



**ADNET**  
Anabaptist Disabilities Network

**PO Box 959**  
**Goshen, IN 46527-0959**  
**Phone 574-535-7053/ Fax 877-214-9838**  
**Email: [adnet@adnetonline.org](mailto:adnet@adnetonline.org)**  
**Website: [www.adnetonline.org](http://www.adnetonline.org)**

**Starting a Disability-Related Support Group**  
**Christine Guth, ADNet Program Associate**  
**[christine@adnetonline.org](mailto:christine@adnetonline.org)**  
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Offering healing and hope to people with disabilities is an essential mark of God's reign and a sign that Jesus, our Messiah, is present and active (Matt 11:4-5). One way to reach out with caring to individuals and families impacted by disability is through a support group. Support groups bring together people who are dealing with similar difficulties so that they can learn from each other and draw strength from the community that is formed. If no support group exists nearby for the people you want to support, consider starting one yourself. Whether you focus on faith openly in the group or choose to keep it in the background, you will have the opportunity to build relationships of caring that embody Christ's love.

Here are suggestions that grow out of my own experience in starting and leading support groups associated with my home congregation. You'll naturally want to adapt these ideas to your intended purpose, your personal style, and the population you hope to serve.

**Decide on who you are appealing to** and be prepared to adjust if needed. A wide scope (appealing to many disabilities) may be necessary in a rural area, whereas a narrow scope (example: parents of teen girls with Asperger Syndrome) may be more successful where population is denser. The narrower definition will appeal to people who want specific information about a particular condition. A wider approach works when many different conditions involve similar kinds of support needs. Let your gut sense of the kind of support you personally need guide you as you think about how to focus your group.

Once you have an idea of the kind of group you'd like to launch, a good starting place is to **find a partner** or partners who share your vision and whose gifts and working style are complementary to your own. If you can't find a partner at first, jump in on your own and keep looking for someone to share leadership with. Obtain the blessing and support of your congregation. This will give you prayer partners to lean on when you feel discouraged. It will inform others about the challenges of living with disability, and it may eventually draw others into your ministry.

**Develop a working understanding** with leadership in your congregation of how the group will relate to your congregation. Be prepared to make adjustments as you go along. Questions you may want to consider at the outset include: How does the group relate to your congregation's mission? To which leader or established group within the congregation will the group be accountable? What do you hope the congregation will provide for the group? (meeting space? photocopies? prayer support? child care?) If the church provides meeting space, who will be responsible for unlocking and locking the building, and for set up and clean up? What will the congregation expect of you and of your group? How will you keep the wider congregation informed about your group?

**Get the word out.** If your vision is a group that ministers beyond the congregation, good publicity is crucial. Explore a relationship with community organizations that might be willing to assist you with an initial round of publicity. For example, if you want a support group for parents whose children have a certain disability, you might try to obtain the cooperation of your local school corporations' special education teams. Ask if they will send letters on your behalf to targeted families or include an announcement in their newsletter. See about obtaining the endorsement of groups that people you are appealing to might already trust.

As you go along and time and energy allow, you can add other modes of publicity. Here are suggestions: Announce your meetings in the *local newspapers* before each meeting. Consider small weekly papers and free advertising newspapers in addition to larger newspapers. If you call their office, they should be able to give you the specific email address of the department that handles such announcements. Newspapers often print such announcements as a public service for no charge. Find out if they will run an article if you submit a news release. Always include phone and email contact information so they can reach you if they want to know more. Newspapers, radio and television stations often have event listings online you can use to publicize your meetings.

Use the *Internet* to get the word out about your group. Take advantage of organizations that will list your group online for free. Providing your contact information to such groups has the added advantage of being included in their network of information sharing. Some to consider include:

- National disability-specific organizations and their state chapters. Check [DisabilityInfo.gov](http://DisabilityInfo.gov), your state's Governor's Council on Disabilities website or its Partners in Policymaking website for links to appropriate groups.
- Statewide cross-disability groups for children and/or adults.
- Your state's university center on disabilities or its affiliates. To find one in your state, consult the website of the Association of University Centers on Disabilities at [www.aucd.org](http://www.aucd.org).
- Wrightslaw Yellow Pages for Kids [www.yellowpagesforkids.com](http://www.yellowpagesforkids.com) (for parent support groups).

