

# CONNECTIONS

March 2008

*Including Persons with Mental Illness and Disabilities*

## Surviving Depression

by *Christine Guth, ADNet Program Associate*

On Ash Wednesday this year, I was struck with the deep familiarity of its atmosphere of intensely introspective, self-critical examination. For decades I was immersed daily in Ash Wednesday penitence and lament. Celebration felt like ashes and death seemed an



Christine, left, and her sister, Theresa Plotnick, enjoy a light-hearted moment.

easy step away. Ash Wednesday provides apt images of living with long-term, untreated clinical depression.

This past May, friends and family celebrated with me my graduation from Associated Mennonite Biblical

Seminary after ten years of part-time study. My joy that day was all the greater because of the adversity I had

pressed through to get to this point. Alongside my coursework all those years I

had been engaged in a parallel curriculum—learning to survive depression.

My own depression fits into a family deeply affected by depression passed down more faithfully than family heirlooms. We treated depression (though unnamed) as a character flaw, a spiritual failure, a source of shame. No one ever talked about it. When, as a teen, I too began to succumb, I forced myself to keep going and hid my pain from the church, as I saw others doing. I observed the church as a supportive community for others—but not in relation to our family's secret misery.

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## Associates Program

The ADNet Board, at its October 2007 meeting, approved a **new direction for the Associates Program**. At the heart of the program will be an opportunity for two students each year to work on special projects that will benefit ADNet while receiving a small grant toward their studies.

The changes are the result of positive experiences with the first two ADNet Associates, both of whom have started with ADNet while students.

**Christine Guth**, named the first Associate upon the creation of the program in early 2006, graduated with an M.Div. from Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary (AMBS) and now works as a "Program Associate," an ongoing part-time volunteer staff position. She works three half-days a week in the ADNet office.

**Rebecca Fast** began as an ADNet Associate for learning disabilities at the beginning of the 2007-08

## Program Changes, Seeks Students

academic year. Her enthusiasm and persistence sparked further conversation about how ADNet could encourage more students from all over the country to incorporate work on disabilities and mental illness concerns within their studies. As a result, the Board decided to create the **Student Associates** program for student-initiated year-long projects. A recruitment campaign for such students is being initiated and a scholarship fund is being created to offer these students some financial benefit for their work.

Details of the program are still being worked out, but will be available soon on ADNet's website at <http://www.adnetonline.org/Business/Associates>. Persons interested in either applying for an Associate position or in funding a scholarship for an Associate should contact the ADNet office. (See contact information on page 3.)

## ADNet Updates

**ADNet Online** continues to collect information on a variety of topics. A new topic, "Depression," has now been added. The "Topics" section has now been moved to the top level gray navigation bar. Check out all of the topics at [www.adnetonline.org/Topics](http://www.adnetonline.org/Topics).

### Matching Grant Announced!

MMA has offered a matching grant up to \$10,000 at \$1 for every \$3 that we raise from families, businesses, congregations, and private foundations. We thank MMA for its ongoing support and invite our readers to step up to this wonderful challenge! Use enclosed envelope.

### Project Updates

- **Congregational Accessibility Network (CAN)** is getting its own website and some supplementary tools. Watch for details.
- **Supportive Care in the Congregation** is a booklet first published by MCC in the mid-1980's. ADNet is interested in collecting stories of congregations who have used this model to build an extended community around dependent adults. **Contact us if you have a story to share!**
- **Mennonite Media's** documentary films on suicide (*Fierce Goodbye*) and mental illness (*Shadow Voices*) continue to be available from the ADNet office. Two more films have been produced: *Building on Faith: Making Poverty Housing History* and *Hunger No More: Faces Behind the Facts*. See <http://mennomedia.org>

### ADNet Wish List

- All-in-one printer, scanner, copier
- LED Flat screen monitor
- Paper shredder
- Scholarship for Associates (p. 1)

**Do you know about ADNotes?** Get on the email list for this quarterly resource sheet on topics of interest. See [adnetonline.org/Resources/ADNotes](http://adnetonline.org/Resources/ADNotes)

*Surviving Depression (Continued from page 1)*

As I moved into my adult years, I was afraid to set goals, never able to count on emotional stability, always on the receiving end of help. Yet at a critical life juncture eleven years ago, with the encouragement of friends who saw gifts in me I could not claim for myself, I cautiously began taking seminary courses, one at a time, frequently second-guessing my emerging call to ministry. My home congregation began contributing a modest amount to my tuition each semester, their faith an encouragement to persist in my studies.

