

Called and Sent, A Charism of Service: School Sisters of Notre Dame
History of the St. Louis Province
Therese Mary Rebstock, SSND, 2006

Ministry to Native Americans

Sister Susan Biegert, a vocation from Geneva, Nebraska, began a ministry as religion teacher and liturgist for the students of grades one to five in Porcupine, South Dakota in 1999. Since 1991 Notre Dames have ministered at Pine Ridge, just a few miles north of the Nebraska border, and in Oglala, five miles farther west.

Sister Joyce Engle arrived by car on August 5, 1991, and needed assistance in finding where she would live and where she would work. A four-day tour revealed the territory she would travel and the diverse needs of the people she would meet. Though Our Lady of the Sioux Church was the center of most religious activity Sister ministered also with the Lakota people in Oglala, Slim Buttes, Red Shirt Table, and No Water.

In a short time other Notre Dames came to South Dakota. Sister Virginia Grumich was a part of the outreach of the church in the area and found that she, too, appreciated the unique culture with which she was surrounded as she assumed the responsibility for the ministry in Oglala.

Sister Constance (Connie) Schmidt was accepted on the faculty at Red Cloud School and began teaching in 1993. Sister became a part of the high school religion department and the spiritual support and guidance of the Red Cloud Volunteers, a group of college graduates who give one or two years of service to the mission. In 1996 Sister was asked to assume the role of coordinator of the volunteer Program. The collaborative working relationship with the Jesuits and the lay faculty made up an extended community as well. Such connections ran deep, as Sister Connie discovered in the spring of 1999 when she was elected to the provincial council of the St. Louis Province. It was not easy to leave the people of the reservation after six years of close association. After serving as provincial councilor she returned to Oglala as Parish Life Coordinator at Our Lady of the Sioux.

Sister Dannel Wedemeyer went to Fort Yates, North Dakota in 1994, and Sister Nicolette Karcher arrived in 1997 to work in St. Bernard Mission School among the Lakota people. In addition to regular classroom subjects, the sisters try to build students' self-esteem through activities for positive reinforcement. Though many of the children are from dysfunctional families, children and parents alike understand the importance of education. The area is one of the poorest in the United States, and unemployment and lack of opportunities do little to raise the motivation to succeed.

At the Santa Rosa Mission Sister Valeria Bueke served as a pastoral minister for some years, but joined the faculty of the Tohono O'odham High school in 1987, then transferred in 1995 to the Santa Rosa Boarding School. For 12 years Sister Janice Munier had served as pastoral minister to several small villages at the San Solano

Missions in Sells, Arizona. She worked with a pastoral team of other priests, sisters and native Tohon O'odham who served 42 villages in the Sonoran Desert with a combined area the size of the state of Connecticut.

A quote from Chief Yellow Horse sustains many in their efforts to promote education: "Education is like the wind. Once you have it, you can go anywhere."