



SPRED

Archdiocese of Chicago

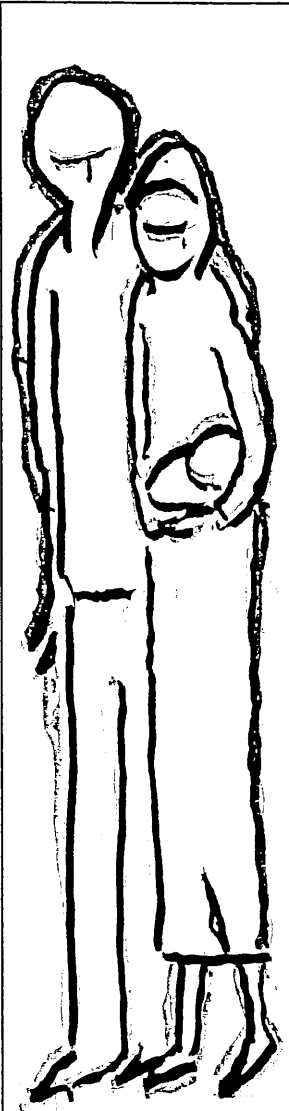
SPECIAL RELIGIOUS DEVELOPMENT

2956 South Lowe Ave. Chicago, Illinois 60616

312-842-1039 [www.spred.org](http://www.spred.org)

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**PARENT**

There is a certain consistency, a predictable rhythm in the development of Spred communities of faith. There is a certain ebb and flow to the birthing of Spred communities which is usually triggered by a call for help from an anxious parent, a compassionate pastor, or a perplexed director of religious education.

Musing over the events of this past year my personal interactions with parents of all walks of life continue to touch my heart in a very special way. I am drawn into a certain camaraderie with them as their story strikes a very personal chord deep within.

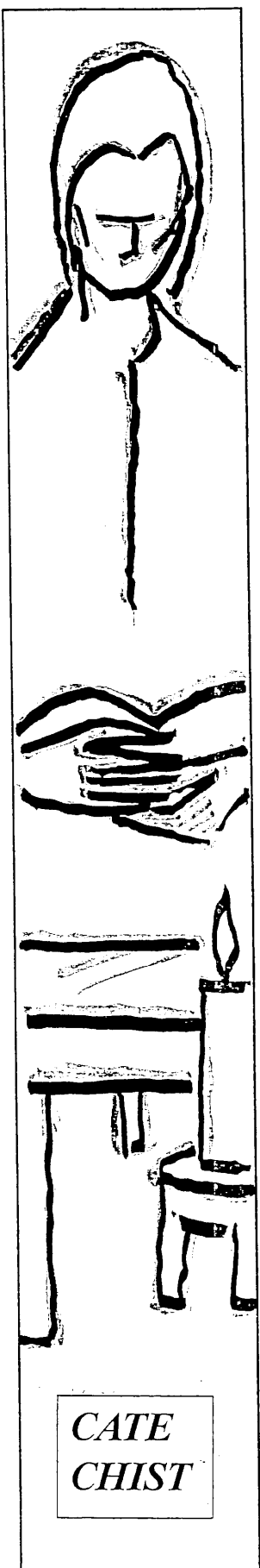
My first child was born with an immediately definable disability. Within minutes of her first breath, she was labeled. "Down Syndrome," the doctors apologetically declared. "So sorry" they remorsefully whispered as they presumed to know my child, certain of the grim future that awaited her. Against all advice, my husband and I embraced her and welcomed her into our lives and into our hearts.

As support systems worked tirelessly to mold and shape her to *fit in* to the norms of society so that she could be acceptable to others, we were delighting in her uniqueness, enjoying her charm, and realizing her great capacity to appreciate life and draw us into a wonderful love story. We were gifted with her for a brief six years. She made a lasting impact on our lives.

Following the death of my daughter, I very tentatively accepted an invitation to join a small community of faith at a neighboring parish - the Spred community that had reached out to welcome my child. I soon discovered that labels were unimportant in the intimate, respectful setting. Friendship and acceptance were at the core of each partnership. My participation in this small loving community opened my mind and my heart. I began to see faith formation, sacraments, Eucharist, Church and my own personal relationship with God through a new lens.

Spred was a fresh approach to faith development. Friendship was at the heart of our journey toward a deeper awareness of God in all of life; a sense of sacredness of all beings, and the realization that Church is all about belonging - finding a place of unconditional acceptance and love freely given. I was smitten.

By taking a personal risk to give myself to this small caring community, a spiritual family, I surrendered to a journey of the heart instead of the intellect. I found a sacred place, my spiritual home. Friends and catechists of all ages, a diversity of ethnic heritage as well as a vast array of gifts and vulnerabilities have touched my life and enriched my faith. I have enjoyed partnerships



with both children and adults with varying abilities and ways of being. They have altered my pace; challenged my presumptions; drawn me closer to God; and simply helped me to laugh and embrace life more fully. We may not always connect on the same intellectual or conceptual plane, but we bond emotionally. This is where mystery resides; this is where we find God. Spred is an experience.

When I sit across a table in a coffee shop with another parent and absorb their story, or in a phone conversation, or at a church gathering, I connect in a special way. They address a deep longing for others to accept their child and honor the child's personhood. There is a cry for justice, a demand for righteousness. They minimize the command to love. One cannot achieve love. It cannot be mandated. Love is an unfolding. Love is a gift.

