Hadley

Religious Services and Vision Loss

Presented by Ricky Enger

**Ricky Enger:** Welcome to Hadley Presents. I'm your host, Ricky Enger, inviting you to sit back, relax, and enjoy a conversation with the experts. In this episode, we share tips for attending a house of worship with vision loss, and our guest is Pastor Scott Himel. Welcome to the show, Scott.

**Scott Himel:** Thank you so much Ricky for having me on Hadley Presents. It's a pleasure to be here with you.

**Ricky Enger:** Well, we are delighted that you could join us. We choose these topics not just by sitting around and thinking about hmm, what should we talk about? But actually, by hearing from people, hearing from our listeners and what's important to them. And this topic is one that has come up quite a bit. So, I'm delighted that you could be here and just share some tips with us.

Before we get into the practical aspects and some logistics to consider, why don't we start by just having you tell us a bit about yourself, who you are, what you do, what your background is, that kind of thing?

**Scott Himel:** Sure. So, I'm senior pastor of North Shore United Methodist Church located in Glencoe, Illinois, just north of Chicago. We're a welcoming, inclusive, and service-oriented congregation. If you're in the area, we'd love for you to visit us anytime. I also have low vision and it's a result of my albinism, which I've had since birth. And I think it's helpful just to offer some examples of what I do see and don't see.

So, I'm right on the edge of legal blindness and I have good peripheral vision. I can see everything anyone else can see, but it's low resolution. I just went on a fishing trip, and I can see where to cast, see the fish, but the line and some of the finer details are really hard for me. I can play basketball, but shorter passes are better for me. A long pass I might miss the basketball. That just gives you a rough sense of what I see.

My remarks today are going to emerge from my lived experience of a person with low vision, and I'm hoping that will help in particular, a person who also has low vision and how to remain active in the life of her or his faith community. Some of my tips may help someone with total blindness, some may not, and I'll try to bear that in mind as I'm speaking. But I think primarily, it will be for those with low vision.

**Ricky Enger:** Perfect. Thank you for setting that expectation. That helps. So I know that even before we get into talking about the service itself and how to navigate that, one of the biggest problems that people tend to have is how do I even get there, especially if I don't know anyone yet and I'm looking for a new faith community to belong to? Maybe I've just moved or for any number of reasons people may find themselves in that situation where they're struggling to even get to a service. Are there ways that people can approach this and get that consistent transportation to just get there and get back home?

**Scott Himel:** Absolutely. There are several options for a person to consider and I'd just like to first mention that this is a tough issue, to have transportation struggles. I have a lot of empathy for it because I've gone through it, and I don't drive. There are days you just say, "Man, if I just had a car." But naming that and that emotional struggle, then I think as a person with any disability in life, it's necessary to say, "Okay, that's true. I don't have a car. And there are actually several options at my disposal that I have to consider in order to overcome this challenge that is in front of me." I think you'll see that as we just list these.

So, the ideal is if you have a family member or someone who lives in your household who also belongs to the faith community and you can ride with her or him, but let's assume that's not the case and that's where I think it gets more complicated.

So going in order of what I would just imagine at a broad level that would be easy and then getting to the more complicated, carpooling with another church member is another great option. And if you go down that route, I would consider lining up two or three people because somebody travels. If it's one person and they're gone, then your whole system doesn't work for that week, and it could be a really important Sunday that you want to be there, or they can get sick. So having a few people is like your bench. You've got your people you can call on.

And if you need help figuring out who can be on your team to help you reach the church, talk to the church administrator. Your church admin knows everything. They know everyone and they know who lives near you, and that's really important. That will help you to not feel like the person is going way out of their way to pick you up. Some people, by the way, don't care if they have to go out of their way, especially if they know you and have a relationship, but even so, it helps you feel good if you know they're in your neighborhood and it's no big deal for them to pick you up.

Larger churches may have a church van and that's a great option if that exists. Smaller churches probably don't have that available. If we've exhausted those options, and again, think of it like these are all options and so maybe something falls through and you have to go to a different option. Another can be public transit. I wouldn't discount that depending on where you live. And bear in mind that your city may offer discounted prices on annual public transit fares. So that's something just to remember. Your city or town may offer a special bus transit service for people with disabilities. You usually need to pre-schedule with them at least a day in advance. And with worship, you can even have a standing appointment with that bus to come get you, pick you up. The downside can be you're sharing it with others. So sometimes, there can be a bit of a wait. They don't always arrive right on the minute, but it's a legitimate option to consider.

