

*Supporting families and equipping the church for inclusive communities.*

Conversations about mental illness and disabilities

Volume 2, Issue 2

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## In This Issue:

There are a number of ways in which we can be an encouragement and support to each other in our common journeys. This issue of *Dialogue* focuses on different aspects of network-building and mutual support.

The **Sonshine Group** in Evanston, Illinois, is one example of what is happening around the country, as families and congregations find creative ways to care for each other. Another example is found in yearly retreats. This issue highlights the **Oasis Retreat**, held at the same time and place as our ADNet Board meeting (see report on p. 4). We hope to feature other groups with creative ministries of advocacy and support in future issues.

The goal of ADNet is to build connections among us, so that we can encourage and strengthen each other in the work that God has given. The article, "**Why Anabaptist Disabilities Network?**" offers a vision for how ADNet can help build those connections.

Structuring those connections with the right balance of order and flexibility has been a goal as ADNet begins recruiting members. In "**Why Be a Member of ADNet?**" you will find an initial explanation of the expectations and benefits of joining this network.

Finally, we highlight new resources. We hope that you can find something from this issue to give your encouragement in your journey. And, we would love to hear your stories and ideas for future articles. See below for ways of contacting us.

## Companions Along the Journey: The Sonshine Group of Reba Place Church

*Charlotte Oda*

On the first and third Fridays of each month, a group of people known as The Sonshine Group gathers for supper at the Meeting House of Reba Place Church in south Evanston, Illinois. The 30 to 40 people present begin their meal with a prayer, then enjoy food and fellowship, and end their evening with sharing and prayer. These evenings together are times when the Lord's presence is sought and felt; each person there is special and welcomed, and God's love is celebrated. A few people take turns preparing the simple, delicious meals, while another picks up some of the members, and others help with set up and clean up. At each meal, contributions are collected toward the cost of the food and supplies, and everyone chips in as they are able. Reba Place Church (RPC) covers all additional costs, and on occasion provides pastoral care, memorial services, and other services as needed.

The Sonshine Group began about 20 years ago when some Reba Place members felt a call to reach out to people living at Albany Care Facility, a local residence for people with mental disabilities and illnesses. At that time, some Albany care residents were attending Reba Place's Sunday worship service. Over four hundred peo-



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ple live at Albany Care, and it is a challenging place to live. A few who participate in the Sonshine Group still live at Albany Care, but many have moved to other living situations. Sonshine Group now draws from a broader area of northern Chicago and Evanston.

The main purpose of the Sonshine Group ministry is to provide a place of welcome and acceptance at RPC for people with mental dis-



abilities. The ministry gives folks a sense of belonging, a place where they can experience God’s love, and a friendly social event that they can count on regularly.

Many within the Sonshine Group have felt

rejected by society and by family members; many were placed in inhospitable institutions in their youth. Thus, this ministry is an illustration of what Jesus described in Luke 4:18-19: “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

Sonshine Group also ministers to me, although I’m not visibly disabled. I would not naturally choose to spend time with people with mental disabilities, but God has opened my eyes and heart to see how much He loves each person, including me. God wants me to love others, especially those who live with the challenge of a mental disability and have been marginalized by our society. I am learning from them about acceptance, faithfulness, friendship, simplicity, generosity of spirit, wonder, and sincerity. I am blessed when Kathleen shouts out on Sunday morning, “I love Jesus!” I feel a sense of satisfaction on Friday nights. I know God has blessed us, and our life together is one expression of His Kingdom already visible.

It is a blessing when people want to help with the Sonshine Group ministry. I am blessed because there is such a loving, helping spirit in everyone present at our events. Each time we gather is a success, because there is laughter and love, and the broken-hearted are blessed and healed.

I also feel challenged to focus more on Jesus, to share Him more, and to worry less about what I can or can’t do. I am challenged to support and encourage others but not to try to “do for” them more than is necessary. I am a friend, a companion along the journey, one who is listening and sharing. We eat together, clean up together, laugh, cry, and pray together. We are bonded.

I am thankful for what God has given us at Reba Place through the Sonshine Group, and I look forward to what lies ahead.

*Charlotte Oda is a member of Reba Place Church, a Mennonite congregation in Evanston Illinois, and is part of the leadership team for the Sonshine Group Ministry. Charlotte can be contacted at r\_p\_f@juno.com*

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## Oasis Retreat Encouraged Families

*Daniel Hertzler*

Some forty persons gathered at Oaklawn in Goshen, Indiana on Friday evening and Saturday, May 14 and 15, for a breather from the task of caring for family members with mental illness. Resource persons for the seminar included a therapist from Oaklawn along with an attorney and a newspaper editor.

