On her Book of Life page, Norma summed up her life in these words: “For all the blessings I have received, my God, I thank you, especially for the many people who have brought me to this day. May I continue to discover and grow until the full bloom must fade and die to give life to new seed.” How prophetic these words were, written 16 years ago!

Norma had many ministries during her long life: student, teacher, nurse, chaplain, volunteer secretary, and driver, usher and during these last six years, a suffering servant.

Norma Groth was born on Dec. 21, 1920 on Detroit’s east side, the second child and first daughter to William and Marion (Girard) Groth. She had seven brothers and two sisters. The family was a member of the newly established Our Lady of Good Counsel Parish and the children attended the local parochial school. Norma graduated from Nativity High School, staffed by the Racine Dominican Sisters, and the emphasis of the course work was secretarial skills. After high school, Norma volunteered as a secretary at Our Lady of Good Counsel School office where Mother Ruth Hankerd met her and told her she wanted to see Norma in Monroe the following June. As Norma noted, “It all happened too fast.” Her parents supported her, although, she admitted, her mother could have used her help with the younger siblings.

After her formation years, Norma was assigned to teach at St. John, Jackson; St. Thomas, Ann Arbor; St. Philip, Battle Creek; Christ the King, Detroit; Sacred Heart, Auburn Hills; Holy Name, Birmingham; and St. Anne, Warren. Sister Dolora Neumaier recalls Norma as an excellent eighth-grade teacher at Sacred Heart, Auburn Hills. A former Christ the King School student wrote to Norma commenting that she was one of her memorable teachers because she “listened to our questions.” Another wrote that Norma was kind to everyone. Still another, Franciscan Brother William, recalled how well Norma prepared him for First Confession and Holy Communion. To one former student who had written, Norma replied, “A lifetime doesn’t seem long enough for all we aspire to do, hence, the value of our choices from day to day.”

In 1974 Norma asked for and was granted a sabbatical year at Visitation. In the spring of 1975 Sister Margaret Brennan asked Norma if she might be interested in nursing. She was, and for the following two years she earned her licensed practical nurse’s degree at St. Clair Community College in Port Huron. Later, while working at the Motherhouse Infirmary, Norma wrote: “The older sisters taught me humility, patience and fidelity” and they made her realize she needed a clinical pastoral education degree. When she was offered a position as chaplain at Mercy Hospital in Springfield, Ohio, she accepted. For the next 11 years she ministered there, making friends of Franciscan, Charity and Mercy sisters with whom she lived. She moved from one convent to another for various reasons for several years and she maintained contact with many of these sisters for a long time. In 1992 Norma considered having a lighter schedule. She moved to Allen Park where she lived with other IHM Sisters, carrying on many volunteer ministries.

Family was very important to Norma. She was especially close to Joann and enjoyed visits to Cadillac, Mich. and other family gatherings. When she could no longer write, she corresponded by phone. A
passer-by her room could hear Norma laughing as she talked with her relatives. Norma loved to bake and when she was able, she took tasty treats to family Christmas and birthday celebrations.

Sister Gretchen Webb wrote a long, compelling summary of Norma’s last years and I quote: “I have had the privilege of knowing Norma for over 35 years. My lasting impressions of her are that she is a woman of deep faith, courage and strength. She loved the IHM community and she loved that she was called to be an IHM Sister. Ministry was of the most importance to her. My following reflection will be focusing on how she coped with her progressive blindness from macular degeneration.

Norma was very concerned about the diagnosis and how she would be able to live with macular degeneration and continue ministering with it. As the disease progressed, Norma became more aware of how this was affecting her life. She hated having to give up driving, but once she accepted that, she was able to reach out to many of our sisters to ask for rides and she seemed to become comfortable with that. She talked about her fears and at one point really became depressed because she could feel her life becoming so dark. I encouraged her to contact the Society for the Blind to ask about options and tools she could use. Once she was ready, she did this. She learned that there were classes she could take and she took them. She learned so much! She became excited by all the tools they offered her. She was thrilled that she felt herself learning how to live with the disease. Norma really became alive as she began ‘seeing’ her world in a new way. In the process, she seemed to grow in other skills of listening and ministering to others.

When it came time for her to move to the Motherhouse, she grieved about leaving her apartment and was fearful that she would become too dependent on others. However, we talked about how all her new knowledge would be helpful to others.

So Norma decided that this would be a good move. It was amazing to see how she was able to use her special cane to navigate around the Motherhouse. In talking about how she did this, she said very simply: “I have to count the number of steps it takes to go to the different places.” She took advantage of all the tools she could to stay connected ... like the reading machine. It was very important to her to read everything that was sent out by the community, keep up with current events, etc. She became a very active member of the Motherhouse community and very interested in ministering to sisters in the Health Care Center.

Truly, Norma is an example of how to cope with life’s most difficult challenges. “I feel blessed to have been able to witness this and be part of her journey.”

Norma, after so many years of blindness, you see God, your parents and family and all the beauties of creation. As you wrote many years ago, you have “died to give life to new seed.”

Written and delivered by Margaret Ann Henige, IHM, May 12, 2015