Again, exhausting those options, I think Uber and Lyft are something not to discount. They can be expensive, especially if you have a long distance to go. I usually tell people over 10 miles, Uber or Lyft gets more expensive, but it's a good backup option even if you do have to go a longer distance like that.

If all else fails, don't forget that there's virtual worship, but I wouldn't rely on this every week. Virtual worship is great. It's a wonderful thing that's come out of the pandemic, but it isn't the same thing as physically being in the church, being able to build relationships with people. It's really best if you're traveling or can't make it for one particular Sunday to have that as a fallback option.

**Ricky Enger:** Absolutely. And it's great to know that there are so many things to choose from because I think people feel like, "I have this single option. I've got this figured out. And if that doesn't work well, I guess I feel powerless. There's nothing else I can do." So having things to choose from is again, so helpful.

**Scott Himel:** Absolutely. You're not powerless. That's a huge thing with any disability, or I like to say that you're differently abled. You're not disabled, you're differently abled. You're not powerless. You just have to go through life differently than some other people.

**Ricky Enger:** Yeah. And thinking ahead of time and figuring out some of those things can make it so much easier to deal with when the thing pops up where you're like, "Uh-oh. My plan A fell through. Now what?"

**Scott Himel:** Yes, exactly.

**Ricky Enger:** So, it's remarkable when we think about attending a service and just how much visual information there is. You may think of it as, "Well, we're here. We're talking. We're having a conversation. We're here to listen to a sermon." It's all centered around speech, but there's a lot going on visually. So, I don't know that we'll be able to cover everything, but let's talk about a couple of the things that do crop up from a visual perspective and then how you might navigate that.

So, one of the first things I think about is the gestures or the things that we do. When is it time to stand? When is it time to kneel or again, perform a gesture? Everybody's looking to the worship leader for when to do that. But if you can't, how are you going to know when to do those things so that you're not a step behind?

**Scott Himel:** Most visual cues in the worship service have an audible accompanying queue such as, "Please be seated." If the clergy person waves to be seated, they usually say that too. If you need to come forward for communion, usually they'll say at the end of the communion litany, "Please come forward at this time for communion," as they make a hand gesture. But for those cues that don't, and they certainly happen, listen and follow what others are doing. It sounds simple and it is simple. It's so simple you might not even think about that at times.

And it's helpful to sit with a family member or a friend and tell them that you may need guidance, especially if it's your first time at a new faith community. That's challenging for anyone even if you do have vision. There's a lot of things you're figuring out how they operate. And you can even ask that person next to you, "Hey, could you whisper in my ear if it looks like I don't know?" Or if I tap you on the shoulder, and no one's going to know. They just lean over no big deal.

Let's say this is your home church where you're going there repeatedly and you're noticing that there are a lot of visual cues without an accompanying audible cue or you're just struggling in general. I think at that point, I would then have a conversation with the clergy about your needs and your experience and ask them to be more intentional about their audible cues and they'll be glad to do that for you. And they'll probably say, "Oh. We do that automatically. I just forgot that day and I should be doing that."

Let's talk about communion because I think that's one where there can be more anxiety because there's movements that happen. And so that can be challenging, but it's easy to overcome. If intinction is how communion is being offered, meaning you're coming forward to receive from the clergy or attendant, the bread and the wine, follow the person in front of you because it’s one row at a time, people are exiting and going toward the front and then they return back to their pew. So, follow the leader. And then if you get there and you're having trouble, you're in front of the elements and you're having trouble seeing things, just whisper to those serving, "Could you help me?" And be patient. Don't rush. They're going to do a lot of it. So, open your hands and let them place the bread in your hands. And then usually, you dip that in the cup, so then just slowly dip it in the cup. If you have trouble seeing it, let them know and they'll guide you. If you're Catholic, you may drink from the cup and usually, the attendant will actually put the cup in your mouth.

So just wait, and they'll do that automatically for anyone.

And just go slow, tell them what you need and then follow the person who's returning to their seat. Follow them. If the person who is in front of you has already left and you don't know where to go, that can be tough. Just go slow. Try to remember generally where you were. And again, if you've told the people you're sitting with you may need help, they'll wave at you or they'll whisper to you and tell you where they are. So, you can be seated there next to them.

**Ricky Enger:** Great tips. Thank you. What about not just the how to navigate in an unfamiliar place or figuring out when to stand up, sit down, all of that. There is so much printed material to think about. So, there's the hymnals during the service, the bulletins that come out, and even projectors now with slides and things to follow along with during the service. What are some ways that people can deal with that and get that information that's so essential in a way that's actually accessible to them?

