

## **Worship at Peace is now more accessible to persons with hearing loss**

**Linda Delk-Hoveskeland**

**What was the need?** Several members of the congregation have shared that they had difficulty hearing and understanding the parts of the service that were not printed in the bulletin, namely the Sermon, Time for Children, Mission Moments, verbal instructions for changes to communion, and other special announcements. When this happens, people with hearing loss often feel confused and left out. It is important to understand that louder is not always better. Because many people have hearing losses that affect high and low tones differently, distorting the sounds they receive, a person may be able to hear that someone is talking, but still not be able to understand what is being said. More than half of adults aged 65 and over have hearing loss. As the members of our congregation age into hearing loss, assisted listening capabilities are needed to ensure that everyone can fully participate in the worship service.

**Conditions in the sanctuary.** Under the direction of Andrew Tlusty, Peace has an integrated video/sound system that uses multiple microphones, cameras, and a mixer to amplify speakers, singers and musicians during the service as well as broadcast and record the service through Facebook.

While some members of the congregation wear hearing aids, hearing aids are only effective within a limited distance, about six feet. The further a hearing aid user sits from the altar area and sound system speakers, the more difficult it is to understand what is being said. The sanctuary is a large room with hard surfaces that reverberate sound, as well as noise from the HVAC system. Hearing aids pick up this ambient noise too, adding to the difficulty in hearing what is said during the service. Other members of the congregation have hearing loss, but do not use hearing aids, which leads to miscommunication and misunderstanding in group settings.

**Investigation of ways to improve the listening experience.** A proposal was made to the Church Council in April 2025 to install an assistive listening system in the sanctuary that would give all attendees hearing access to the entire service. Linda Hoveskeland, Ardell Hoveskeland, Andrew Tlusty, Pastor Doug, and Marissa Wilson, Council president formed a working group recommend a system to be installed. Two different types of assistive listening systems were considered – an induction loop system or an Auracast system.

Loops have been around since the 60s and are still considered the gold standard. However, loop installation can be very expensive unless new construction or renovations are taking

place. Loops fields can be interrupted by metal building structures and other electrical devices.

Auracast is new Bluetooth technology that uses low energy radio signals to transmit sound directly to individuals' hearing aids. Auracast is less expensive to install, reliably delivers high quality sound without interference, and will see increased use in public venues within the next few years. New hearing aids are now available that can connect directly to Auracast broadcasts. For people who have telecoils in their hearing aids (used with loop systems), neck loops and receivers can be used to access the system. People who do not have telecoils or who do not use hearing aids can access the system using headsets and receivers or Auracast earbuds and headphones. There is an access option for everyone.

**Purchase and installation of the Auri Auracast system.** The Council approved installation of an Auracast assistive listening system. The leading maker of Auracast systems in the US is Listen Technologies. They referred us to a local integrator, Artistic Concepts, Inc. of Chantilly, Virginia, to do the installation and training. Elspeth McCormick of Artistic Concepts and the East coast representative of Listen Technologies came to Peace to demonstrate how the Auri Auracast system works, evaluate our sound system, and answer questions. The Auri Auracast system was installed October 8, 2025.

The system was paid for through donations by Peace members at a cost of \$8,198.78. This included a transmitter, a docking station with 16 receivers, and 22 headsets (16 headphones, four universal ear speakers, and two neck loops).

**How have things changed?** Universal accessibility signs have been posted at both usher stations. Headset and receivers are distributed in the narthex before each service. There are about seven members who use the headsets every week. They keep their set in a Ziplock bag with their name on it. Sanitary wipes are available to keep earpieces clean.

After the first service, one member said that it was the first time she had heard Pastor Doug's sermon since he came to Peace. Another member who used to go home and listen to the sermon online, because she could not hear it in the church, lit up as she followed Pastor's sermon, picking up punch lines for the first time. Two members who forgot their hearing aids, used the headphones and were able to understand everything that was said. One member who was waiting to get hearing aids used an ear speaker, which made listening easier, not having to strain to catch every word. Now she has hearing aids that are Auracast-enabled and will be able to connect directly to the system.

On the Find a Congregation page of the ELCA website, the Auracast assistive listening system now appears as an accessible feature of Peace Lutheran Church. This can encourage persons with hearing loss to try Peace if they are seeking a church to visit or join.

## Objectives for 2026

There are still improvements needed with the distribution and collection of headsets and receivers.

- Recruit and train volunteers to distribute headsets and receivers before service starts and assist people with turning on and tuning into the Auracast channel for the service. Collect, clean, and store the headsets and receivers following the service.
- On the Peace website, add a bullet to the page on what visitors can expect when they attend Peace, alerting them to the presence of the assistive listening system.
- In Google Maps, edit the Accessibility options in the Peace business profile to show that the church has installed an Auracast assistive listening system.
- The headsets are currently stored in two cardboard boxes in a cabinet in the room near the usher station in the hallway. Better storage is needed for this valuable equipment.
- More information about hearing loss, hearing aids, listening devices, and communication strategies should be shared with members of the Peace community.
-