Midway through my studies I began a pastoral internship. In that role, I helped to form a support group for depression that met monthly for nearly four years. Here at last was a place where those with depression could open up our private suffering to the care of the church. Here we could bring to God the pain that dominated our lives, sharing our stories and receiving the concern of others.

That year my mood began plummeting. The tasks of ministry were getting harder, and I had to force myself to keep at them. Medication that had helped for over a year was now failing me. My doctor held out hope that two particular meds in combination would be the "magic bullet" for me, as it had been for several of his patients. "Oh no!" I thought. "Now I am *really* sick to need *two* antidepressants!"

Despite my sense of shame about it, I followed my psychiatrist's advice. His intuition was right. As spring arrived that year, the sun emerged from the clouds for the first time in many months. After a few weeks, I was feeling better than I ever remembered feeling. It dawned on me that I had been living with depression all my adult life—even from as early as age 12. Until that spring, my life had been a roller coaster of ups and downs, but, I realized, even the best times were colored by depression.

A few months after I began to feel hugely better, depression started afflicting my son, then ten. For three tumultuous years we struggled to find effective treatment while I wrestled with agonizing theological questions, starting with "Why should a child be suffering so?" Mental illness raises theological questions that defy answers. Those of us with mental illness deeply need people who will face the abyss with us without flinching. Are our churches willing to enter such theological struggles with us?

Unfortunately, stigma often keeps the body of Christ from embodying the tangible love of God to those affected by mental illness. Stigma keeps us isolated in our suffering. It keeps us from accessing treatment that could help. Stigma prolongs and intensifies suffering.

Depression is a physical illness of the brain, not a bad habit we bring on ourselves because of character weakness or moral failure. We don't get depression from not trusting God enough.

These are truths we need to integrate into the common practices of our congregational life. When someone has the courage to talk about feelings of hopelessness, let us affirm the courage and extend extra care. Churches can make mental illness something we regularly talk about, pray about, and even lament over in our public worship. In these ways, we can embody Christ's love to the many among us who suffer from a mental illness.

*Christine Guth is available for speaking engagements and workshops by contacting ADNet at [adnet@adnetonline.org](mailto:adnet@adnetonline.org). See also [www.adnetonline.org](http://www.adnetonline.org) for further information.*



**"Depression is a physical illness of the brain, not a bad habit, character weakness or moral failure."**

ADNet had a positive year of activities and growth in 2007! ADNet had its display and/or gave presentations in at least 12 national or regional conference gatherings and 11 local congregations.

Highlights of the year were the launch of the **Congregational Accessibility Network (CAN)** in July and the restructuring of the **Associates Program** (see p. 2).

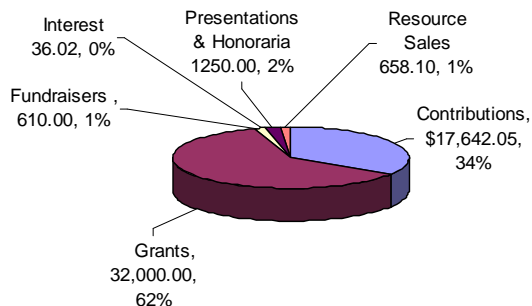
ADNet also completed its **“Build a Haystack” Funding Campaign** that was launched in the fall of 2006 in an effort to raise \$90,000. Although the ambitious goal was not reached, the overall financial picture is the most positive yet for ADNet. Learnings from

the campaign led to securing further training and expertise in cultivating new major donors for the future.

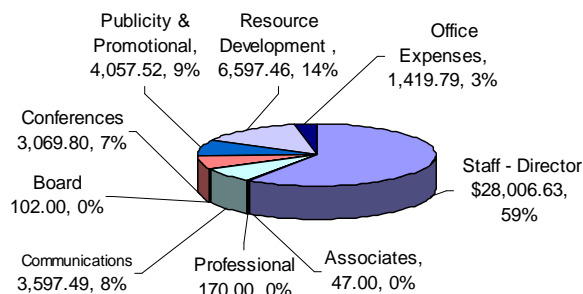
The charts below show the sources of \$52,196.17 in income and the distribution of \$47,067.69 in expenses for the fiscal year ending January 31, 2008. A one-page Annual Report is available at [www.adnetonline.org](http://www.adnetonline.org).

