

guest. I stayed with many people who had very little themselves, all of them kind and gracious hosts, and began to fret that I was taking and taking, and giving so little in return. It is easy to get into this state of mind when your two hosts and their four children give you their only bed and sleep on the dirt floor of the kitchen during your visit. A friend pulled me up short after one of my lamentations and said very simply, "It keeps you humble." He was right, of course; if we begin to perceive ourselves only in the role of beneficent distributors of hospitality, and never as recipients, we lose sight of the true nature of this transaction. I have learned from experience that simplicity and balance are intertwined; and if we lose sight of one, it is harder to maintain the other.

We enter this world with nothing but the loan of a body, which must be returned on the date we leave the world again. This, therefore, must mean that our time on earth is spent living off God's beneficence as guests. Surrounded by miracles — a chick pipping its shell, an opening leaf, a dainty monarch butterfly tumbling out of the chrysalis it formed as a fat striped caterpillar two weeks earlier — I feel like an honoured guest indeed. And yet, with God's presence in each of us, are we not also the hosts of God? Hosts of the Spirit, guests of the Spirit, we do indeed walk in the glory of the Light. ✞

*Jennie Wright is a member of Thousand Islands Monthly Meeting.*

## Broken open at the Welcome Table: A grieving Friend at the ninth assembly of the World Council of Churches

By Katie Aven

It comes as no surprise to me that I write this reflection for the issue of *The Canadian Friend*, whose theme is illness, aging and death. My trip to Brazil to spend two weeks among theologians, clergy and lay people from every denomination all over the world was one of my most anticipated experiences in many years. When the time came to go, however, it was the most difficult choice I have ever made: our beloved niece ended her life just two weeks before I was set to depart.

In the end, the decision to go was discerned and encouraged by my family, my meeting, and the members of the

Finance Committee of YM. It was a choice to go half a world away from my grieving family, from my husband, and from our home, in which our niece lived just a few weeks before her death.

I went to Brazil praying that the Spirit would go with me, hoping that grace would surround me. From a life of sudden, acute shock and grief, where we literally lived day to day, or even hour by hour, it was the only way I could imagine making it through almost three weeks in a foreign country, where I knew no one.

The World Council of Churches (WCC) is a global ecumenical body, bringing together 340 Christian denominations worldwide, and providing a forum for churches to reflect, speak, act, work, worship, challenge, support, share and debate, together. Founded simultaneously with the United Nations (and continuing to have a strong relationship with the UN), the World Council of Churches is committed to the work of justice and peace, international affairs and human security, upholding the integrity of creation, and working together to understand and achieve the shared vision of the

commonwealth of God. It is a tall order, but my experience at the assembly demonstrated that there are millions of people all over the world who are working diligently towards these goals, and who are brought together by the WCC.

Canadian Yearly Meeting is a founding member of the World Council of Churches. We were represented at the first assembly (Amsterdam, 1948) by an 18-year-old Jane Zavitz-Bond, and have been present at every assembly since. Quaker membership is highly valued by the WCC: Friends have always sat on the WCC Central Committee, and together with the Mennonites and Brethren, we were instrumental in the establishment of the “2001-2010: The Decade to Overcome Violence.”

The assembly hosted representatives from every denomination in the world (with the exception of the world wide Pentecostal church). I met Ethiopian Coptic Bishops, Mennonites from Germany, and members of the African Methodist Episcopal church still recovering from Hurricane Katrina. I ate lunch with a Korean feminist theologian, a brother from the Taizé community in France, and a sur-

vivor of the Rwandan genocide of 1994. I prayed with parish priests from Pakistan, Indonesia and Nigeria, whose churches were burned during the assembly, a result of the riots surrounding the cartoon of the prophet Mohammed. I had long talks with an African and a Cuban Quaker about the status of women in our society, the issue of homosexuality, and the growth of Christian



LEFT TO RIGHT: ALEX KERN, FGC DELEGATE (CAMBRIDGE MM, NEW ENGLAND YM); KATIE AVEN, CYM DELEGATE (ANNAPOLIS VALLEY MM, CANADIAN YM); JANE MUTOLO, FUM DELEGATE (KISUMU MM, KENYA YM).

fundamentalism. I engaged the Evangelical Lutheran Bishop of Canada, the Anglican Primate and the United Church Moderator on the response of Canadian churches to the war cry from our southern neighbors. I made a new friend from the Heltsiuk First Nation in British Columbia, and together we listened to indigenous Brazilians tell their creation

story, which was both spoken and sung.

