When to stay, when to go

Last week, as I was going to sleep, I was having trouble sleeping, so I decided to read the lectionary passages for today. I confess that I was anxious about a number of things. But one of the things I was anxious about was the annual conference meetings that took place Thursday through Saturday. As most of you will know, Mennonite Church USA is under strong strain as it continually strives to handle disagreements over gay inclusion, and this is as true in our local conference, the Indiana-Michigan Mennonite Conference.

In particular, there was a draft proposal sent out for discussion, that included four parts:

1. The first part proposes coming to understand our common life as a conference as centering on following Jesus
2. The second part suggested a number of ways to make that real, especially a set of shared practices – practices that congregations and pastors would sign a renewable covenant to do. These practices are worship; prayer, fasting and generosity; study of scripture; hospitality; evangelism; and peacemaking. Of course, these all are things are not exactly news, but the idea of a renewable covenant was.
3. The third part is a particular process to follow when congregations either want to engage in practices or beliefs which differ from conference practice and beliefs, or when a congregation is found to vary.
4. The fourth part where three specific recommendations about gay inclusion. The recommendation was to leave to individual congregations whether to allow membership for people in same-sex unions or civil marriages; and whether to allow licensed ministers to perform marriages for same-sex couples. Those were the first two recommendations. The third recommendation was to not allow people who are in same-sex civil unions or marriages to be licensed for ministry in our conference. (The conference holds ministers’ licenses).

Partly because I was involved in drafting recommendations that eventually became these recommendations, I was anxious.

As I said, as I often do when I’m anxious when I’m trying to sleep, I read the lectionary passages and prayed and mediated on them.

After reading them, I was especially struck by the Elijah story and the demoniac story.

In the Elijah story, we have Elijah in a depression following some great victories. He has confronted evil King Ahab and Jezebel, seen God mightily work at the confrontation with the priests of Baal, seen the breaking of the deadly drought. And then he has been miraculously sustained for 40 days and nights. And then he sits, sad, in a cave.

What is Elijah’s anxiety over? He believes he is all alone. He says to God, “I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.” (1 Kings 19:11).

In the gospel story, we have Jesus healing the man filled with the legion of demons in him. This is another story of God’s miraculous work: the man is healed, and the man is restored to his right mind. The man is anything but depressed: he is ready to start his new life, and follow after Jesus. But Jesus sends him back to his home town to declare what God had done for him. And so he does! “So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus had done for him.” (Luke 8:39)

Honestly, reading these stories didn’t lower my anxieties. Instead, the deceiver turned my church anxiety into a new one: would I come home from conference proclaiming how much God had done, or would I come home depressed at the state of things? Stupid devil, twisting scripture to his own ends again!

Now that the conference is over, how do I feel?

Let me say it simply first, and then expand: I came away rejoicing at what God had done, but also very sad.

Here’s what I was rejoicing over.

Because one of the goals of the conference is to center more on following Jesus, much more time was spent on building one another other up as Jesus’s followers through worship and teaching. Annual conferences, for the past decade or so that I’ve been attending, have been pretty grim affairs: lots of bureaucratic time (receiving reports and talking about budgets) and lots of time focusing on hard things, especially our disagreements. We were hosted by the pastors of Elkhart county, and they did a fine job. There were three teachings that were especially meaningful to me:

1. Alan Kreider talked about the themes of his book, “The Patient Ferment of the Early Church,” that I discussed a few weeks ago. I won’t review this, but I’d be glad to send my teaching on that or lend you his book if you’re interested.
2. Mandy Yoder, who is one of the pastors at Belmont Mennonite Church in Elkhart, preached on the conference theme of “Rejoice in the Lord Always.” Mandy’s daughter was recently diagnosed as having Type I Diabetes, meaning that her body produces no insulin at all. So their life has changed radically, with daily shots and pokes and constant monitoring of her daughter’s sugar levels. What does it mean for Mandy and her family to “rejoice in the Lord always” under such hardship? It means understanding that joy is not our emotion of happiness or ease, or a false smile and pretending nothing is wrong, but a deep centered reliance on God. It was a precious gift that Mandy gave us to share her daughter’s story, and she encouraged us as we faced our conference’s current difficulties to deeply place our trust in God.
3. Cyneatha Millsap, who is the pastor at Markham Mennonite in Illinois, gave a masterful exposition on Nehemiah 8. She talked about how the exiles returning to Israel brought back with them their own problems and issues from living among people who did not believe in the God of Israel. And when they returned, what they wanted before anything, before they rejoiced, they wanted to hear the word of the Lord, which he did, “from early morning until midday,” reading the scripture they had missed so long. They wept in repentance, but Ezra still encouraged them to rejoice, “for the joy of the Lord is our strength.” Cyneatha talked about mistakes she had made in ministering to a group of teen girls in Elkhart, but how God had protected her, and protected her girls, from her mistakes, especially because she attempted to deeply “love on” those girls. (Love, we can remember, covers a multitude of sins).

So, Alan, Mandy, and Cyneatha each called us to patient, faithful, loving service of God. This, and the several worship sessions, were of great encouragement to me. Also very encouraging was the reception of a new congregation of 160 members and 65 children in Indianapolis of Mara Christians, and the introduction of a congregation of Chin Christians in Indianapolis. The Mara people and the Chin people are both Burmese groups.

But I also came away sad. In the past year, five congregations have withdrawn from our conference over disagreements over gay inclusion. This included Iglesia Menonita el Buen Pastor, Shore Mennonite, Carroll Community Worship Center, Marion Mennonite, and most recently, Emma Mennonite. Emma’s withdrawal also meant we lost our moderator, and a moderator had to be found at fairly short notice to take his place (Bob Yoder, of College Mennonite in Goshen, is the new moderator).

And Thursday night I sat at dinner with a number of pastors, many of whom were quite upset and even angry at the trend in our conference towards more gay inclusion. In Emma’s statement, “from our perspective, the current trends with IN-MI Conference and MC USA regarding Biblical authority, interpretation of scripture and human sexuality, are moving in a direction which is much different from our congregation. As a congregation, we have come to see that the ‘noise’ and disruption happening within the denomination is such a distraction, so as to keep us from the work and direction to which we have been called.” And I fully expect several more congregations to come to a similar decision.

Of course, I personally believe that the various groups have been trying to be obedient to scripture as they understand it (and that the various groups are failing in different ways, too, as they try to do that. And, honestly, our attempts to teach the biblical position that these conflicts are opportunities to grow in virtue have not been helpful in keeping some churches in the conference, with a few rare exceptions. It might have been helpful for churches who are unsure about where they stand, but to those whose minds have been made up, it hasn’t been helpful.