The ministerial life of Sister Joan (Robert Jean) Mumaw, IHM, began traditionally: she taught in Detroit for several years.

But then she was called upon to change course and work in the fields of cross-cultural ministry, cultural anthropology and justice/peace for 30 years. She served as a lecturer at Katigondo National Major Seminary in Uganda and as a member of the management team and development coordinator of the Catholic Institute of Education in Johannesburg, South Africa for 10 years. Sister Joan helped to initiate the AIDS Office of the Southern Africa Catholic Bishops’ Conference and was on its advisory committee. She was also a board member of the African Faith and Justice Network, group founded by US religious communities active in ministry on the continent.

She was a member of the IHM Sisters’ Central Administration for six years; provincial of the IHM Overseas Mission Province for six years and served as the African Mission Unit representative to the IHM Coordinating Council while in South Africa. To say her heart is in Africa is an understatement.

In March 2011, IHM President Mary Fran Gilleran sent Sister Joan, the congregation’s vice president, an email requesting support for Solidarity with South Sudan, a project of the International Union of Superiors General that provides assistance in rebuilding the health care, education and pastoral ministries of a country left in upheaval following nearly 50 years of civil war.

On the day South Sudan celebrated its independence in July 2011, Sister Mary Fran died, and Sister Joan became president of the congregation. When her term in leadership ended in 2012, she contacted Solidarity with South Sudan to see if her development and leadership skills might be of use. Her love of Africa had not diminished, and she still felt called to minister to its people.

“Solidarity responded that they really needed someone in the United States to start a nonprofit organization. I gulped and agreed to try,” she recalls.

The result is Friends of Solidarity.

“I spent three months in South Sudan getting to know the country and its people and immersing myself in the work of Solidarity,” Sister Joan says. “I am educating religious men and women in the United States about the needs there and raising funds to support the work of Solidarity with South Sudan, with the hope that within the next 15
years, the people of South Sudan will be trained and able to assume leadership roles in the areas of education, pastoral ministry, agriculture and health care.

“It’s the newest and least-developed country in the world,” she continues. “Its long civil war was devastating and left it without the infrastructure we take for granted. This ministry is a blessing to me, allowing me to meet new people and learn a new culture.

“Sister Mary Fran Gilleran was so supportive of Solidarity with South Sudan, pledging the IHM community’s support for at least five years. The timing – the country’s independence being celebrated on the very day she died – really made contacting the organization a spirit-led decision for me.”