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## SPEAKING & READING IN WORSHIP: WHEN A MICROPHONE IS THE ENEMY OF PUBLIC ADDRESS AND WHAT YOU CAN DO ABOUT IT

What do you do when the electric power in your church building fails — It happens, in a Canadian winter! — and your Public Address system shuts down? I'm turning in the following paragraphs to speaking and reading in a public setting without a microphone. These paragraphs might even be helpful when you must speak and read *with* a microphone. And I'm writing here from the perspective of someone with a moderate to severe hearing loss: Me.

(I don't have to remind faithful readers of these Essays of my distaste for Public Address systems in church sanctuaries. That aversion arises from theological and ethical considerations as well as aesthetic: See Essays [10](#), [47](#) and [110](#). You have also found me willing to admit, begrudgingly, that there are many circumstances in which, despite my antipathy toward almost all high tech in worship, a PA system is sometimes indeed a necessity. There, I've said it.)

What I have *not* done is offer helpful advice about speaking and reading in public with the naked human voice. Further: Here's some specific counsel about how to reach even those who are hearing impaired.

Before I begin, a demurer: I have no training as a speech therapist or elocutionist. I have had considerable amateur experience in theatre, and I feel that my current hearing loss, in my declining years, provides me at least a measure of authority in the subject: With an electronic hearing aid in each ear, I know when I can hear and comprehend, and when I can't. And I think I know the reasons.

So here goes. Four Tips for Public Speakers If They Want to be Both Heard and

Understood. Plus a grab-bag of further advice.

1) The first and easiest rule in projecting your voice in public is simply to slow down. Speak slowly. Slower than you might in normal conversation. Remember, public speech is not the same as conversation around the coffee table at *Starbucks*. If you speak in a rush of words, people like me with hearing problems have a very difficult time of it. See Tip Number 4 below...

2) Pump it out. Speak louder than you would in *Starbucks*. Project your voice from your diaphragm, not from your throat. Make a conscious effort to reach the rear seats in your worship space with your voice. Even with a microphone, you can't whisper without long training and experience. In all my 78 years, I've heard only one preacher who could make the most of a microphone effectively. At significant moments in his sermon, he'd project his voice, pumping out the volume, leaning back from the microphone so as not to overwhelm. At other moments he'd lean very close to the microphone, and whisper seductively. It was an altogether astonishing experience to hear him. But the ease and fluency and power of his preaching was the result of years of practice and experience, I am sure. You can't do it. Not yet anyhow.

Beware too that you don't fall into the habit of dropping your volume at the end of sentences, or at the conclusion of a sermon. It's a common failing among preachers almost certain to guarantee that a big percentage of your listeners will lose you.

And a microphone is your enemy if it lulls you into thinking you don't need to project. So I say: Pump it out. Project: Even with electronic technology.

3) Enunciate clearly. Clip those consonants. Round those vowels. Remember: In English speech, the consonants carry the meaning, the vowels carry the music. No, it's probably not the way you speak at home to spouse or kids. You simply have to practice this, if it doesn't come naturally. Again, you're not in *Starbucks* when you're at that ambo. Preaching — and the public proclamation of Scripture — is not one-on-one conversation. It's public, corporate, communal discourse. You're trying to reach each listener with the Word of Life. Even those with hearing loss. Your listeners, in the words of a friend and mentor, should be able to discern in you "the will to communicate."

4) Speak and read in sense lines. Try to communicate not simply words, but meanings. Newer lectionaries for use in worship print out their texts in what are called sense lines: small sequences of eight or ten words max that deliver short bursts of meaning: a kind of sound byte. It's voiced something like this: "And the angel said unto them" (pause) "Fear not." (pause) "For behold I bring you good tidings of great joy" (pause) "which shall be to all people..." That's perhaps overstating my point. But you get the idea, I hope.

Further for you preachers: Divide your sermon *manuscript* into sense lines as the last

step in its composition. You'll find it's much easier to preach. And much easier for your listeners to hear and comprehend. (Many deaf people, like me, can *hear* well enough most of the time. What we can not do is *comprehend* that jumble of words you're pouring forth. Chopping up your vocalizing into sense lines or sound bytes is a great service to me, anyhow. And it needn't sound artificial.)

