

**THE
GOOD
SHEPHERD**

Spred offers personal support to parish Spred groups through two community religious workers. That title of community religious worker is somewhat unusual, but it fits the inter-faith language used to designate lay workers in pastoral settings with people who have various disabilities. Spred is fortunate to have Elizabeth Sivek and Julia Hess as community religious workers. This is how Elizabeth Sivek sees her work primarily in Vicariates V and VI in the Archdiocese of Chicago.

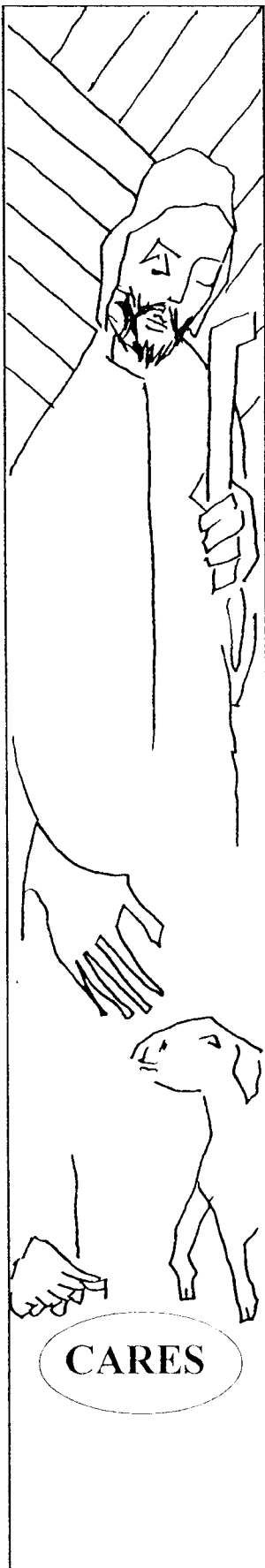
In 1974 the State of Illinois Department of Human Services through the Division of Developmental Disabilities created a formal contract with the Archdiocese of Chicago through Spred to provide pastoral services to the residents of the Elisabeth Ludeman Developmental Center in Park Forest.

The Spred community religious worker was to work with local church communities to help them to welcome those living in Ludeman to belong to the church community of their tradition after consent would be given by parents or guardians. The goal was integration into the sacramental and worship life of the church community.

In the 1980s the State of Illinois worked with many agencies such as LARC and Blue Cap to open community integrated living arrangements, known as CILAs. As the residents moved from the Ludeman center to these homes, I tried to follow them to make sure that their faith development continued wherever they went.

Now there are thousands of our friends living in apartments, group homes and CILAs in the Archdiocese. Many still live in Ludeman and other larger residential settings. As I work with local churches I also become aware of our friends who live with their parents. These friends also need to be welcomed into their parish communities.

It takes energy, persistence, presence and work to form a Spred group within a parish. I try to get people's attention through bulletin articles, bulletin inserts and speaking at parish liturgies. As a follow up, I organize monthly informational gatherings of parents and people who become catechists. At these gatherings I arrange dates for them to observe Spred sessions to help parents, volunteers, coordinators and directors of religious education as well as parish priests to get a grasp of the model used. Once a parish team is trained, I try to help them find appropriate space to use. This whole process takes many twists and turns but our friends are served well when the process is completed.



When the group of volunteers is assembled, I accompany them as a Spred trainer. I especially like to train parish chairpersons for their role in the Spred community of faith. The training is based on the seven standards which affiliate a parish group to the Archdiocesan Spred ministry.

When the groups are trained and up and running I work to build bonds among the Spred catechists in a given area. I think of myself as a mentor. According to the Webster dictionary, the word **mentor** means -entrusted with the education of another and -a trusted counselor or guide.

I have the honor of being entrusted with the continuing education of Spred catechists. After gaining experience in their communities of faith, they know that they need more indepth support to meet the challenges they confront and the concerns that they wish addressed. I can then offer a variety of opportunities to meet their needs.