**Scott Himel:** Sure. I think at a high level, it's important to think when you have low vision that I need to prep before I go somewhere. And the more components that need to be considered, the more you may need to prep. Then if it's a recurring thing, it gets easier to prep because you know what you need over time. So, think about what you usually need a few days before something like a worship service, especially if it's your first time going there. Make a list of what you need. I like to say that any person with low vision needs to have a low vision toolkit. Maybe it's even something like it's your set of tools, your things you generally take with you somewhere. You can always edit the toolkit as you need to.

And maybe it's even physical objects you keep in a bag and it's a literal bag you take with you somewhere. It may even be helpful to put a reminder in your phone like on a Friday morning to prep for Sunday worship. And we'll get into some of the specific things now of what you need to prep.

So, let's think about first, the bulletin. And I suggest talking with the church administrator to see if he or she can send you a word version of the bulletin or liturgy prior to Sunday. Usually, a church has that completed by Thursday afternoon a lot of times, or Friday morning. So, there is a time of the week when they'll have that for you. They're probably not going to have it on Monday.

A PDF can work, but a Word document is ideal because you're probably, in the worship service, going to be viewing that Word document on a tablet of some kind. I would say it's better than a phone. With a tablet you can enlarge things much bigger than you can with a phone, although a phone can work depending on your vision. But the Word mobile app is really good because it has something called scaling in its mobile view. You can either view a document in Word in print view or mobile view. It's a button you hit. And in mobile view, you can scale a Word document really big. And what's nice about scaling is that it formats it where everything fits on the screen. You don't have to go back and forth on every line, makes it much easier to view. And the Word app on iOS and Android is free for viewing documents. So, you can pay for it if you want to edit them, and Hadley is glad to help you to learn how to do this if you're unfamiliar with anything.

But let's say you don't have your tablet. You don't have a digital version of the bulletin. All is not lost. With a printed bulletin, there are solutions. That's where you want to have a digital magnifier ready. The iPhone or Android magnifier is fantastic, and it's replaced the need to carry a physical digital magnifier with me. But there can be benefits to a physical digital magnifier. These are a device that all it does, it has a camera, and it lets you enlarge things. So, it's up to you to see what works best for you, but I wouldn't discount using the phone magnifier apps first and see if those work for you. You can even use them at a distance and enlarge things within some degree of distance so they can serve a function as a binocular as well. And again, Hadley can help train you with these items and how to use them.

I think the projector is another item for someone with low vision to consider how to interact throughout the service, and some churches put everything on the projector. A lot have moved to that and away from bulletins, but there are many solutions here as well. So again, I would ask the church administrator to send you the slides for the PowerPoint before Sunday and then view that on your tablet or phone. And you're probably going to load them into the PowerPoint app, which is great and very easy to use. Or they could send you PDFs of the slides and you could use a PDF viewer app. Usually iOS and Android have them just built in into the operating system.

But let's say again, you don't have the digital version to view on your tablet or phone. That's when I would use a binocular and a handheld device. The ideal just for ease of use for an hour long service is to have a binocular mounted to your glasses. But usually, those only go up to about 3x in power. That may not be enough for you. The handhelds can go up to about 8x or 10x, and so you may need to use a handheld one. You really don't need to keep it to your eye the whole time throughout the service if you're using a handheld. You just need to read it for a time, put it down and that's very doable.

On Amazon, there's a lot of very affordable handheld binoculars that have come onto the market. These used to be very expensive, but I've recently bought some inexpensive ones and they're great. They're actually just as good as the expensive ones I used to have to buy years ago. And again, Hadley is a wonderful resource. They can help you, advise you on these tools if you need them. Or talk to your low vision doctor and they very well may have at their facility all of these items for you to experiment with and they can advise you what power you may need for your vision.

**Ricky Enger:** Exactly. And just helping to build that toolbox as you say.

**Scott Himel:** You got it. Exactly.

**Ricky Enger:** So, outside the service itself, there are many, many activities and why would you not want to be a part of those things just because you're experiencing vision loss? Maybe you want to be in the choir, maybe you want to attend the Bible study. You want to be participating equally in those things, but there might be some things that you have to think through. Are there ways that people can prepare so that they can fully participate in those extra things that are so important, even beyond the service?

