



SPRED

Archdiocese of Chicago



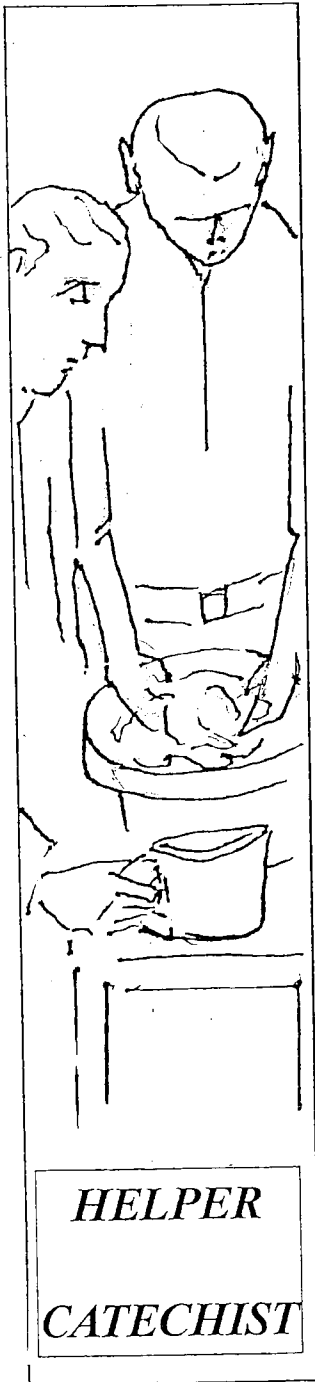
SPECIAL RELIGIOUS DEVELOPMENT

2956 South Lowe Ave. Chicago, Illinois 60616

312-842-1039 www.spred-chicago.org

March 2018

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Sometimes fairly new Spred helper catechists may refer to themselves as 'only' helper catechists. I don't think there is such a thing as 'only' a helper catechist. I want everyone to know how important this role is within a Spred group; how essential helper catechists are, how without them there would be no Spred community of faith.

Helper catechists are the people who live out the ideal of building relationships open to faith. 1

This building of relationships takes time; it does not happen overnight; one of the reasons why people who come forward to the Spred training are asked for a commitment of a minimum of two years. The helper catechist gives total presence and full participation regularly to become a friend with one person with an intellectual or developmental disability. To be a friend requires the giving of self in time, energy, talent and love and it asks for sacrifice, unselfishness and sharing.

At times our own light goes out and is rekindled by a spark from another person.

Each of us has cause to think with deep gratitude of those who have lighted the flame

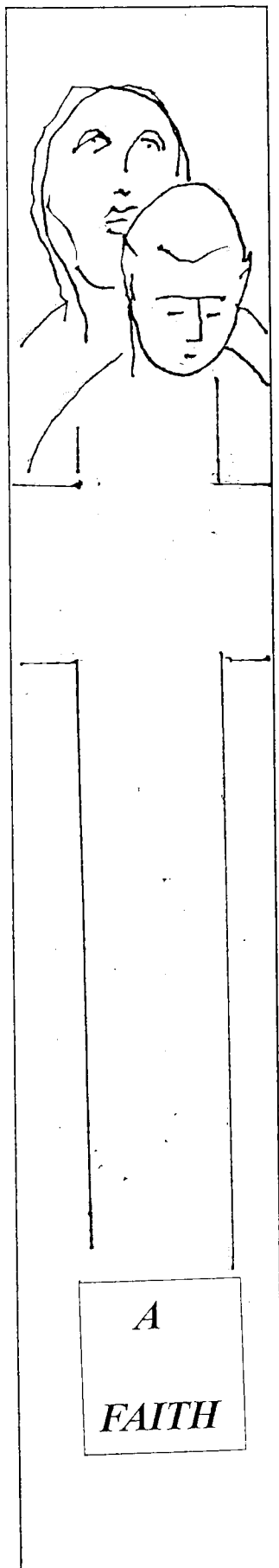
within us.

Albert Schweitzer

Most of us at some time in our lives have felt our light waver and dim and we need a spark of something or someone to make it strong again.

Our helper catechists, I am sure, strengthen or start the light in one of our friends or in other catechists.

During the preparation phase of our session with our friends, we sit quietly at an activity, taking time to rid ourselves of the stresses, troubles and busyness experienced in our daily lives. Unbeknown to others in the group, we may be worried, anxious or concerned. We may feel God is not walking with us at this point. We take the time to be still and calm and try to leave that concern with God. All it might take to bring us back on track is for our friend to smile at us, or as happened in one group, for a friend to give a thumbs up to her helper catechist and congratulate her on completing the art project she has been working on. We surely don't know the effect we may be having on anyone else or whose flame we are rekindling or making stronger.



