Thursday’s news of Nelson Mandela’s passing sent my heart jetting halfway across the globe to grieve with my friends in Dinokana, South Africa.

Mandela was in intensive care in a Pretoria hospital when I visited his country for three weeks this summer.

Most evenings, we joined our hosts, Raato and Susan Mogajane, in watching TV news coverage of the vigil outside that hospital. Raato would shake his head somberly and say something like, “It will be bad for our country when The Old Man goes. We need another leader like him.”

I was there with my husband, Rich, and our youngest daughter, Kathryn, for a church-related trip to build partnerships. The Mogajanes had visited us in summer 2012 as part of a group of 65 people from the Western Diocese of Southern Africa, and we were among 42 from the East Central Synod of Wisconsin on a return visit.

Most Americans probably know something about apartheid, imposed by the white government to keep the black majority population separate. Black families were forced to move from their homes into black townships because the government drew “white” boundaries. Blacks were forced to carry ID books with them wherever they went and to observe curfews, made more difficult because their jobs — mostly menial ones — were in the white areas and blacks had to commute longer distances home to their black neighborhoods.

Our group gathered in Johannesburg for two days of orientation, during which we visited the Apartheid Museum to learn more about this oppressive regime and its aftermath. “There still is a lot of anger here,” we heard from the Rev. Phil Knutson, a liaison between the U.S. and South African Lutheran church bodies. Knutson experienced protests firsthand when he was asked to help lead one in the 1970s.

Yet we were welcomed warmly at our final destination, Dinokana, about 200 miles northwest of Johannesburg and near Gabarone, Botswana. We were the only white people in that rural village (population estimated at 30,000). The Mogajanes and a planning committee had arranged meetings with various church groups there; outings to a game reserve, a casino restaurant and a historical site; we experienced a wedding and Rich took part in the funeral of a retired local pastor. We shopped in local stores, snapped photos of scenery and people, prayed and sang and worshipped with local congregants.

We saw that although our hosts lived comfortably, many villagers did not. Some used donkey carts to haul wood for cooking and heating or to carry home barrels of fresh drinking water. Many lived on simple foods, commonly a cornmeal porridge and vegetable gravy.

At the end, a church elder told us, “At first, I was afraid to host. I didn’t know these people. Would they judge me? What would they think if they saw my wife cooking outside over a fire? “But now I see,” he said, “they are just regular people, and I would be happy to host them.”
That was the point of our visit, and in some ways, the point of Mandela’s life. We are all just “regular people” and we need to work together to make the world a better place. Perhaps the best way to honor Mandela’s legacy is to continue to build partnerships, across the ocean, across the aisles of government, and across the streets of our own neighborhoods.

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