Fifth Freedom Network offers many more ideas about how to increase your group's Internet exposure at [fifthfreedom.org/youtube\\_workshop](http://fifthfreedom.org/youtube_workshop).

Submit your group's information to your local *211 call center* ([www.211.org](http://www.211.org)) or other information and referral helpline. *Post flyers* about your group on public bulletin boards. Develop a *group brochure* and send copies to professionals who serve your target group, asking them to make it available in their waiting rooms. Make sure your group is represented at area *resource fairs*, especially those that pertain to disability.

**Organize:** Once you have a few interested persons, convene an ad hoc advisory group periodically who can give your leadership team ideas & broaden your perspective. This may be monthly at first, and then less often as you get established. Respect their time and be organized.

Decide how democratically you want to run your group. Fewer decision makers may enhance efficiency and dependability. Wider participation offers the benefit of diverse gifts and perspectives and wider investment in sustaining the group over time. Email communication

between leaders can contribute to efficient use of time, but face-to-face meetings build community, which contributes to the group's purposes and sustainability. As the group grows and matures, patterns of organization may need to change.

**Work on building community.** The heart of what support groups are about is breaking into the isolation of living with a given challenge, so plan deliberately to nurture connection. Give attention to community building in your meetings. Asking people to introduce themselves at each meeting is a simple way to build connection and help newcomers feel welcome. If the group becomes large, consider occasionally breaking into small groups of 3-5 so that each person gets a chance to talk.

Build community in between meetings through regular communication. Email has a lot to offer in keeping people informed of your group's activities for minimal cost. If you start getting blocked as a spammer, you'll know it is time to start a Yahoo or Google Group to manage your email list instead of using your personal email account. If you think you can't manage the technical know-how, recruit a teenager in your church to help you learn how to do it. It's easier than you think. A group email service can be set up for announcements only, or for email exchange between members. Psych Central offers advice about starting an *online* discussion group at [psychcentral.com/howto.htm](http://psychcentral.com/howto.htm).

You'll probably need to keep people informed who don't have email. Microsoft Access or other database managing software can help you keep track of people's contact information. Spreadsheet software such as Microsoft Excel is another way to organize data. Here are a couple of free database software options: [creator.zoho.com/explore/online-database-application.html](http://creator.zoho.com/explore/online-database-application.html); [www.blist.com/what-is-blist](http://www.blist.com/what-is-blist). You'll want to decide what to do about sharing contact information among group members so that people can be in touch in between meetings.

**Regularly ask for feedback** from those who attend your meetings and pay attention to what they are telling you. Consider handing out file cards at meetings and asking each person to write a short comment. Or use your email list to ask for feedback.

**Run meetings purposefully.** Start and end meetings on time. Stop early enough to allow time for informal conversation afterward. Draw on the expertise of professionals in your area who will speak at your meetings. Experiment with different formats to see what draws the most interest. We are finding that busy people turn out in more numbers for our meetings when a professional will be speaking on a topic of interest.

**Keep the meeting's focus positive** and on topics that will actually help people in coping with issues that impact their daily lives. Avoid prolonged gripe sessions and flaming controversies about theoretical matters or you will likely drive people away who desperately need the group's help. Sometimes staying positive requires tactfully intervening with individuals who may not always have the best social skills or who monopolize or steer the conversation off topic.

**Focus on content rather than fundraising,** at least until you have a strong group going. It may be possible to operate several years with no group treasury. If you state at the outset to potential speakers that you are asking if they will donate their time as a service to the community, the generosity you encounter will be amazing. Thank them profusely and consider providing a small thank you gift such as a home-baked item.

**Let ADNet assist.** Christine Guth, ADNet's Program Associate, would be happy to assist you with further ideas and guidance as your group gets underway. ADNet would be pleased to include information about your church-related group on the [Support Groups](#) section of ADNet's website. May you be blessed richly with the rewards of sharing the journey with others.