

Making a Difference

Four special Yankton women are making a big difference in the lives of many of Yankton's "special" residents through EARTH: Ecumenical Religious Training for the Handicapped.

The program has been rotating weekly one-hour Saturday afternoon meetings between Yankton churches throughout the school year since March 1, 1980.

"It's designed to bring the Gospel of Christ to those with special needs," Sister Margo Tschetter, one of two original developers, says. "I worked with special needs students at a preschool our monastery operated for a number of years until the public school system started providing for those needs. When our preschool closed, I still had a desire to work with special needs individuals."

At about the same time that S. Tschetter was researching what special needs services might be lacking in the Yankton community, she met new Yankton resident, JoAnne Dickinson.

"My husband and I had just moved here from Marshall, Minnesota," Dickinson says. "In Marshall, I had worked with a group of elementary school children who were given release time to help meet their faith needs. When I inquired about the possibility of continuing that kind of work in Yankton, I was referred to Sister Margo."

Together, Tschetter and Dickinson reviewed results of their special needs research and began developing a religious training program for Yankton's special needs adults. Initially, participants came from Sacred Heart Parish, but it didn't take long for the group to grow in numbers.

"Participants were bringing friends," Dickinson says. "Soon there were more participants from other churches than from the Catholic church."

After a few years of operation, EARTH also attracted special needs residents at Bloomfield.

"The program was never intended to remove responsibility from churches for involving special needs individuals," Dickinson says. "The purpose of EARTH is to prepare a Gospel lesson at a special needs learning level. One of the reasons we rotate meetings between different churches is that we've found our students find it very important to let us know when our meeting is held at their church."

Approximately 60 special needs people who reside in group homes or individual apartments in Yankton and Bloomfield, NE, gather weekly for the lessons prepared by either Tschetter, Dickinson, Linda Balfany and Jane Walser.

"One person could never keep EARTH going," Tschetter says. "We can hold a meeting with just two of us present, but the ideal is when all four of us are there."

Meetings consist of singing, a lesson and serving treats.



Linda Balfany, S. Margo Tschetter, Jane Walser and JoAnn Dickinson work together to provide weekly spiritual training gatherings for area adults who have learning challenges.

Tschetter, Dickinson, Balfany and Walser prepare the lessons, participants provide treats and the hosting church provides beverages. At each meeting, supportive personnel who transport special needs individuals to the meeting, are also among the group.

"We usually plan for at least 70 people at each meeting," S. Tschetter says. "The four of us take turns presenting the lessons so that we each are responsible for a lesson about every four weeks."

Finding appropriate materials has long been a struggle for the women. At one point S. Tschetter wrote a full year of lessons.

"Most of the time the materials available to us are geared toward children," S. Tschetter says. "We respect the fact that our students are adults and it can be challenging to identify lesson plans



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