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Taking her ministry on the road

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Sister Bernadette Trecker puts a lot of miles on her automobile during July and August. A Catholic outreach worker since 1986 for the migrant communities of Walsh and Pembina counties, she spends many hours visiting Hispanic migrant families to offer spiritual and sometimes personal support.

Sister Bernadette became a Presentation Sister in Fargo after completing high school. Following a 34-year career in elementary education, she now operates a private piano studio there during the school year.

With her summers free, she had the opportunity to be involved with the Diocese of Fargo's ministry to migrant workers, first in the Casselton area from 1969 to 1985, then in Grafton for 25 years. She spends June, July and sometimes into August supporting the spiritual needs of the migrant families by home visits and Spanish Mass and activities at St. John the Evangelist Catholic Church.

Every Sunday following the Spanish Mass, Sister Bernadette hosts a reception for the families who attend. Once a month they have a potluck and on Fathers Day, the Fourth of July and other holidays she plans a special reception that sometimes includes games, a pinata and watermelon, with prizes of a religious nature.

Over the years, she has taken many pictures of the Hispanic families that come to St. John's and those she visits with on the road. She has chronicled those pictures into numerous photo albums she displays at one reception each summer and the families delight in the memories of the past.

While spending 25 summers in Grafton, she has seen families welcome new generations and has gathered with grandparents, parents and grandchildren. Although she says she is not fluent in Spanish, she can manage to converse during a friendly visit if there is no one present who speaks English.

Monday through Friday evenings you will find Sister Bernadette behind the wheel of her car, traveling to visit at the homes of the migrant families throughout Walsh and Pembina counties. She keeps records of all the families she visits including addresses and phone numbers, which frequently change as the families move around.

According to Sister Bernadette, about half of the migrant families in the area come from Mexico and because of the drug wars they fear for their families when and if they return. It is an added hardship for them as they struggle to find work and provide for their families.

"I befriend them and offer them the friendship of Christ and the church, and pray for them," Sister Bernadette said. "They tell me their joys and their sorrows, who has passed away and their struggles with the work situation. Just listening is very important to them."

Don't be surprised if you see Sister Bernadette attending a Golden Gloves boxing match — she often attends many of the social events the migrant families she serves are involved in. They greet her whenever they see her, whether it is in church or at the grocery store and her genuine interest in their lives and seeing her return every summer has resulted in a real connection and trust between Sister Bernadette, the church and the Hispanic families. Her presence is their assurance that the church truly cares about them.

Through her connection to the Hispanic community here, Sister Bernadette had the opportunity to visit a Mexican village and stay at the home of one of the families she worships with here during the summer months.

"I enjoy being with them. I like the quality they bring to life, they have a very strong element of celebration and living in the present," she said. "They have strong family values, strong work ethic and strong faith."

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