L. Dale Raber, the therapist, gave two addresses stressing themes



of concern to persons who have had to become caregivers without having chosen the role. He emphasized the importance of grieving the loss of what the ill person might have become at the same time recognizing that care giving is an opportunity to be embraced. He pointed out the importance of “diversifying their identities”, being other things in their lives than simply caregivers.

The attorney, Galen Kauffman, described details of a trust which parents of the mentally ill may establish instead of the usual will so that the mentally ill son or daughter does not lose important benefits as the result of an inheritance.



Gerald Hertzler, managing editor of the *Goshen News*, reflected on his experience with his older brother who became mentally ill and how it was necessary and possible to adjust to this unwelcome change in their relationships.

Between formal sessions, participants were able to compare notes and take courage from their common experiences and partial solutions.

*Daniel Hertzler is former editor of Gospel Herald and lives in Scottdale, Pennsylvania. He is a member of Scottdale Mennonite Church.*



## Why Anabaptist Disabilities Network

*Cindy Warner Baker*

With all the resources available to individuals, families and churches, do we really need one more Anabaptist institution?

- Aren't you just going to duplicate information and resources that are already in existence?
- What does ADNet offer that is unique?
- Why an Anabaptist Disabilities Network, anyway?

## Not an institution, but grassroots advocacy

ADNet works in partnership with many Anabaptist organizations, and is always looking to build more and stronger connections across institutional lines. We are, however, an independent not-for-profit group of people who live with and care about those who live with mental illnesses and other disabilities.

## So many resources, so little time

One thing that ADNet offers is a collection of resources that we can recommend, gathered in a central location. It is true that there are vast amounts of information available in print and on the web, and sorting through it all can take up much time and energy. Those of us affected by mental illness or other disabilities often do not have much of either. By gathering information and resource links in one location, ADNet helps you get the help you need, when you need it.

## Connections across the country

Life with a disability is often challenging, tiring and lonely. Things that others take for granted—playing soccer on the meadow, going camping in a different state without first locating the nearest hospital, sending a child off to camp with other church youth, wearing a new shirt without washing it ten times first—are out of reach or demand huge amounts of physical or emotional energy for a person with disabilities. "Normal life" with a disability can differ greatly from the "normal life" of others, and this difference can lead to a feeling of isolation, even for those surrounded by family and friends. ADNet facilitates connections among those living the daily challenges of life affected by disabilities. Here we can find a unique kind of community and support.

Congregations also need ways to access the ideas and wisdom of others that have lived with and grown through the challenges of increasing the accessibility and welcome of their congregations. There are many creative and exciting things happening in countless congregations across the country, and ADNet can provide links between congregations look-

ing for assistance or ideas, and those already implementing them.

### Working to build and strengthen community

Anabaptist congregations and denominations are many and varied, but one thing we hold in common is our conviction that faith is not only a "me and my God" proposition. Faith with integrity pervades and affects all our human relationships, and shapes how we view those around us. The "priesthood of all believers" is not meant to be a high-sounding platitude; it's meant to drastically change our view of *what*, and especially, *who* is important. In Jesus' kingdom all people have value and the gifts of all are necessary for the life of the gathered community. ADNet hopes to serve Anabaptist congregations, conferences and organizations by calling us all to a greater awareness of areas that need growth and change, and by assisting in implementing constructive institutional change.

### Disabilities—the challenge and the invitation

We are all human, all created in the image of God, all necessary to the full expression of God's kingdom here on earth. The challenge for the Church is not simply that of becoming accessible to those with disabilities. The greatest challenge lies in embracing the reality that the contributions and gifts of *all* individuals are equally valuable and necessary for the health and life of God's people. ADNet is committed to work toward the fuller expression of this reality within families, congregations, conferences and church organizations.



## ADNet Board of Directors Meets in Goshen, Indiana

*Ruth Detweiler*

The Board of the Anabaptist Disabilities Network (ADNet) held its second meeting, May 14-15, 2004, in conjunction with the yearly retreat of Oasis, a local support network of family and friends of persons experiencing the challenges of living with mental illness. The staff and Board of ADNet joined in the opening and closing sessions of the retreat, and were blessed by the shared worship and fellowship.

In the Board sessions of Friday evening and Saturday, the ADNet Administrative Team (ADTeam) reported on activities and issues arising from their twice-monthly meetings and ongoing projects. The focus of attention was on the growth and future direction of ADNet as it continues forming a network of assistance and resources for persons within the Anabaptist faith community who face disabilities of any kind. Initial membership guidelines were set up in accordance with ADNet's bylaws. Requirements and benefits of membership will be more clearly defined and communicated to the network in the coming months.



*Dialogue*, ADNet's quarterly newsletter, as well as ADNotes, ADNet Online, and the ADNet brochure were affirmed as important means of communication to ADNet's constituency as well as the broader faith community.