Another helper catechist was so sad when her special friend of fifteen years was leaving to attend another group. They had 'lived' so many experiences together and knew each other so well but there was another friend ready and waiting to come along and so the work began again; the work of building a new relationship. The very experienced helper catechist knew just what to do and knew, without asking or talking about it, what the most important elements of building that relationship were.

The main element of that relationship to one person with a disability is that it be **genuine**; it is **honest** and **caring** with mutual **respect** for each other's individuality and gifts.

The second element is **time**. Already mentioned briefly at the beginning, to develop a **good** relationship takes time and it cannot be hurried or measured.

The time issue is different for every special friend and catechist but a knowledgeable, understanding catechist realises this and waits, supports, invites, encourages. Patience is primary.

The final element is constancy. Our special friends of all ages depend on our constancy. They depend on their helper catechist being there waiting for them to arrive. The smile on their face tells it all when they are brought into the room and see their helper catechist sitting in their usual place ready to give them a quiet but warm welcome and equally, if the catechist is not there for some reason and has not been able to tell their friend in advance, then disappointment is just as evident and an explanation has to be given. 2

At a Catechist Preparation Session we have the opportunity to prepare for proclaiming how we live the Gospel of Jesus in our daily lives. We share our thoughts on the reflection and often we share something deep-seated and not often spoken of but because of the environment, the ethos and the trust built up over time between all the catechists, we are able to show and share an inner part of ourselves. This helps foster faith in our *own* lives so we can share that witness to the Gospel values with our special friends in the integrated session. With the help of the symbol, the sharing is different but catechist and friend both help one another to appreciate God in their lives and helps them bind the small catechetical community together.

One of our new friends who was not Catholic wanted to be baptized and to receive the sacraments. After a time in Spred and attending Mass regularly, she asked her helper catechist to be her god-parent and celebrated the sacraments of initiation.

The whole group turned out to Mass that day to witness and share in the joy of the helper catechist and her special friend who had such trust and belief that they were genuinely sharing faith with everyone.

That catechist was literally the god-parent to her special friend but within the Spred group, all helper catechists take on a similar role.

A god-parent is usually someone who belongs to a community of faith or is active in the practice of the faith so is able to help the god-child grow in faith. When looked at that

way, then are not all helper catechists a kind of god-parent?

Taking on the role of god-parent asks for responsibility, willingness and trust.

It may not be something we have done before and therefore there is a bit of a learning curve, but god-parents are usually honored to be asked to take on the task.

And so it is with the helper catechists; they may never have worked with people with special needs prior to this and it may certainly take time for a learning curve but helper catechists take on their role with responsibility and willingness and with a deep joy and honor at the sharing of their faith.

It is a serious role but there is also much fun and laughter in a group, particularly around the agape table where the small daily events and happenings in our lives are shared. No wonder some of our friends speak of our Spred group as a family. The sharing of faith, food, and fun are what families are all about.

Just as in most families we speak and listen; we open ourselves to each other and respond and so reveal something of our innermost selves. Although the leader catechist does just that - leads the catechesis - the helper catechist works hard at getting to know their special friend so that they become united in heart and spirit; so that each can share their faith experience; that very special 'family' relationships can be built.

Within a family we all know one another's names and we use them so many times a day. It is the same in a Spred session where we hear ourselves called and welcomed by name and where we strengthen our relationship with God;

**I have called you by your name..
Whenever two or three are gathered
in My name I am there.**

All catechists help lead their friends tenderly to that understanding throughout the session.

If there were a specific job remit for a helper catechist it would be quite long and quite involved and would probably put many people off! But doing the job and living it shows just how committed helper catechists are.

Helper catechists are never 'only' helper catechists but essential and vital in bearing witness to the loving relationship of the Father, Son and Spirit and leading their friends gently to that feeling.

Emma Robertson
Edinburgh, Scotland Spred

1. MTHarrington Chicago Spred Handbook, Spred Publication 1982
2. K. Kaiser Chicago Spred Newsletter 1982



SPRED CALENDAR

Spred Training

Role Orientation, English and Spanish

March 10, 17, 1:00 to 6:00 Spred Center

Helper Catechist training

March 3, English 1:00 to 6:00 Spred Center

March 24, Spanish 1:00 to 6:00 Spred Center

Visit Our website: www.spred-chicago.org

Observation

6-10 6:00 p.m. Monday March 12, April 16

11-16 7:00 p.m. Tuesday March 13, April 17

22+ 7:00 p.m. Monday March 12, April 16

Spred Family Liturgies

2956 So. Lowe Ave, Chicago 11:00 312-842-1039

Mar. 4, April 8, May 6

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