There is an annual workshop for chairpersons, leader catechists and activity catechists as well as helper catechists. There are usually two enrichment seminars for core teams that involve reflection on the method of catechesis used, the method Vivre. There is an annual reflection weekend on elements that would enrich the Spred experience, for example reflection on the five senses, or the four elements of water, fire, earth, and air, or the fruits of the Holy Spirit. Lastly I enjoy an invitation to share an evening with a Spred community to provide trusted guidance to maintain a quality center.

In the scripture passage from the prophet Ezekiel (34: 1-4) I am reminded of what a trusted guide would do for the good of the flock. In this passage the Lord is upset with his shepherds who misuse their role.

Shepherds, the Lord says this: trouble for the shepherds of Israel who feed themselves! Shepherds ought to feed their flock, yet you have fed on milk, you have dressed yourselves in wool, you have sacrificed the fattest sheep, but failed to feed the flock. You have failed to make the weak sheep strong, or to care for the sick ones, or bandage the wounded ones. You have failed to bring back the strays or look for the lost.

Sometimes a Spred community loses its direction. It forgets its mission of being a welcoming community for our friends. There are times when catechists choose to close their center rather than ask for help to rebuild the center with new volunteers. At times a pastor may call me to step in to reassure parents and guardians that a group will be rebuilt so that Spred will remain a viable ministry in a parish. I have been called on by pastors to help struggling groups to recruit new catechists for the sake of our friends who have the need for what one parent called "a spiritual community for her son."

At a recent workshop for leader and activity catechists, twenty-one people came from twelve parishes. In this workshop we looked at aspects of the Spred method where the two roles of leader and activity interact with one another, the silence circle and the agape. Questions and comments enriched the evening. We also addressed the concerns of all present as we began

a new year in this ministry. When the evening concluded, I was aware of their enthusiasm, their joy and their excitement in getting started after a long summer break.

An enrichment seminar is another means used to deepen our awareness of the Spred process. We often begin with background material taken from former Spred newsletters which we have on hand since 1968. I select material based on some connection to one of the seven standards. Then I pose a question which moves the group into a reflective process of about three quarters of an hour. During this time, each one is encouraged to write down their reflections based on their own experience in their Spred community of faith. Then we gather again and share what we have written. When everyone has shared, a discussion may follow. Usually the evening concludes with the sharing of food and drink. I invite those catechists who have taken the two initial courses of Spred.

Sometimes a Spred community would like some personal guidance to better understand the process and method used in Spred. I always look forward to building relationships by praying with those I have been able to help train and support in their own setting. All I need is an invitation to a group that is eager to learn more and to grow in a deeper way. I remember sharing a total community session with a new Spred group who had some experience but wanted more support and guidance. After spending an evening together, I returned the following week to provide some feedback. I remember discussing things such as thoughts about their rooms, interaction with parents, preparation materials and how they are structured. The group needed time to adjust, but they understood things better. I could see in their faces that they were eager to learn and to grow.

Another task I have is to facilitate the Spring Planning Meetings of area parish chairpersons. This annual gathering plans for the growth of Spred, not only for each existing center's needs but also for the surrounding parishes who have yet to respond to those waiting lists of friends with intellectual challenges. Parish chairpersons are constantly finding new friends and having to put them on waiting lists. I work with the chairpersons willing to reach out to another parish to talk about the needs that are waiting to be met.

I try to be a resource person to pastors and religious educators. I try to find the sheep and help them to become strong, but the real shepherd is Jesus, the good shepherd. Each Spred session gives us a glimpse of Jesus who is continuously guiding us to the Father. This good shepherd is described in John's Gospel (10: 14-15; 27-28)

I am the good shepherd; I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father, and I lay down my life for my sheep. ... The sheep that belong to me listen to my voice, I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life.

All people with developmental and intellectual challenges need to be part of the flock.

Elizabeth Sivek
Chicago Spred Community Religious Worker

