

CONNECTIONS

March 2010

Including Persons with Mental Illness and Disabilities

Including Children with Autism

by **Christine Guth**, ADNet Program Associate

“Really? You want to spend your Sunday mornings with my child so that I can sit in worship?”



Melissa Jantz recounts her amazement at Michelle Shelly’s surprising offer a few years ago. Michelle, a member of Assembly Mennonite Church had offered to organize care for three-year-old Ethan, who has autism, so that Melissa and her husband Tim could participate in worship at the Goshen, Indiana, congregation.

Three years later, Tim and Melissa express appreciation that members of the congregation responded to their need even before they could articulate it themselves. The support team committed themselves to a rotating schedule of support for Ethan. Now, instead of spending their Sunday mornings running after Ethan, Tim and Melissa have the opportunity to worship without distraction.

This was not the first time the congregation had thought about how to make a more welcoming place

for Ethan. Assembly’s worship often includes applause, yet Ethan’s sensitivity to unexpected loud sounds meant that congregational clapping

caused him noticeable distress. After observing how much the abrupt sound bothered Ethan, one member proposed an alternative to clapping—visual applause (fluttering hands overhead, common among Deaf communities). Although Ethan’s sensitivity to clapping has faded, many in the congregation continue to prefer the hand-waving variety.

As Ethan has grown older, the congregation has looked for additional ways to support Ethan and his family. Keeping routines the same is comforting to Ethan, as it is to most people on the autism spectrum. Therefore, pastor Heidi Siemens-Rhodes has worked with the various teachers of Ethan’s Sunday school class so that they can provide him with con-

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Worship Team

What happens when all can worship? by Milt Stoltzfus

Several times a month a team from Friendship Community travels to churches in south central Pennsylvania to offer an answer to the question, What happens when all can worship?

The participants of the Friendship Community Worship team are individuals with developmental disabilities served in residential settings operated by Friendship Community.

The team consists of a choir and a creative movement team who through their worship share the message that all people have the desire as well as the capacity to offer worship to God.

The response that the team receives from churches is often overwhelming. It is not unusual for the con-

gregation to offer a standing ovation. At most services there are tears on faces in the congregation as



the message of God’s inclusive nature sinks in.

Following are comments that the team has received:

“The team blew everyone away at the service... A

number of folks have mentioned that the service led by your team was the most powerful service they recall attending.”

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ADNet Updates

Interested in the issues of **hearing and deafness**? Check out the February 2010 edition of [ADNetNotes](#). ADNet works closely with **Anabaptist Deaf Ministries (ABDM)** on deafness issues. Check on [ADNet Online](#) or contact us (see p. 3) for links to these resources and/or more information.

Summer camping opportunities for persons with disabilities and their families at Mennonite-related facilities are now listed on ADNet Online at www.adnetonline.org/Resources/Retreats.

ADNet **Student Associates** are hard at work this semester. Watch for more information about Kathy Dickson and Vanessa Yoder by visiting the Student Associate [web page](#).

A big thank-you to Curt Wenger for serving as volunteer bookkeeper for ADNet since its incorporation. As of mid-February, Curt is turning over that assignment to Rollin Handrich. Welcome, Rollin, and thanks!

ADNet has been assisting a local effort in Elkhart/Goshen, Indiana to begin a [clubhouse](#). ADNet commends the clubhouse model to other communities and encourages churches to support this type of effort to provide a “hand-up” to persons with chronic mental illness.

An expanded and more informal **Advisory Committee** met on February 8th in Goshen, Indiana, and feedback is also being sought from others around the country via email. The [Advisory Committee](#) is giving counsel on the Congregational Accessibility Network (CAN) and Supportive Care Revisited projects. Others with interest in participating are encouraged to contact Paul Leichty (see p. 3 for info).

Connections is now available online and by email! See the cover letter with this issue or go to www.adnetonline.org/GotoConnect to sign up. **Please let us hear from you** if you appreciate *Connections*! Thanks for your support!

Including Children with Autism (Continued from page 1)

sistency no matter who is teaching. The entire pastoral team has made an effort to learn about autism, through meeting with an autism consultant from the public school district and purchasing reading material on autism.

Heidi has taken steps to share information in the wider congregation about Ethan in order to build understanding. Following a model suggested by Barbara Newman in *Autism and Your Church*, she prepared a flyer introducing Ethan, with a photograph, descriptions of his strengths and challenges, and suggestions for positive ways to interact with him. The flyer names Ethan’s support team and describes some of the things he likes to do on Sunday mornings. It also offers members a framework for understanding behavior differences, with concrete examples. All of these efforts have made Assembly a place where Ethan feels safe and where he enjoys going.

Recently, Assembly dedicated a Sunday morning to focus on the diverse gifts of people with disabilities. Kim Kurtz, a special education teacher in the congregation, planned and led worship. Christine Guth, Program Associate with ADNet, was a guest preacher. Her sermon focused on the indispensable contribution to the body of Christ brought by those members who *seem* weaker (1 Cor 12:22). A school autism consultant led a conversation during the adult education hour about children on the autism spectrum and accommodations that can help them participate with others.

Ironically, the Sunday event came just one week after the Jantzes had announced to the congregation that they are planning to move to Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Although feeling a little guilty, Melissa commented afterward, “This was not just about us, though. It was a great Sunday.” Tim also expressed appreciation for Christine’s message which included an honest acknowledgment of the difficulties faced by parents when they try to bring children with behavior differences into a worship service.



Although they knew the Jantzes would be moving away in the summer, Assembly leadership continued with plans for the special Sunday, knowing that the community’s efforts to understand Ethan have prepared them to welcome other children with disabilities. The congregation is already anticipating the arrival of another child with a disability, who will be coming soon from Ethiopia when his family completes adoption procedures.