The Board adopted in principle a "Three Year Plan" for 2004 –2006 covering the issues of networking, resource development, communications, fundraising, and staffing. The goals in these areas were approved with the understanding that they will be refined yearly. Preliminary discussions also addressed the issue of long-term office space for ADNet. *Ruth Detweiler is Secretary of the ADNet Board of Directors, and lives in Akron, Pennsylvania.*



# Why Be a Member of ADNet?

Paul D. Leichty

With this issue of *Dialogue*, ADNet launches its first **Membership Campaign**. If you have followed the formation of ADNet, you know that we have no sponsoring church agency as our predecessor ministries had. At the same time, our goal remains to offer free or low-cost resources to any individual, family, or congregation that needs those resources. (See article by Cindy Warner Baker entitled "Why Anabaptist Disabilities Network?")

ADNet was established on the assumption that we who are concerned about the inclusion of persons with disabilities and mental illness into our communities will need to form the foundation of this new organization. That is why ADNet is very conscious a network. It is not our intent to build an organization or agency that is staffed by experts. Instead, we are building a network so that we can support and provide resources for each other.

At the same time, there are some coordination and networking functions that cannot happen unless we support someone's time to do them. There are resources that cost money to develop. ADNet has received and continues to explore outside sources of funding such as foundations and businesses. Yet, the major source of our income must come from the network itself. Together we are the Anabaptist Disabilities Network.

These are the reasons that the Board of Directors of ADNet has established two very simple criteria for membership in ADNet:

1. **A desire to join the network.** This will normally be indicated by providing contact information and checking a box that indicates a desire to join ADNet.
2. **A minimum financial contribution which indicates tangible support.** Initially, this will be \$10 for individuals and families and \$50 for churches and other organizations. We believe that this minimal contribution should be within the reach of anyone. **We encourage those who can to give much more.**

**Why would you want to become a member of ADNet?** We hope that the answers will

become ever more obvious as we continue to work together. Cindy Baker's article, noted above, outlines some of the reasons for the existence of ADNet in the first place. Here, we offer these additional thoughts on why you, as an individual, family or congregation should join ADNet.

- ADNet offers its resources from the **perspective of your Anabaptist faith heritage**. It helps link you to resources for thinking and acting and caring that ring true to our understanding of Christian faith.
- ADNet provides **a voice for persons with disabilities and mental illnesses within our Anabaptist churches**. Advocacy and education are vital. When we always have to advocate for ourselves and our loved ones in addition to caring for them, it becomes another burden to bear. However, by banding together, we can provide a greater awareness and more educational tools to others in our congregations.
- We want to continue to provide resources like our *Dialogue* newsletter and ADNotes resource sheets to members and non-members alike. However, **members will receive certain special mailings**, including an annual report at the end of our fiscal year.
- As a member of ADNet, you have the privilege of **nominating persons to the Board of Directors**.

Most of all, membership in ADNet **expresses your commitment to live out the calling of Jesus:** *"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."* As we join together in this network, we proclaim together that we, too, are called to both extend and receive the good news that all are invited, all are welcomed, all are precious in God's Kingdom.

Please join us as pioneer members of ADNet! Give generously to enable this work to continue and grow. Pray for us in leadership as Board and staff! And send us your ideas and any experience and expertise that you are willing to share.



## News in Brief

**Leroy Willems** has been contracted to serve as 1/4 time West Coast Mennonite Central Committee Regional Disabilities Director. This complements his 3/4 time role begun in January as director of the new Arizona Disabilities Ministries, that has taken the name “Goldensun Peace Ministries.” Willems was previously Administrator of Mennonite Disabilities Committee (MDC) Goldenrod in Goshen, Indiana.

**David Heusinkveld** has been named the new Administrator of MDC Goldenrod (formerly known as Mennonite Disabilities Committee). Heusinkveld, who will begin in mid-July, was previously a pastor in northern Indiana, and an administrator of a rehabilitation program in Iowa.



## Resource Notes

*The following are available through ADNet*

### **ADNet Child and Youth Resource Information Page**

A questionnaire designed to be used in the Christian education setting to discern the special needs of children and youth. The questionnaire gives parents the opportunity to share with others in their congregation the strengths and needs of their child, and provides a way for Sunday school teachers, pastors and others in the church family to better understand and nurture the children and youth of the congregation.