**Scott Himel:** Sure. Well, for the choir, I sing in the choir, and I would say you need to have the hymns scanned and use them on a tablet to see them. And I have another person in our choir who has low vision, and he does the same thing. It can be a little challenging just because choral music can be small, but I also think it's important to sing it a few times before you go to rehearsal, so you have the tune. So at least maybe you have to pay more attention to the words with your vision, but it's certainly doable.

With bible study, again, I would prep before you go, talk to the teacher about your needs and to understand what the class entails. Don't hesitate to ask a fellow participant to help you with maybe reading something or if you just get lost in a reading of where you are, it's no big deal. But I think just a philosophy to bear in mind is that you are your own advocate. It's something the IEP specialists when I was going through school would share with me repeatedly, "Scott, we're glad to help you." And over time, if you have a disability, you've got to tell others what you need. And 99% of the time, people are glad to help you in life. And for the 1% who aren't, we pray for them, and you move on, and you brush it off and you don't let it get to you because you know that virtually everyone else has no problem. And in fact, it's a joy for them to help you or assist you with something specific you need.

Going down to more specifics, let's focus on the Bible study setting and just work with that. Again, you need to bring a tablet or a laptop with you. I think with low vision, tablets work better because you can hold them, and you can also put them on stands on a table. That's nice for your hands. Some stands you can get will lift them up a little bit, which can also help you. The apps are important to consider. There's a great bible study app called Bible Study by Olive Tree. That's the software developer, but you can just search in either the Android or iOS store for Bible study. It'll come right up. It has a picture of a green tree. What's nice is you can enlarge text size and change colors as much as you want, so it's very adaptable. You can highlight and take notes. You can compare translations and you can purchase study Bibles and commentaries to supplement the text of the Bible itself. So, it's a very powerful tool.

But let's say there's a book study. Depending on your vision and if you're able to read printed texts on say on a computer, Kindle can be a great option. And virtually every book you can imagine is on Kindle. If you need it to be read audibly to you, I like to use Voiceover on iOS, and Voiceover can read Kindle books to you. But talk to Hadley, they can show you the steps of how to use Voiceover. It takes a little bit of training. The Voice Dream Reader app is phenomenal and that's available on iOS and Mac. I don't think it's available on Windows, I could be wrong. But it allows you to take EPUB files. It's a certain type of book format, put them in and then it can read it back to you. You can also see it so it's not just audio and you can annotate and even connects into services like Bookshare that you pay a membership fee and then you can download pretty much every book you can imagine into Voice Dream directly and read it. Audible is great to listen to books.

And then for handouts in class, just ask for PDF files from the teacher or Word files beforehand or again, we go back to the digital magnifier solution if it's in print.

**Ricky Enger:** Right. And that is an important thing to know is that this material already exists digitally. It wasn't handwritten by someone, so they sent that digital copy to the printer. It's just as easy to send that digital copy to you via email so that you can take advantage of that.

You alluded earlier, Scott, to the idea of just how important it is to be together as we worship. So, fellowship is so important and having virtual services is a really nice thing, especially during the pandemic. Now people may be ready to attend in person again, but it feels complicated, either because they've lost more vision over that time or are just out of practice or again, just want to approach this and are really concerned about some of the social aspects that have become a little more difficult. I can't nod to people and say hello because I don't really see faces anymore. I can't make that eye contact. Or maybe I'm brand new to the community and how do I meet people? And that's not even talking about the refreshments table, which is its own fun little nightmare.

So, what are some ways that people can approach this in a way that takes a lot of the stress out and gets to that nitty-gritty of connecting with people, which is what they really want to do?

**Scott Himel:** Ricky, I think starting out by naming the emotional struggle of this is important, like we talked about in relation to the driving issue. You're going through a lot internally with something like this, especially if you're in a new faith community or maybe you recently lost your vision later in life. And so, this is all very new, even if you're still in the same faith community.

It's important whenever we go through something in life that's very emotional, that we take time to reflect on that and not just bury that emotion, but really put our finger on it and explore that. Because I think so much of life is awareness, that when you can touch that emotion and connect with that vulnerability, it then, in a way, helps you to not let it be so frightening and for you when you encounter it again, say when you're actually in the moment of fellowship after worship to say, "Oh, I know what this is. I've felt this before and there are many ways that I can adapt in this situation and I'm not going to let this fear prevent me from connecting with people." Because we're going to talk about there really are many ways to overcome this.

