



What does it mean to be a Helper Catechist?



The helper catechist becomes a friend, a presence, a sponsor or a kind of god-parent for a child, adolescent, young adult or adult with a developmental disability in a SPRED community of faith. As a helper, the essence of the catechetical act is to relate to a person with special needs. The relationship that the helper simulates by loving the other and allowing the other to love is the foundation for the process of education in faith. This is essential because the human experience most like that of faith is relating. Faith is relating to God.

Simple affection is not what we are talking about. It is more beautiful and more difficult than that. It involves inviting another person to change, to grow, to try to take a step outside the circle of day-to-day living. This is basic to all education but it is indispensable to the process of faith education.

When the person with a disability or Friend grows to feel loved, understood and accepted, the helper has learned to attend to the needs and interests, moods and desires, characteristics and mystery of this particular person. Life is shared in this relational climate of attention, warmth and acceptance. Because of this bonding, faith growth becomes possible. This communion between persons exists in order to help the person to be open to God. Faith is not the direct product of identification with the helper but the Friend is asked to follow Christ and the way to know what that means is to be in communion with the helper who is a disciple of Christ. Through the sponsor, the person is invited to listen, to hear, and to believe.

How does one prepare to be a good Helper Catechist?

A good place to start is to observe other helpers. At one of three observation sites, one can observe helper catechists at work. Training for helper catechists is available at various sites throughout the year.

([www.spred-chicago.org](http://www.spred-chicago.org))

There are also preparation sessions for every session with persons with a disability. The session starts by a period of feedback, when the helper can open topics of concern to the larger group for reflection. This point is not to pick at what is happening in the relationship, but to put things in perspective. What this means is that helpers learn best from other helpers.



The next part of the preparation session deals with the mystery that is the same as the one in the session to come with all the Friends. This preparation session gives the helper a chance to probe the mystery first so as to be ready when the session with the Friends takes place. The key point is to hang on to the goal of the session so as to be sensitive and supportive within the larger SPRED community of faith. The written sessions are not like recipes but schemas to help each SPRED group work according to the quality of relationships at play. One looks at the goal and determines how the group can best tend toward it.

### What does one do as a Helper Catechist?

The helper catechist has the phone number and the address of his or her Friend. Each helper catechist is asked to call his/her Friend to warmly welcome them to each session. The helper catechist may also talk to the parent or caregiver to find out information about the Friend's life experience which is relevant to the sharing in the coming session. Each group has a system for calling one another before each session to be sure that everyone can come. The helper is alert to special events in the life of his or her Friend.

It is best if the helper can be at work in the environment when the persons with disabilities arrive. The goal for the helper is to become proficient with every activity in the environment so as to model for and help the partner to grow in both concentration and skill. When the Friend enters the room and sees the helper at work, the modeling begins promptly after an appropriate greeting. The process of working calmly and becoming centered is more important than the finished product. Both the helper and the Friend should be able to enjoy what is being done and not feel judged, scolded, intruded upon nor shamed. The point of the activities is the preparation of one's spirit for what will come in the celebration room. The activity catechist is the one who prepares the activities and guides the work in the preparation room or area.

Once everyone is happy to be together and focused, the group prepares to move to the celebration room or area. They move into a circle for the silence activity. If some members are upset and unable to go to the celebration room, they remain in the preparation room and the poor helper stays too and tries to keep the time as boring as possible, so that the next time there will be a desire to join the group.

Once in the celebration room, the helper gives full attention to the process at hand. The first part of the session will be an effort to explore some life event. It is called the evocation of the human experience. The helper may need to draw in his or her Friend by word and example. Since the helper went through the session already and shared a personal life experience during the adult preparation sessions, the drift of the session should be clear. The leader catechist, leading the group, has to be able to count on the helpers to pitch in and share... on the point being developed! The leader who has active helpers is blessed especially if they stay on the topic!

If the person with a disability is unable to focus easily, the helper can put an arm around the person's shoulder or give a pat on the knee. The goal is to bring each person into the orbit of the mystery and not to allow the person with a disability to bring the whole group off track. The helper does not respond to every bit of negativity but staying glued to the leader helps to redirect the energy of the person with a disability. The helper draws his or her Friend into the center of the activity of the group.

Sometimes the helper is tempted to give a little sermon or a lecture on holy things. The disability that is present may not predispose the person for the instructional method. That is why the method being used is symbolic, intuitive, contemplative and celebration oriented. One can sense when the group is responding this way through the second part of the method that allows for some interiorization. This means that everyone is focusing on the main thread of the session that is hidden within the evocation of the human experience. Then the leader can juxtapose the interiorization with some ecclesial event, some liturgical event that has the same dynamic as the one hidden in the evocation of the human experience. The group is then a community ready to hear Sacred Scripture with some biblical evocation that has the same intentionality. Finally the leader goes to each one to give a kind of blessing and a word crafted from the whole session such as, "Today, Jesus say to you John, Lift up your heart." After some time of silent prayer, a song will be played. The point of playing music is to let each one rest in the mystery that was touched. Then everyone gets up and moves gently to it. A feeling of communion deepens in the group. Sometimes the members of the group sit for awhile in silence or with some soft music playing and just to enjoy praying. Eventually everyone returns to the preparation room. Each group has its own style of changing from one room to the other. The main thing is not to mess up the sacred feeling getting loud or bossy.

In the first environment there will be a space where everything needed for the agape has been prepared by the activity catechist. It is important for the helper catechist to keep a hold on his or her Friend so that purposeful activity can get started right away. One couple of helper and Friend can put out the placemats, another the candles and flowers, another the cups or glasses and so on. During the agape or fellowship table, the effort is to keep the conversation such that everyone can participate. This is part of the celebration of the evening and becomes a remote preparation for the liturgical sharing of bread and wine. That is why good dishes, good food, fresh flowers, and candles contribute to the feeling of a ritual meal. The group at this point has achieved a kind of intimacy and there must be time to savor it. Parents who arrive at this point can wait for a minute until there is closure when the table has been cleared and good-byes have been exchanged.

In all these little steps, the helper has been a model, drawing attention to himself or herself to lead his or her partner toward growth. The helper is there for the others, to contribute to the life of the group. The helper is there to be a faithful friend and in return life flows back to the helper catechist.

Sr. Mary Therese Harrington, S.H.  
Chicago SPRED Staff Member