*We welcome your questions/ comments.*  
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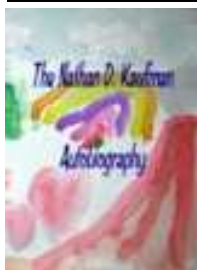
**ADNet 2007-08 Income**



**ADNet 2007-08 Expenses**



## News from the Network



**Nathan Dean Kaufman** of North Newton, Kansas has written a wonderful little autobiography complete with photos inside and cover artwork by his six-year-old niece. He tells the story of what it is like living with disabilities. Nathan has a remarkable life journey starting with his birth on the island of

Java and his adoption by MCC workers. He also includes his thoughts and feelings growing up through school years and his experiences as an adult finding work and getting married. This inspiring book can be ordered directly from Nathan for \$9.00. Phone: 316-217-2003. Email: [nkaufman1@cox.net](mailto:nkaufman1@cox.net). Mail: 500 W. Bluestem, Apt. C-1, North Newton, KS. 67117.

## Board member appointed

**Sharon Beyer** of Norristown, Pennsylvania has been appointed to a three-year term as a new member of ADNet's Board of Directors. Beyer brings an extensive mental health background as well as a deep concern for families affected by a broad range of disabilities.



Sharon was a social worker in three Pennsylvania state hospitals and has also worked at a school for children with minimal brain dysfunction. Since her retirement in 2007, she is part-time director of a small non-profit organization which organizes local churches and the larger community to help provide a weekly meal and social time for people living with mental illness.

Since 2002, Sharon has been a member of Norristown New Life Mennonite Church, a bilingual, multi-cultural church which has an extensive ministry with persons with disabilities, mental illness, and addictions. She currently serves as the chair of Inclusive Community Ministry, reaching out to families in the church and community who face the challenge of disabilities.

**ADNet welcomes Sharon Beyer to its Board!**

*Book Review: A Relentless Hope (Continued from page 4)*  
 me understand what was happening to me and encourage me to extend myself some grace. I especially commend *A Relentless Hope* to parents and other adults who love someone with depression. While some teens may find the hope Nelson writes about through reading his book themselves, most teens with depression will benefit from companions who embody the acceptance and encouragement that Nelson fosters.



# ADNET

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Supporting families and equipping the church for inclusive communities. ADNet provides: Resources • ADNet Online • Regional Support Groups • Accessibility Surveys

## Book Review

### A Relentless Hope: Surviving The Storm of Teen Depression By Gary E. Nelson

Reviewed by Christine Guth

*A Relentless Hope: Surviving the Storm of Teen Depression.* Gary E. Nelson. Cascade Books, 2007.

A RELENTLESS HOPE  
Surviving the Storm of Teen Depression



GARY E. NELSON

In *A Relentless Hope: Surviving the Storm of Teen Depression*, Gary Nelson offers to teens and their parents what he has learned from walking closely with his son through prolonged depression, and from counseling many struggling teens and their families. His book testifies that God is at work in our world, offering hope and new possibilities that can transcend even life-threatening mental illness. One of this book's strengths is its warm and empathetic approach to suffering teens and their parents. Recognizing how much stress the illness of one of its members places on the whole family, he cautions parents against turning frustration with the illness into anger toward the teen. He encourages parents above all to "just keep loving them."

Nelson's accessible theological reflection is another of the book's strong contributions. He argues that teens need both "a theology that works in the midst of the suffering" and "the opportunity for God to be present through our patient presence."

I wish that as a teen with depression I had had someone like Gary Nelson to lean on and offer hope, to help

(Continued on page 3)

*Connections* is published quarterly by Anabaptist Disabilities Network, PO Box 959, Goshen, IN, 46527, Paul D. Leichty, Executive Director and Editor, Christine J. Guth, Program Associate and Associate Editor. 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.)