative (www.HLAAbq.com/LoopNM.html) reports that many churches in Albuquerque, Santa Fe, Las Cruces and elsewhere in the state have supplemented their existing sound system with a loop for under \$2,000 and, in some cases, less the \$1,500.

To learn more about hearing loop technology, the most comprehensive web site is www.hearingloop.org. Two other helpful web sites are www.hearingloss.org/content/get-hearing-loop and <http://www.audiology.org/publications-resources/consumer-information/get-hearing-loop>.

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Rev. Peter Frazier-Koontz is a retired Presbyterian minister and former Executive Presbyter for Homestead Presbytery in Southeast Nebraska. He is hard of hearing and played a crucial role in the looping of Eastridge Presbyterian in Lincoln, NE before his retirement to New Mexico where he has played a similar role in the planned looping the the Placitas, NM Presbyterian Church.