So one is, and I want to mention, Ricky, I really appreciated your conversation with Hannah Fairbairn on December 8th on ways to socialize with low vision or blindness, and she's informed a lot of these comments. So, you may find it helpful, the listener, to go and listen to Hannah's excellent talk. It's great to go to worship anytime you can in pairs or with a group and stay with your other person or your group during the fellowship hour. It could be a spouse or a family member or a friend you sat with in the service. And depending on your vision level, if you really have trouble with faces and seeing people in a room, I do have this at times, depending on the room and the lighting, ask them to point out where people are, especially if you want to connect with certain people or have them look for a group and they can guide you into that group. That's a great thing to do.

Another one is let's say that you are alone. That's certainly a possibility. I would suggest standing and not sitting. And if someone wants to guide you and let's say an attendant says, "Oh, well, you can sit over here in the corner," don't let them put you in the corner. You'll feel disempowered if you're over there sitting, I think, in most situations, especially if everyone's standing up and socializing. Try to remain standing. And if you need to remain stationary somewhere, try to stand where the action is, which is usually near the refreshment table. You don't want to be in the way of the line, but you can hover in that area. People will have no idea that you're intentionally standing there and just let people come up to you. And if you feel comfortable approaching groups and you're by yourself, look for an opening in the circle and walk up to the circle and say hello. And especially if someone knows you, they'll greet you.

But let's say you don't know anyone in that circle. That can be an especially difficult situation. A line that I will say when I walk up to a new group and I don't know people sometimes, or maybe I know one person there, but I've forgotten their name or I can't see them clearly is I'll just say to the group, "Hey, I have low vision, could you help me with your names?" And that really is a relevant line to say, especially in a church situation, because many times, people have name tags on and they think they don't need to tell you their name because they have their name tag, and I've had people say that. "Well, I have a name tag on." I say, "Well, name tags don't work for me, I'm sorry." And then they're like, "Oh, okay."

Again, it's like this thing, they just don't know you have low vision. And once they know that, they're very empathetic and glad to help. And they say, "Oh, well, my name is Jim." And then you share, and you can even do that if you've met them 10 times in a row. I'll say that it's like the ultimate card. If you forget someone's name, "I have low vision. I have trouble seeing. Can you help me?" "Oh." And then they'll usually, over time in a community, they know, and they'll come up to you and they'll say, "Oh. Hey Scott. It's Lisa." "Oh, great to see you, Lisa." Because ideally in a church community, we should be a people of compassion and sensitivity, and so people are thinking in that frame, and they want to be helpful.

Another topic to consider is the refreshment table. So here, just speaking briefly, high level, ask your family member or friend if you need them to serve you a plate. But let's say you don't want someone to do that for you. I don't like doing that personally. So, I go and I serve myself a plate, but there are times you have no idea what food is on that table. And you know what? A lot of other people don't know what that thing is either half the time, especially casseroles. What is it? A casserole. So, you can make it a joke. "Do you know what that is?" Just say it like that. "Oh, that has chicken in it and da, da, da, da, da." Because sometimes, they put little itsy-bitsy signs in front of it or nothing. So, there's a way you can joke with people, and they have no idea that you're even trying to assess because of vision reasons what it is.

And just take your time. Let someone know if you need help. But again, you need to be your own advocate. If you need help, ask someone and people are glad to help you.

**Ricky Enger:** Perfect. Those are some really great practical solutions to problems that I think can feel insurmountable, at least initially, when you're trying to navigate your way through this. So, it's been so helpful just to go through those things and again, really get some perspective on, it may feel difficult initially, but there are ways through it. And I think that's what people need sometimes, is just to know that this feels overwhelming, but it's not impossible.

Scott, I want to thank you so much for stopping by and again, just sharing your experiences both as a pastor and as a person with low vision. It helps to have both those perspectives. Any final thoughts that you have before we wrap things up?

**Scott Himel:** I just say, especially to someone who may have lost vision later in life, and this is all very new, is to realize you're not powerless and you're not even disabled. You're differently abled and seeing yourself that way is really a game changer. It's a perspective shift. And trying to be aware of the emotions that you're going through, putting your finger on that, not letting that debilitate you, but having that mindset of, "Okay. I feel this. How can I overcome this and adapt," and find a way to remain active in your faith community and in all areas of life?

**Ricky Enger:** Fantastic. Thank you so much for joining us.

**Scott Himel:** Thank you, Ricky. It was a pleasure to be here with you and your audience.

**Ricky Enger:** Got something to say? Share your thoughts about this episode of Hadley Presents or make suggestions for future episodes. We'd love to hear from you. Send us an email at podcast@hadley.edu. That's P-O-D-C-A-S-T @hadley.edu. Or leave us a message at (847) 784-2870. Thanks for listening.