

Why Should I Care about SPRED? (SPRED is Special Religious Education for People with Special Needs)

Because you're a Christian, and Christ's disciples care about people with special needs and about their families.

Because the program touches the hearts and spiritual well-being of those who take interest. How? It increases our ability to love more people and brings us into the mind of Christ.

It benefits the entire parish, giving direction to existing programs like religious education and creates a desire for spiritual growth at all age levels – whether participating in the program or not.

It adds a dimension to liturgy, since the SPRED Masses twice or three times a year bring added means of participation of the community in the liturgy.

So what is this SPRED Program that promises such benefits to the parish? SPRED is an acronym for Special Religious Education for people with Developmental difficulties: autism, retardation, Down's Syndrome, Cerebral Palsy, et tal. It is not religious education in the traditional sense because many of the people with developmental difficulties are not capable of learning content, but they are capable of a relationship with God. So the program is more correctly a "spiritual formation" program that concentrates on helping the people with special needs develop a relationship with God through a one-to-one relationship with a catechist and through the parish community of the Church to which they belong.

The sessions are modeled on the liturgy: (1) preparation of participants in activity that calms and centers them, (2) a "circle of silence" in which each person is greeted and invited particularly to hear a message from God to them, (3) a reading from Scripture with a homily-like development, and (4) an "agape" or Eucharist-like sharing of a simple communal meal.

There are four age groups: 5-11 years, 12-16 years, 17-21 years, and 21-105+ years. So this isn't just a sacramental preparation program. It does prepare people for sacraments, but it goes beyond that with on-going follow-up to bring people continually closer to God at all ages. This "follow-up" is lacking in traditional programs and can inspire a desire for the same in a parish family.

The SPRED Program was developed by experts in psychology, theology, and education in France, brought to this country by Fr. James McCarthy of the Chicago Archdiocese. There is a SPRED program in over 160 parishes in the Chicago Archdiocese. It is found in 28 dioceses in seven countries of the world. It takes training to be a catechist: one session of 4-5 hours.

Can we interest YOU in taking a closer look at the program — to see if the program would help someone you know/love, or to see if you would like to become a catechist? There is no commitment on your part for taking a look. I have a video of 15 minutes that I would like to show you in the SPRED room — the circular area in the vestibule of the church. Please give me a call at (262) 770-0362.

Peace and blessings to you and yours!

Fr. Jerry Hessel