

that are appropriate for them.”

One other significant ongoing challenge the women face is finding other volunteers to continue EARTH.

“It’s quite a commitment,” Balfany says. “I became involved with EARTH when my good friend Jane was ill and had to step back for at least one year. When she asked me to help I decided it was something I could do short term. However, when Jane was well enough to come back, I found I didn’t want to completely give up my responsibilities.”

Walser, whose career was in social services, became connected with EARTH in 1983 when one of her pastors at First United Methodist Church asked her to join the program as a teacher.

“Throughout the years, a career and family pressures sometimes caused me to consider leaving EARTH but I couldn’t give up the joy and satisfaction of interacting with this group and the opportunity to teach of Jesus’ love for them,” Walser says. “Without those dedicated staff there would be no EARTH.”

Walser credits staff at Yankton and Bloomfield’s group homes with making sure EARTH participants are transported to class each week.

“Some participants have severe physical challenges,” Walser says. “Transporting them is not always easy. Without that dedicated staff there would be no EARTH.”

While all the women struggle from time to time with health issues that hinder their EARTH involvement, they share an equal passion for making the service available.

“We often role play during meetings,” Dickinson says. “I once asked one of the young women to make a pretend phone call to one of the members of the group that day. To my surprise she called one of the young men there and asked if he would like to take her to a movie. That caused me to recognize that the people we work with have special needs, but they also have much in common with us.”

“I’m certain I’ve learned much more from special needs students than they’ve ever learned from me,” S. Tschetter says. “I’ve been amazed at the amount of scripture they often know and how much they remember about different Bible stories.”

S. Tschetter, Dickinson, Balfany and Walser hope that EARTH will experience an influx of new volunteers in the near future. As they advance in years, they recognize the importance of involving



Each weekly meeting opens with music, which quickly engages enthusiastic EARTH participants.

others who will eventually step into their shoes.

“There are a number of ways to volunteer,” S. Tschetter says.

“We are delighted to have visitors who simply come to learn more about the program. It’s interesting

how many people step up to help teach and find they want to return again and again to interact with EARTH participants.”

The women strive to keep the structure of the program simple, meeting annually to plan lessons and church rotations.

“The Yankton Area Ministerial Association holds the funds we use to pay for materials,” Dickinson says. “Local churches are asked to contribute funds to pay for materials and some participants make donations. Sacred Heart Monastery, Knights of Columbus and the VFW also provide funding. We work together as a team to keep it going.”

Churches currently hosting EARTH meetings include Sacred Heart, St. Benedict, Calvary Baptist, First United Methodist, St. John’s Lutheran, Trinity Lutheran, Peace Presbyterian, Riverview Reformed and United Church of Christ Congregational.

“We realize that this kind of volunteerism is not for everyone,” S. Tschetter says. “But anyone who wants to know more about EARTH is always welcome to attend our 1:00 meetings. Perhaps it would be convenient to visit when the meeting is held at their church. They can always contact any one of us, too. This is a much appreciated, much needed program and we want to see it continue.”

■ by Loretta Sorensen

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