I like these reflections by Hans Reinders, Professor of Ethics in Amsterdam.<sup>1</sup>

"We have undergone a paradigm shift from charity to rights. It is important that in our focus on rights and choice, we do not forget the fundamental point, which is, that being loved as the fulfillment of our lives can only be received. The reason why it is important is that being loved and befriended does something for you that rights and choice cannot possibly do. It brings you the invaluable experience of being chosen by someone else. Whatever it is that rights and choice can do, they are not going to make me your friend. ... Friendship, like love, is other-dependent. Neither rights nor choice are other-dependent. Basically, rights and choice are about you making other people comply with what you want. Understanding the difference may help us to conceive a richer vision of inclusion than we have been working with thus far."

Thus, I believe that many parents, teachers, catechists, pastors and caregivers are duped by the current illusion of inclusion. I suggest that we tuck the misleading banner of inclusion away into a dark place especially when we enter the arena of catechesis, faith formation and sacrament. Insisting on placing a child with an alternative cognitive or developmental way of absorbing and interpreting life in certain settings will frustrate both the child and the host. If a child is accepted, for instance, into a religious education program with the caveat that the parent attend or another student will be assigned as an aide to assist in projects that hold little meaning or are not a part of the skill set of the child, then, are we not drawing attention to differences? This profile does not draw upon and nurture the gifts of the child with special needs. Is this true hospitality?

Reinders further points out that there is a natural environment in which persons can flourish. At the heart of this is desire for honest attraction and a calling into relationship by another. A parent or teacher who responds only to the edict of inclusion overlooks the deep-seated hunger of the child or adult for a place of welcome, acceptance, and respect. Our friends long for a place where differences are celebrated and where there is no expectation of change in order to fit in. They long for friendship that embraces who they are rather than who they could be. Relationships cannot be driven by conscience, but by choice and attraction. Patronizing relationships serve the giver and deplete the receiver. Genuine friendship is a reciprocal encounter. It nourishes both.

Earlier this year I responded to an invitation, a call for advice, from a gathering of catechetical leaders in Chicago. Their concern was to find behavior management options for children who were being mainstreamed into their religious education classes. Despite aides, student assistants, parental presence, challenges continue. There is a degree of comfort with the child who sits

quietly. But there is an admission of concern about what the child is able to absorb to prepare for sacramental readiness.

On the other hand, there was a disturbing account regarding a young man who physically needed to be removed from a liturgical setting due to disruptive behaviours. Affirming nods evidenced untold stories. The expressed desire was to change behaviors. In response, I reminded them that they are in the **ministry** of catechesis rather than in behavior management. I suggested that the instructional approach to religious education may not respond to the cognitive or developmental capacities of some people, including those on the autism spectrum. As long as they work in a classroom setting and focus on concepts about God with a teacher-pupil model of catechesis, they will be plagued by unforeseen behaviours.

Honest and respectful exchange aired the following concerns:

\*How to tell parents that their child belongs in Spred? *The response:* stop apologizing for Spred. Offer it as a gift and time-honored process.

\*Parents are not always honest about the disability of a child..sometimes they deny it. *The response:* If you suspect anything, request a home visit. Get to know the child. Offer to bring the parents to observe a Spred session at one of the resource sites. Don't offer Spred as a lesser alternative. Honor it.

\*Why not aids or parents in the classroom? *The response:* this draws attention to the child and draws attention to the differences. It is not assistance that they need as much as a change of approach.

\*Isn't it good for the other children to experience having a child with special needs as a peer. *The response:* Absolutely! However, the child with a disability should never be the object of a lesson. Bring the groups together for liturgical events making enhancements to respect their way of encountering the sacred. Share social events in the parish and occasions that foster friendship rather than caregiving.

I reminded the participants that the Spred method was developed with a clear focus on the child and the adult with a wide range of special needs. Research evidenced a call to change the catechetical method from a teaching mode to a relational approach grounded in the experience of friendship with others who choose to walk at their pace, enter into their world and engage in the journey of faith side by side. The Spred approach asks the **catechist to change**, to offer and to explore the places where our friends will lead us to unearth the wonder of our merciful and loving Father.

Faith must be anchored in conversion and submission to God's way. The hospitality of God begins with presence. The call of Spred catechists is an invitation to become loving hosts, the reflection of God with us. The point of entry is through the heart. What a wonderful option for our friends and for each of us!

Julia Hess

Chicago Spred Community Religious Worker



## CALENDAR

### SPRED TRAINING

#### +2-1 Introduction to Spred English and Spanish

Spred Center Saturday Feb. 11, 18, 25, 1:00 to 6:00 pm  
2956 South Lowe Ave, Chicago IL 60616, 312-842-1039

#### +3-1 Role Orientation, English and Spanish

Spred Center Saturday March 11, 18, 2017 1:00 to 6:00pm  
2956 South Lowe Ave, Chicago IL 60616, 312-842-1039

### SPRED FAMILY LITURGIES SUNDAYS 11:00 am

Dec. 4, Feb. 5, Mar. 5, April 2, May 7

### OBSERVATION - Spred Center

6-10 Mon. 6 pm Dec. 12, Feb. 13, 27  
11-16 Tues. 7 pm Dec. 13, Feb. 14 28  
22+ Mon. 7pm Dec. 12, Feb. 13, 27

### SPRING MAMRE DINNER DANCE FUNDRAISER

**Drury Lane, Oakbrook Sunday, April 23, 2017**

### REFLECTION WEEKEND, JAN. 6, 7, 8, 2017

ST.BENEDICT ABBEY RETREAT CENTER, BENET LAKE, WIS.  
register: [www.queenofangelsspred.org](http://www.queenofangelsspred.org) or Julie Hess 773-539-3634

# SPRED

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