Sitting beside Diane, I felt her stirring before breaking the quiet with her struggling voice. I touched her hand after her voice got caught in the throes of the coming tears of the heart. In the midst of the pause, I whisper, “You’ve been quiet, Diane.” She clutches my hand with a strong hold. I clutch back. Diane, the Australian sister, who during the past week spoke often, sometimes forcefully, other times playfully, but always with a seemingly deep integrity from that large heart.

I liked her immediately. One of the nearly 20 persons constituting my “small” group that was a part of our daily schedule at the International Congress on Pastoral Care and Counselling (ICPCC) meeting in Accra, Ghana, in West Africa. I liked her Aussie accent, her mischievous smile, her open sincerity.

But today she was uncharacteristically quiet. And sad. This group was dying. This group would never meet again. This group a microcosm of a week-long gathering of groups; at worship, in assembly, in the dining room, on the patio, in the bus, at the marketplace. Nearly 200 people from 35 nations.

My heart now opening in a tear of sadness. My eyes until now, dry as the dust in the air. She is bringing me back to my own deeper feelings about the dying of this group, this week.

Diane speaks in a pained and choking voice. “Yesterday, standing outside the bus. The bus – ironically called ‘Apple Pie’ – I am watching these hungry children. One of them comes up to me and touches me on the arm.” Straightening and pointing her finger in imitation, she says, “He touches me so tenderly, like a dot.”

A pause, and a gulp, and she goes on in a small voice. “That for me is symbolic of how Africa has touched me. A gentle touch, like a dot,” motioning again. “But profoundly.” And the tears of grief flow, and several heads nod, and the quiet somehow has found comfort in this room.

Quiet was not the measure we measured out earlier this week. Neither was comfort flowing over. Our group was a hard group. Our group found little quiet and little comfort. But for those of us sitting there that last Saturday morning, we had hung in, or come back, to this place of dying.
Place of dying? Dying to what?

Dying to layers upon layers of my belongings. Each of us with his or her belongings. I think of Job: “Naked I came into this world, naked I leave.” In the in-between, I am clothed, piled high with belongings: family, ethnicity, nationality, race, color, religion.

And match those designs with the mix of my own personality; my own unique body, my own unique mind, and my own unique spirit. I get up each day and struggle with my own self, and then too, with those who surround me, usually my own kind.

What happens then when I meet and mix with those who are different? What happens when, like it or not, I am rolled onto this globe with persons wearing different belongings? A different family, a different ethnicity, a different nationality, a different race, a different color, a different religion?

All of this – and more – when 200 people from 35 nations come together face to face, for an hour and a half, six days in a row.

Our group had an Australian, two Nigerians, a New Zealander, a South African, a Hungarian, a Finlander, an Englishman, four Germans, a Ugandan, an Indian, a Swede, and five North Americans. We had women and men; young, middle-aged, and older. We were diverse in color, religion, continent, custom, language.

And then we were, each of us, individual, and in this reality, I think, vulnerable; naked from the womb, if you will. Here in this room we feel that we have few or no belongings. Everybody is so different.

And thus the dying begins. I will not have it my way (individually), and we will not have it our way (collectively).

I am white in color, Caucasian in race, male in sex, privileged in economy, dominant in nationhood. I speak the language of the assembly. But I sit facing people who are of different colors and races and languages. I am with those who belong to a different gender. Many of the people present are from parts of the world that “we” horribly and patronizingly identify as: “second world,” “third world,” “fourth world.”

All week we will struggle with difference. Trust will not come easy, if at all. Two people will leave the group the first day and not return. We will finally choose a leader the second day, and ignore him the third day. The fourth day the issue of the size of the group will split
the group for a time.

I will not have it my way, and we (whatever the “we” that I cling to at the moment – gender, race, nationality, language group) will not have it our way. I am losing my belongings.

The first day a woman takes the initiative to begin the process of getting to know one another by suggesting a meditation on “feet.” “It is our feet that have brought us to this place,” she says. I appreciate the initiative of her leadership, and I love the meditation as she unfolds it, and as some of the others share stories of their feet.

But not everybody likes this approach. The grumbling starts, “Aren’t we supposed to be discussing the topic of this morning?” Tension rises, and disagreement follows. Underneath the surface, all the differences bob in and out of consciousness, individually and collectively.

The German woman wants order; the Ugandan man utters barely a sound. The New Zealander is quiet since her meditation appears to have slowed its course, or rather tumbled off of a cliff. The North Americans are dominating, someone observes.

I am not having it my way; we are not having it our way. I don’t want to let go of my belongings.

Another day, someone a little too abruptly tells a North American woman to slow down, “You talk too fast.” “We” seem to be making an effort (the first language English-speaking). “They” are not happy. “Perhaps if we split up into two groups,” one of “them” says. “No,” say many of “us.” We have already spent significant time together. The issue of group size is talked out sensitively, and the group seems settled.

It comes up the next day. And the next. And finally, an East-West tug-of-war is as visible as an iron curtain. I don’t want the group to split up. Three of “them” do.

I am not having it my way; we are not having it our way. I don’t want to let go of my belongings.

Like sunlight through trees, insights and sharing break through in the midst of all the struggle. Life is lived in the tough work of dying. Good life too. But tough dying.

The group splits up for a half an hour the second to last day. I am angry. Even physically, I am in the center of the room as the chairs
turn, forming two groups. I don’t know which way to go. I don’t want to go either way. I sit there, feeling awkward, dumb and mad. I am not having it my way, we are not having it our way. The “three” of them have “won.”

The next day I will share my insight into my own history of win-lose situations and my continuing struggle not to get caught there. The Hungarian man’s eyes and my own eyes meet, perhaps for the first time. The meeting is in my apology, my taking responsibility, my letting go, and something dies there on the spot.

The German man and the New Zealand woman reconcile before our eyes. He has been angry with her since the second day, when she asked to say a prayer at the beginning of the session. In the silence that follows, she begins to pray, and he resents this imposition, and he tells her so.

Now he is sharing with her an insight into his own projection upon her and how that has distanced them. For him, this hard experience is precious for he tells her that this is the gift that he will take away from the experience.

The Indian woman, who earlier in the week referenced her “small heart,” reaches out of its cavernous contours to the youngest and most quiet, a German woman. The Indian woman holds her emotionally like a child to her breast – another image from earlier in the week.

A North American man suggests a unique way of reporting back to the large group later that afternoon. “How about a group sculpture?” he asks. All the week’s issues ooze out as some don’t seem to like the idea, others do, some struggle with the “what ifs,” others want to rehearse. I am not having it my way, we are not having it our way. I don’t want to let go of my belongings.

This group is dying, but wasn’t that the task of the whole week? Letting go of all my belongings, returning to the nakedness from which I was born and to which I will return.

Vincent Van Gogh toward the end of his short and pained life painted Wheatfield with Reaper, a vast, rolling field that covered nearly all of the canvas. He writes of the reaper,”... I then saw the image of death, in the sense that the wheat being reaped represents [hu]mankind...but there’s nothing sad about this death...it happens in broad daylight, under a sun that bathes everything in a fine golden light.”

My death tomorrow is but a final swing of the reaper’s hand in the
field of my life, and the lives of all of us. Dying, as Jesus taught, is taking up each day. Death then is lived thousands of times before the tomorrow comes. We prepare persons to die well when we prepare ourselves to die well. A good death is good dying, daily.

In the fields of Africa, I felt the breeze of the reaper’s swing whenever I was called to shed some of my belongings. Dying is perhaps not my way, not our way, but it is the only way. Under the sun of the day comes not only tomorrow’s death, but today’s dying as well. ✡