

Access to **FAITH COMMUNITIES** for those with hearing impairment

Since language plays such a central role in humankind's emotional and intellectual development and social interaction, various degrees of hearing loss or total deafness invariably leads to the exclusion of such individuals. It is therefore of cardinal importance that faith communities be aware of these key aspects in order to make meetings, spaces, services, programmes and other faith-related functions inclusive.

The rights of persons who are deaf or experience certain degrees of hearing loss (hearing impairment) are set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which has been accepted by the South African government. (WPRPD Para 6.1.1.4)

According to the World Report on Hearing, there are approximately 12 million people who have varying degrees of hearing loss in South Africa (20% of the SA population), from mild to total hearing loss. Almost 5 million people in this group of 12 million have a substantial loss resulting in a hearing disability. 600,000 members of this group are Deaf and use SA Sign Language as a primary form of communication, while about 4 million people in this group are hearing impaired and therefore do not use Sign Language. This group identifies with the hearing world and represents various cultures in South Africa. They mainly use hearing aids, hearing technology, cochlear implants, speech reading, subtitles, captions, and other forms of alternative methods of communication.

Faith communities share the obligation of all authorities and institutions to implement measures to enable persons who are deaf or hearing impaired to fully participate in all activities. Technology and /or assistive devices now offer several ways of applying the principles of Universal Design to address this challenge:

Lighting, acoustics & sound system

The effective distance for speech reading is 6 metres so favourable seating near the speaker will be an advantage. A speaker whose face remains expressionless is not conducive to understanding, nor is a speaker who looks the other way or whose mouth is invisible. Lighting should fall on the speakers face to facilitate speech-reading. Background noise, like other conversations or fractious children may cause severe restrictions.

NOTE: not everybody with hearing loss has the ability to read lips.

- The provision of adequate light and a quality sound system, with the insistence that speakers use the microphone will be a tremendous help.
- Leaders of faith communities can provide notes on the service before or after the event;
- A projector and laser light can offer text and announcements on screen
- Acoustics may be harnessed to eliminate noises like the sound of footsteps



Induction loop system & receivers

An induction loop system functions in a similar fashion, but with greater efficiency, enabling access to more users at any given time. An induction loop consists of a cable surrounding the listening area and a loop amplifier. The cable is connected to the induction loop amplifier, which receives a signal from the microphone used by the speaker, as well as from the sound source. Persons with hearing loss sit within the induction loop area and set their hearing devices on the T function to import sound and eliminate background noise. Those not using a hearing aid system or cochlear implant may also benefit from the system by using a receiver with induction loop earphones. The system is wireless and listeners may move freely within the induction loop area

FM systems

FM systems are wireless devices with a transmitter and receiver that enhance the effectiveness of hearing aid systems, cochlear implants and bone-conduction hearing aids. The speaker operates a microphone and transmitter while persons with hearing loss use a receiver system. The microphone captures sound near the speaker and transmits it to the listener, for a clearer sound and less background noise.

Speech-to-text transcription

Transcription can transform the spoken word into writing on the screen of any web-connected device. For the best quality, language practitioners are needed to feed the words they hear into a system which transforms sounds into text, which is then sent to a device.

Lip-speakers

Language practitioners serving as lip speakers repeat the words, enabling the person with hearing loss to read their lips, body language and facial expressions.

Captioning

Captions are a visual display of spoken dialogue on a screen but also identifies other audio content like music, squeaking doors, dogs barking, telephones ringing, and so on. Captions assumes an audience member is deaf or hearing impaired, cannot hear the audio, and needs a text description to gain access to information. Faith communities should caption any video played during an event so that all congregants may understand.

"Questioning ourselves, sharing, experiencing and growing together, in order to reach a society where everyone is equal and included"

The National Council of and for Persons with Disabilities (NCPD) supports society to build strategies for equitable access to information and communication and maximum participation. We have the expertise and networks to equip buildings and other spaces used by faith communities in the goal towards inclusivity for their members with disabilities.

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