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Blessed for Disabilities Advocacy
By Christine Guth, ADNet Program Associate

Blessing for ministry is a valuable gift that faith communities can offer to budding disabilities advocates in our midst. Such blessing has overflowed at key points along the way in my own journey to becoming an advocate and has been encouraging and empowering.

My first nudge toward advocacy came when I was a student at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary. I had been taking one class at a time for years and was nearing completion of the requirements for my Master of Divinity degree. I sought the counsel of my advisor, Rebecca Slough, and we began meeting regularly to talk about the directions God might be leading me in my call to ministry. I timidly suggested to Rebecca an idea that I might use some of my experience with disability in ministry. She encouraged my vision that my life experiences with mental illness and family members on the autism spectrum could bless others. Her blessing for exploring this avenue further made it possible for me to take the next steps.

At about the same time, Janeen Bertsche Johnson, seminary campus pastor, invited me to share my story of living with depression in a chapel service. I took the leap, and for the first time shared in a public setting the struggles that I had, until that time, kept largely to myself. The positive response was overwhelming. For weeks afterward, members of the seminary community expressed their appreciation and shared with me their own stories. I began to recognize the power of my own story to open up a space for others in pain to share their stories and receive God's care in the faith community.

The blessing I received from testing my vision with Rebecca and telling my story publicly gave me the courage to approach ADNet in 2006 with an idea that I might work for the organization on a volunteer basis in the areas of autism spectrum and mental health support. Director Paul Leichty and the ADNet Board received my proposal with enthusiasm and gave their blessing for my work as a part of ADNet's mission. A small group that included Janeen, Rebecca, Paul and another area pastor met with me occasionally during the first two years of my work with ADNet, nurturing my sense of call, encouraging my work, and advocating on my behalf.

Two years later, Eighth Street Mennonite (Goshen, IN) and the Central District Conference of Mennonite Church USA gave formal recognition of the ministry I have been engaged in. They blessed me through licensing me for specialized ministry for my work with ADNet in disabilities advocacy. This blessing by my home congregation and representatives of the wider church confirms in me a sense that God has called and uniquely prepared me to a prophetic ministry of assuring that the voices of people with disabilities are heard in our churches.

As Isaac, Jacob, and Esau knew, a blessing is a powerful thing. A congregation's blessing for a disabilities advocate provides new opportunities for God's transforming love to work in the faith community. Where might advocacy be emerging in your congregation? Whom might you invite to tell their story? How can you bless those who listen for and speak on behalf of others who cannot yet speak for themselves? ADNet invites you to bless a congregational disabilities advocate—and then share with us and the wider church the stories of transformation as they unfold.

For more information on ADNet's resources for advocates, visit www.adnetonline.org/advocacy.