The hotel I stayed in housed all of the Canadians, all of the Australians, a smattering of Scots, and the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC). The MCC is a Protestant denomination that identifies itself as a church that embraces straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered Christians and seekers. The MCC is the most marginalised church within the World Council of Churches; the issue of homosexuality continues to be unresolved within global ecumenical circles, and it was no different at the assembly. It was the most contentious and most explosive issue within the ecumenical forum.

I had shared my niece’s suicide with very few people at the assembly. On the one month anniversary of her death, the busyness of the assembly churned all around me. Seeking a quiet refuge, I found myself at the worship service hosted by the MCC. Their communion took place at the busiest time of day, a time when attending worship would mean missing out on something

else interesting and important. There were unconfirmed rumors that Bishop Desmond Tutu would be addressing the assembly at the same time as the worship. Despite what I might have been missing, I went.

The worship was simple. It was a humble liturgy of word and sacrament, a small mix of clergy and laity from many

contained by simple theological platitudes — we praised God. We rejoiced at God’s presence among us. We rejoiced in the work of the Spirit in our lives. We rejoiced that God involves Godself in our brokenness, not abandoning us but rather calling us by our name. Together we sang “I’m Gonna Eat at the Welcome Table One of These Days.”

**The worship was simple.  
It was a humble liturgy  
of word and sacrament,  
a small mix of clergy and laity  
from many denominations.  
And for me, it was the single  
most powerful experience of  
inclusive, radical love  
at the assembly.**

denominations. And for me, it was the single most powerful experience of inclusive, radical love at the assembly. We anointed each other and fed each other communion. We held each other and wept together as we recalled our grief, disappointments and disillusionments before God. Our weeping was not about who we love or why, but the bitter weeping of Peter when he realises he has denied Jesus three times. We wept for the love we have not received, and for the love we have been stingy with. We wept for ourselves, for others, for God. In our collective human brokenness – a brokenness not

When I returned to the assembly floor, I found that the rumors had been true: Desmond Tutu was addressing the council. This is what he said as I walked in:

“God reveals Godself to us in our moments of suffering, and through God’s grace, we are able to cope with our suffering. This often means working together, being together in our brokenness and suffering.

Grace is not a conceptual reality. It is an existential reality that touches all manifestations of life. Grace is experienced

by all, it is a fact of unity. It belongs to all peoples, all cultures, all races, all beliefs. Grace embraces all of humanity and creation. It has personal, communal and cosmic dimensions, which are interconnected. Grace is God’s transformative power; it is the incarnational reality of God who is with us.”

And then I knew it was God’s grace that got me on the plane, flew with me, walked with me among 4000 strangers in a foreign country. It was God’s grace that brought me into fellowship with the walking wounded around me, and steadied my steps as I learned to walk with my own wound. I knew it was God’s grace that penetrated my suffering and broke me open at the welcome table. What I learned is that being wounded means walking with grace.

In the deep brokenness in my heart, I discovered a graced hope that overcomes suffering. This is a hope which penetrates the suffering of illness, of aging, of death, of exclusion, and makes us believe again. For me, it is the hope — and belief — that my niece and I still have a future together, a future in which we will meet at the welcome table. ☞

*Katie Aven, a member of Annapolis Valley MM, is the Yearly Meeting representative to the World Council of Churches. She was the Canadian Quaker delegate to the Council’s 9th Global Assembly, held in Porto Alegre, Brazil, last February.*