For the Jantz family, the move to Lancaster was precipitated by the desire to be nearer to a family support system and the pressing need to obtain more specialized services for Ethan which they anticipate receiving from Philhaven, a Mennonite-affiliated behavioral healthcare organization.

The anticipated relocation brings with it ambivalence. Melissa expressed regret at the hard choice to leave behind their community of faith in order to obtain services for Ethan. “Forming a team to support us, helping us to communicate to the congregation, offering flexibility to accommodate how we do things—it’s hard to let all that go,” she added. Tim also expressed appreciation, noting that “Assembly has done as much as they can do.”

A longer version of this article can be found online at www.adnetonline.org/GotoConnect. Links are also included to resources on autism. Both Christine Guth and Paul Leichty are available for additional [speaking assignments](#) and [workshops](#).

ADNet Board

New Member Appointed

Connect With Us

ADNet welcomes **Vyron L. Schmidt** of Goshen, Indiana, to the ADNet Board. Schmidt, who was appointed at the Board's January 12, 2010 meeting, will serve a three-year term beginning February 1, 2010. He replaces John Heyerly, one of the founding Board members in 2004, who served as Vice-president and declined to seek a third three-year term.



Although Schmidt is new to the ADNet Board, he has been well acquainted with ADNet since its inception in 2002 through his former position with MMA (Mennonite Mutual Aid) as Vice-President of the Fraternal Division. In that role, he offered his wisdom and counsel, enabling ADNet to secure vital funding during those early years.

As a former pastor at Silverwood Mennonite Church in Goshen and through his work at MMA, Schmidt brings to ADNet both a knowledge of the inner workings of congregational life as well as a broad picture of Mennonite churches throughout the country. He also brings his knowledge and experience as a financial consultant and philanthropic adviser to his Board work. His current role with MMA is Mennonite Foundation and Trust Adviser.

Reflecting on his appointment to the ADNet Board,

Worship Team (Continued from page 1)

"How blessed we were to receive the praise-filled gifts of love, song and dance."

"Everyone was moved by your love, hope and joy."

"What a joy it was for us to worship with you on Sunday. Your teams added a truly inspirational element to our worship services that we could never have accomplished."

"It was an absolute delight to have you at [our church] this past Sunday. Many people commented to me how light their hearts were as they left worship. A few folks commented that they need to evaluate their willingness to put themselves before the Lord in worship and praise. The courage of your group, the compassion of your heart and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit created a memorable experience of the sacred."

It is not so much about the pleasing melodies or the graceful movements of the team. In fact, those might not be the best descriptive terms to use to describe the team. Rather, it is about the spirit of worship and the joy in being able to publicly offer praise to God and to be included and recognized as a vessel of praise.

The team from Friendship Community cannot easily travel across the country to share their message; how-

Schmidt says, "I think ADNet provides a very important ministry in the church, helping us become more aware of the many accessibility issues encountered by fellow members. It's a ministry that needs to grow and become more well known through use of its excellent resources."

Schmidt is a graduate of Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary (AMBS) and also holds a Doctor of Ministry degree from Chicago Theological Seminary. Vyron and his wife, Elvina, have lived in Goshen for 30 years and have three adult children and two grandchildren, all living on the West Coast.

In addition to recognizing John Heyerly's departure, the Board accepted the resignation of Randy De Pry at its October 2009 meeting. De Pry, of Palmer Lake, Colorado, served for four years, including time as Secretary of the Board. Nominations are being sought to fill the remaining years of his term which runs until January 2012.

More information is on the [Board page](#) at ADNet Online.

We welcome your questions/comments.

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ever, others with a disability in your church may be able to share their talent and their praise that will lead your congregation into a new understanding of the presence of God.

What happens when all can worship? Why not try it?

Milt Stoltzfus is Director of Development at Friendship Community in Lititz, PA and the Treasurer of the ADNet Board.

Annual Report Highlights 2010

- Presence and display at conferences, including MC USA **Convention 2009** in Columbus, Ohio
- Upgrade of **Congregational Accessibility Network**
- Research on **Supportive Care** presented at MHA
- Appointment of two new **Student Associates**
- Membership in **MHS Alliance**
- Cooperation with **Anabaptist Deaf Ministries**
- **Income:** \$43,091. **Expenses:** \$57,351. **Asset balance:** \$21,2632.
- Board response to **financial challenges**
Download a complete copy of ADNet's [Annual Report](#) at www.adnetonline.org or contact us (see top of this page).



ADNET

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March 2010



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

Book Review

Souls in the Hands of a Tender God

Book by Craig Rennebohm with David Paul Review by Christine Guth

In *Souls in the Hands of a Tender God*, Craig Rennebohm draws on thirty years of ministry on the streets of Seattle to bring us into the world of street people who live with a mental illness. As Rennebohm introduces us to his characters with gentle respect, he enables us to look past the presenting signs of illness to see the humanity we share with them, always present and always potentially accessible.

Rennebohm teaches the ministry of companionship by example. His stories illustrate how he slowly builds trust with someone who presents an illness self that is withdrawn, terrified, or belligerent. He invites readers to experience the tender mercy of God as he leads us to identify with the fear, anger, and vulnerability of people we ordinarily keep at a safe distance. We receive in his

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.)

stories the blessing of God for the weakest, most vulnerable parts within ourselves.

I commend the book to anyone seeking to understand a loved one with a mental illness and to all who are involved in ministry among people who are homeless, mentally ill, or otherwise deeply vulnerable. Beyond these audiences, I believe the book has much to offer readers seeking to understand how God is present in a disturbing and broken world. I join with the authors in their hope that these stories "will help demystify mental illness and encourage efforts to build communities of openness, understanding, and care, with active participation and leadership from local congregations."

Christine Guth is ADNet Program Associate.