

In all Godliness and Dignity: Beginning to Talk about MAiD

Psalm 113, Romans 8:37-39, 1 Timothy 2:1-6 by Patty Friesen (Sept. 18/22)

In the 1 Timothy reading, Paul reminds us to pray for government that we may live a peaceable life in all godliness and dignity. My grandmother prayed for the Canadian government every day of her life since leaving Russia - both in giving thanks for it and praying for its ongoing wisdom to rule in godliness and dignity and the value of life. As Mennonites we value life as God's gift - from the gift of birth to the gift of death. We will sacrifice our own lives before we take someone else's life. We've always believed our lives and our deaths are in God's hands.

With regard to the difficult topic of Medical Assistance in Dying, we need prayer for personal wisdom and prayer for wisdom for government. Because it is now a legal option, more and more Mennonites are choosing MAiD at the end of their lives and pastors and churches are trying to theologically catch up, per usual. We deacons at OMC thought it's a good time to wade into this difficult topic with Helen Olfert, retired RN who has been helping Bethany Manor and other Mennonite churches with this conversation. Helen will be speaking at our 11:00 Forum because she didn't want to preach - for some reason:)

Helen says MAiD should be a difficult conversation and requires good questions and good listening - so let us listen to some stories. One of our beloved elders at Nutana Park Mennonite Church, Connie Gutwin, chose Medical Assistance in Dying earlier this summer as reflected in her obituary: "Connie ended her life with medical assistance. She was very grateful to have that option and for the support of the MAiD staff. Connie faced her death with grace and openness. She wasn't sad to die, but she was sorry to leave her family: she said, 'relationships, for me, are the essence of life.' Connie lived her life with integrity, curiosity, and a deep interest in others. Her family is deeply grateful for the gift of

her life and we will continue to learn from the example she set.” Connie helped frame these following questions with regard to MAiD.

1. We are all human beings. We all die. We don't have a choice in that matter but do I have a right to choose when I die? How I die? What makes it so difficult for us to talk about, accept, the idea of MAiD?
2. Do we say that it is wrong to use MAiD when we are living with serious and life-threatening conditions but at the same time say that it is acceptable to prolong life with oxygen and feeding tubes? If our beliefs tell us that our life span is “in God's hands”, then both actions are in conflict with that belief.

The other side of this MAiD topic came from a family member whose parent did not choose MAiD in the midst of long-lasting suffering. They said, “I am glad they did not choose MAiD. Even though I knew she was suffering and dying I needed time.” The question I would ask in this situation is - who is this need to stay alive about - the mother or the adult child? I think we as adult children need to ask our parents about how they want to die and do our hard grief work in letting them go so we can honour whatever their decisions are.

Before his death in November 2019, John Regehr of Winnipeg said he wanted to start a discussion about death and dying. Regehr, 93, a former Canadian Mennonite Brethren pastor and professor at Mennonite Brethren Bible College (a founding college of Canadian Mennonite University), did just that when he chose to die using medical assistance in dying (MAiD).

“I saw his decision as the professor giving his last teaching, or the pastor preaching his last sermon,” added his son Mark.

“He was ready to go,” said his son Rennie. “He had lived a full life. He knew it was time.”

According to his children, Regehr's last few years had been difficult. His wife Mary died in 2014. At the age of 90 he needed life-saving heart surgery.

The surgery went well, but a few months later he fell and broke his hip. He recovered, continuing to live independently. But over the next few years there were more falls and more trips to emergency.

On Oct. 18, 2019, he was admitted to hospital with severe pain in his hip. This time it was clear he would never be able to go home again.

"He was exhausted," Rennie said. "He had no more projects and didn't want to stay alive for the only purpose of remaining alive. He didn't want to lie in bed for who knows how long, waiting for death to come."

Two weeks later, Regehr called his children together for a conversation about death.

"He asked us if it was okay for him to die," Rennie said. "He wanted our support and blessing."

Mark admitted he was taken aback at first. "I was caught off guard when he suggested it," he said. "But I quickly saw his point of view."

While finding it hard to hear his request, daughter Jenny was not surprised; her dad had spoken many times about being ready to die. "He had made his mind up," she said.

Regehr asked medical staff at Concordia Hospital, a publicly funded facility owned and operated by Winnipeg's Mennonite community, about ways to hasten his dying. They suggested he stop eating, an option that didn't appeal to him.

Then he learned he was eligible for MAID because he couldn't return to normal life, and had an incurable health situation, and his life was unbearable and there was no hope of reversal. "His face lit up," Rennie said, remembering his reaction upon hearing he qualified and could be certified for MAiD by a doctor.

While the news put Regehr at ease, his children worried that his decision might cast a pall over their dad's life of service to the church. But when they saw how convinced he was, they offered their full support.

Since Concordia Hospital doesn't permit MAID on its premises, on Nov. 7 Regehr was taken by ambulance to another city hospital, where he was joined by his family and two pastor friends.

Before he died, Scripture was read, and he was asked: "John, can anything separate you from the love of Christ?"

He shook his head emphatically and, with a strong voice, answered: "No!"

Then, as Rennie played one of his dad's favourite hymns on the viola, a life-stopping drug was administered intravenously, and Regehr slipped away.

For Rennie, it was a powerful experience.

"To see my dad surrounded by people who loved him deeply, lovingly participating in a compassionate, painless and comfortable death was overwhelming," he said. "It was wrenching and beautiful all at the same time."

For those who might question Regehr's decision on theological grounds—that only God can decide when someone should die—Rennie said his dad had no doubts.

"The inner work had been done long before," he said, noting that his dad had spent

a lot of time thinking and praying about it. “He had complete trust in a loving and accepting God.”

Plus, he said his dad “felt he had already played God earlier by deciding to have life-saving heart surgery. He felt death had already come calling for him then, but he had not been willing to go.”

Regehr anticipated some might be critical of his decision based on pro-life grounds. According to the children, he told them that anyone who insisted he should have continued in a “torturous, useless struggle to survive” might not really be pro-life from a caring, compassionate point of view, “but more a slave to that ideology.”

Reflecting on Regehr’s decision, Jason Dyck, director of church ministries for the Mennonite Brethren Church of Manitoba, said, “I don’t know what it’s like to experience the last stage of life. I don’t know the pain, I don’t know the loss, I don’t know what questions I’ll ask. While we Mennonite Brethren aspire to believe that all life is subject to God’s sovereignty, John’s story reminds me that nothing in life or death is simple.

The reading from Romans 8 reminds us that whatever we do in life or in death, we live and die in God. The deepest reality is that the love of God, which, shown forth in Christ, forms the unbreakable bond between God and us. Paul lists threats, and circumstances that might separate one from God’s love; and the forces that might stand behind those physical threats. This passage offers, for the first time in Romans, a description of the kinds of suffering that Paul and his fellow Christians faced in the first century. Not only is there physical affliction to be faced, some from natural causes and some from violent opposition, but there is also the constant threat from supernatural or cosmic forces. Of these, death itself is the

most obvious. For Paul death remained the last and greatest enemy—but even if death itself might try to break the bond of love between God and the church, it can wield no power to separate God’s people from God’s love.

God’s love is the ultimate security; matched by opening one’s heart and life to the tidal wave of that love, displacing all other rivals. The mind is to learn, and the heart is to know in experience, “the love of Christ which passes knowledge.” Let us ask good questions these days about what makes for a good death rooted in God with or without MAiD. Let us keep talking about these important issues and let us pray:

Thank you, God, that we are born, live and die within your loving care. As our end of life has more options and becomes more complicated, help us to ask good questions, hear each other’s experiences and trust you in the midst of everything. Amen.