Under ordinary circumstances, stress nouns and verbs when speaking, not adverbs or adjectives or prepositions. The heavy lifting in most sentences is done by the nouns and verbs. Adverbs, adjectives and prepositions are all qualifiers to the action announced in nouns and verbs. See Essay [58](#). Those of us with hearing loss can generally intuit the qualifiers from the context, so long as we can hear the nouns and verbs. And when you're writing, in many cases, as the old grammarians used to say, the adjective is the enemy of the noun.

Remember, you're not just reading or speaking words. You're communicating meanings. Even punctuation — periods, commas, semi-colons, etc — are not there to tell you when to pause, but to help you understand meanings. And to convey meanings.

5) Finally, a grab bag of tips:

a) Both men and women: try to lower your pitch. This is specially important for many women, but men too can sometimes sound shrill or screechy in the ambo. This is good advice in any case, Monday through Saturday out there in the world. No, you don't want to develop a fake "pulpit tone" that you affect only in worship. See Essay [60](#). But every human voice sounds lovelier when it's not shrill or squeaky. If your voice is naturally high pitched, do everyone a favour and try to lower it.

Not just in worship: All the time. The hard of hearing will thank you.

b) Be especially aware of difficult or unfamiliar words in your speech. Enunciate any problem words with special care. Remember: It's better to use simple, everyday language than high-falutin' words or constructions. (Aren't you glad Martin Luther King said, "I have a dream!" instead of "I want to articulate a new paradigm!")

c) If necessary, when you don't want to avoid an unfamiliar word, spell it out: "Eschaton: That's E-S-C-H-A-T-O-N." Give helpful etymologies. "It's from the Greek, and it means the end times, the end of history. But not just the end — like *punkt*, it's over — but the end in the sense of fulfillment, the realization of promise and potential..." That kind of thing.

I think Christian congregations should be able to tolerate acquiring at least a little theology, learning at least an occasional unfamiliar word. (Hey, I preached a sermon some months ago about the distinctions between *metastatic and anthropogenic eschatology*! Sure, I spent a good deal of time and effort giving definitions and

etymologies to my listeners: That was the whole point of my sermon. But I had fun, and so did they, to hear their comments afterward.)

d) Beware of contractions in public speech. My old-age ears find it very difficult sometimes to distinguish aurally between “can” and “can’t”, between “is” and “isn’t”, in careless public speech. Better to avoid the contraction altogether and say “can not” and “is not”.

e) Be alert to monotonous melody patterns, in the advice of a friend, a homiletician. He notes: *Humping* is when the voice starts low, rises to a bell curve, and then drops back down to the starting pitch. *Plateauing* is a similar pattern, but instead of moving in a bell curve, it starts low, then rises and proceeds at that pitch, and then drops back down to the starting pitch. A variation is starting on the plateau and dropping at the end of the phrase. *Flatlining* is the infamous monotone. *Lilting* is marked by a continuous upward inflection such as we commonly use to ask a question. It communicates an uncertainty, a lack of confidence in what you’re saying.

f) Again, advice from my friend: Pauses have particular functions in English speech. Pause to get listeners’ attention and to prepare them for an important meaning. Pause to let a meaning germinate. Don’t rush on after a significant meaning has been expressed or a climax has been reached, or a potent image has been conveyed. Pause to communicate a shift of scene or transition in your text. Pause for dramatic effect.

g) Show your fingers when you’re counting small numbers in public speech. Count out the integers on your hand, with your fingers. I find that’s extremely helpful in registering your meaning with me in my hearing loss. Eloquent gestures in any case can be enormously useful in compelling public speech. Turn off the audio on your TV — don’t listen, just watch — and take lessons from a fine public speaker, like Barack Obama. (To be sure, there aren’t many of them these days. More’s the pity...)

A not-so-unimportant footnote: Almost all of the above is useful to remember when you’re on the *telephone* with someone with hearing loss. I often find myself re-playing a voice-mail message, sometimes four or five times, before I can make sense of some careless speaker on the other end of the line...

Footnote Number Two: And almost all of the above is useful as well to remember when you’re asking a question or making a comment from the floor at the conclusion of someone *else’s* public address. Even in the smallest assemblies, when *your* chance comes to speak — as in a question period — do NOT remain seated, hiding behind the person in front of you, and vocalizing your comment in a tiny whisper.

Do us a favour, those of us with hearing loss, and *stand* so we can see you — so it’s clear who’s speaking, and so we can read your lips, if necessary — and speak firmly and forcibly as noted above. Not to observe these courtesies is just

plain impolite to the rest of us. Hearing challenged or not.

Would you add anything to my list? I'm open to enlarging this conversation.

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