### **New: FASD Resource Packet**

Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) is an umbrella term that describes a range of physical differences and social behaviors associated with a person whose mother drank alcohol during her pregnancy. It is a brain or neurological impairment. People living with FASD can have primary disabilities that include:

- trouble understanding and sequencing information,
- memory and attention deficits
- delayed or dysfunctional language skills
- adaptive behavior
- other deficits or delayed development such as learning to talk and walk

FASD causes a wide variation of intellectual ability and can affect everything from the ability to learn to knowing how to act appropriately in a social setting. One of the most challenging aspects of FASD is that affected individuals usually appear “normal” and are very engaging. Yet they lack the ability to understand cause and effect, and are not able to learn from experience.

Families living with fetal alcohol effected individuals can easily feel criticized and misunderstood by those who assume that poor parenting is the cause of the many behavioral consequences of FASD. The ADNet FASD Resource Packet includes basic information on fetal alcohol disorders, “Come Walk with Me”, an educational brochure about fetal alcohol-related disabilities and the church which is published by Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) Canada, essays and biographical writings by affected individuals and their families, and links to a variety of online and print resources on FASD.

### **ADNet Online**

[www.adnetonline.org](http://www.adnetonline.org)

ADNet's own website is an ever-expanding array of information and networking opportunities. Major sections for Families and Churches are especially useful for resources and networking. Included are several opportunities for online discussion groups. The Resources section is a gateway to ADNet resources and the Information section highlights other sources of information on the Internet on disabilities and mental illness. More information on ADNet as well as links to other Mennonite Church information round out the site.



## TV documentary explores family pain and changing pastoral views on suicide

"With that one phone call, your whole life changes - absolutely everything," said one mother after her son died by suicide. **Fierce Goodbye: Living in the Shadow of Suicide**, an hour-long documentary produced by Mennonite Media with Faith & Values Media explores many facets of what happens after the suicide of a loved one, and will premiere on Hallmark Channel, Sunday, August 22, 12 noon ET/PT, 11 a.m. CT.

The program is hosted by folksinger Judy Collins and brings to light stories of families and friends as they face difficult, unanswerable questions and also surveys biblical/theological understandings about suicide. Kay Redfield Jamison, a professor of psychiatry and other experts also give insights. For more information go to [www.fiercegoodbye.com](http://www.fiercegoodbye.com) To find out whether the Hallmark Channel is aired in your area, go to [www.hallmark-channel.com](http://www.hallmark-channel.com) and click on "Channel Locator."



## Going Places

Since the last issue of *Dialogue*, the ADNet staff (ADTeam) has been involved in the Sunday worship services of three northern Indiana congregations.

At Pleasant View Mennonite Church in Goshen, ADTeam worked with Jim Smith, ADNet Board Chair, and Coni Walters, an ADNet member and member of Pleasant View, in preparing the entire worship service and an adult Sunday school class.

At First Mennonite of Middlebury and at Berkey Avenue Mennonite in Goshen, Sheila Yoder presented the message and led a Sunday school class. A children's story on a related theme was also part of the service. At Berkey, this sermon and Sunday school class presenta-

tion were the beginning of a four-week series of classes that the ADTeam will lead over the course of the summer.

In all three congregations, there was a very positive response to the call to become more inclusive of all in our worship services and congregational life. During the Sunday school hour there was lively dialogue about the challenges that face each congregation, both in becoming more aware of the specific needs within the congregation and in celebrating the gifts that each person brings.

If you would be interested in having the ADTeam assist your congregation in developing a worship service and/or Sunday school presentation, contact the ADNet office. Phone or fax: 1-877-214-9838 (toll-free) or e-mail [adnet@adnetonline.org](mailto:adnet@adnetonline.org)



## Thank you, MMA!

Early this year, the ADNet Administrative Team realized our current computer was not capable of managing the intricacies of our growing database nor was it compatible with our voice messaging system. In addition, the computer monitor had a glitch, leaving it with limited pixel options, readable but annoying!

At almost the same time, ADNet was asked by Mennonite Mutual Aid (MMA), "What do you need?" Remembering Christ's words that "you do not receive because you do not ask," we boldly asked and generously received!

ADNet is now equipped with a desktop personal computer with a beautiful 17" monitor which meets the office needs. In addition, a 15" notebook computer will allow staff to efficiently take meeting notes and manage administrative tasks after office hours.

Thank you  
very much,  
Mennonite  
Mutual Aid!





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Anabaptist Disabilities Network

*Supporting families and equipping the church  
for inclusive communities.*

Resources  
ADNet Online  
Regional Support Groups  
Accessibility Audits



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The mission of the Anabaptist Disabilities Network (**ADNet**) is to provide encouragement and resources to congregations, families, and persons with disabilities as they identify and embrace their God-given gifts and abilities in ministry to each other and to the larger church.

*(Note: Following the example set by the Americans with Disabilities Act, the ADNet definition of "disability" is broad-based and includes, among others, physical, learning, sensory, and cognitive disabilities and mental illnesses.)*