Beloved Adventist Preacher Morris Venden Dies

Elder Morris L. Venden, the widely-known and much loved Seventh-day Adventist preacher, passed to his death on Sunday evening, February 10. He was 80 years old and his health had declined significantly in recent months.

The pastor of several large congregations near Adventist colleges and universities over the years, Venden’s personal ministry was largely with students, professionals and young adults. When he retired from pastoral ministry in 1998, he became an associate speaker at the Voice of Prophecy media ministry and in addition to regular broadcasts was a guest speaker at many camp meetings, convocations and other events, including the 2000 World Ministerial Council at the time of the General Conference Session in Toronto. READ MORE....
Elder Morris L. Venden, the widely-known and much loved Seventh-day Adventist preacher, passed to his death on Sunday evening, February 10. He was 80 years old and had struggled with Frontotemporal Dementia (FTD), a rare form of gradual cognitive loss that affected him in a form known as Pick's Disease*, for the past ten years, according to an announcement from the denomination's Upper Columbia Conference (UCC).

The pastor of several large congregations near Adventist colleges and universities over the years, Venden’s personal ministry was largely with students, professionals and young adults. When he retired from pastoral ministry in 1998, he became an associate speaker at the Voice of Prophecy media ministry and in addition to speaking for regular broadcasts was a guest speaker at many camp meetings, convocations and other events, including the 2000 World Ministerial Council at the time of the General Conference Session in Toronto.

During his many years of ministry, Venden is best known for advocating a grace-oriented perspective and for defending Adventist theology in a way that was acceptable to at least some
evangelicals. He had a profound impact on the spiritual lives of large numbers of church members and others through his preaching and writing. For example, He is described as “the very first preacher who ever reached down deep into my stone-cold heart-of-hearts … with a gospel message that got right into my kitchen and would not let me go” by a member of New Earth Band, the country gospel group based in Reading, Pennsylvania. “He was my pastor for all of the years I attended Pacific Union College … and was such a blessing to me in shaping my daily walk with Jesus,” wrote Pastor Steve Dayen on the SDA Ministers page on Facebook yesterday.

Another ministerial student at the time remembers that at the height of the controversy kicked up by theologian Desmond Ford, during a meeting of the theology faculty and students at Pacific Union College, “after a series of papers 20 to 30 pages [each] parsing the Greek and Hebrew,” Venden passed out a two-and-a-half-page paper and made this simple statement; “You must be born again. You must be born again. You must be born again. There was something wrong with your first birth so you must be born again.”

In addition to the Pacific Union College Church, Venden was also senior pastor at the Collegeview Church on the campus of Union College in Lincoln, Nebraska; the La Sierra University Church in Riverside, California; the Keene (Texas) Church near Southwestern Adventist University; and the Azure Hills Church near Loma Linda, California. He focused on salvation and spiritual life, teaching that both justification and sanctification are by faith. He was famous for his dry humor and his stories, contemporary parables.

He wrote more than 30 books, many of them originating in his sermon manuscripts or transcriptions. The first, Salvation by Faith and Your Will, was published by the now-defunct Southern Publishing Association in 1978. The most recent—other than some reprints with title changes—was Why Didn’t They Tell Me? in 2005 at Pacific Press. Among the most important of his books is a three-volume series published by the Review & Herald in 1984 covering the doctrines of the Adventist movement: Common Ground presented doctrines that Adventists hold in common with all Christians. Higher Ground reviewed doctrines that Adventists share with some other conservative Protestants, mainly focusing on spiritual growth. Uncommon Ground included those doctrines that are largely unique to Adventist faith.


Venden spoke and wrote much about a widespread concern of his generation of Adventists—assurance of salvation. Many felt that the way the atonement and the sanctuary were presented from the 1920s into the 1950s left a person without knowing that their salvation was certain in Christ Jesus, a fundamental faith assertion very common among American evangelicals. As assurance was more widely emphasized by Venden and other preachers, an ultra-conservative reaction developed, rooted in the fear that Adventists would shift to the “once-saved, always-saved” attitude that has resulted in lax personal and social ethics among many evangelicals.
As a result of his themes, Venden is controversial on both former Adventist and ultra-conservative Adventist web sites. For example, on the greatcontroversy.org blog, Kevin Paulson begins a review of the 1996 *Never Without an Intercessor* by describing Venden as “one of the most curious yet tragic figures of modern Adventist history.” Paulson states that as a student at Pacific Union College, Venden got him started in his personal devotional life, then writes, “Yet the fundamental errors of Morris Venden’s salvation theology and his view of the church’s spiritual priorities continue to prevent clarity of understanding among many contemporary Adventists. … The theology of Morris Venden perhaps best epitomizes the modern Adventist obsession with the dangers of legalism,” when, in Paulson’s opinion, the concern should be focused on “the swelling floodwaters of worldliness and laxity in today’s church.” A similar critique of Venden, some of it very lengthy, can be found on many independent, ultra-conservative Adventist web sites.

The Former Adventist Fellowship Forum presents a contrasting view of Venden’s work. Commenting on *95 Theses on Righteousness by Faith*, one man wrote, “I find it disgusting that Venden would rely on a reference to Luther in order to teach many doctrines directly opposed to the central core of the Reformation. [He] teaches that righteousness by faith comes through the combined efforts of man and God … the Roman Catholic view that Luther, Calvin and others fought so strongly against. [He] denies original sin.”

“Perhaps the fact that he got disagreement from both sides is evidence that he was solidly in the center of both Biblical theology and the Adventist heritage,” one pastor told Adventist Today. “It is certainly true that no one since H. M. S. Richards has had such a widespread and deeply spiritual influence on a generation of Adventists. What Richards was to the World War II generation, Venden has been to the Baby Boom generation, at least among Adventists in North America.”

A memorial service will be held in the Loma Linda University Church on Sunday, March 3, at 10 a.m. In lieu of flowers, the family requests that gifts be sent in memory of Venden to the SonBridge Community Center in College Place, Washington, or to Maranatha Schools and One-Day Churches. He is survived by his wife, Marilyn; son, Lee; and daughter-in-law, Marji; daughters, Lynn and LuAnn; grandchildren, Kris, Lindsey and Mark; his brother, Louis, and sister-in-law, Margie.

Pastor Lee Venden, Morris Venden's son and a minister on the UCC staff, said, "Dad will be remembered for the one string on his violin that he consistently talked about, Jesus, and the privilege available to everyone to have a meaningful friendship with Him. At this point, it seems clear that Dad will be able to sleep this disease off, the long sleep from our perspective; the short sleep from his."

Most of Venden’s books can be purchased through [www.adventistbookcenter.com](http://www.adventistbookcenter.com) and used copies of his out-of-print titles can be obtained through [www.LNFbooks.com](http://www.LNFbooks.com) as well as the major online book sellers. Many audio and video files of Venden preaching can be found at [www.allaboutjesusseminars.org](http://www.allaboutjesusseminars.org). Many articles by Venden can be found through the General Conference Archives web site by searching the collections of Adventist periodicals there.

*Note:* Because of peculiarities of our web hosting technology that we do not fully understand,
some readers may not be able to click on the links above and successfully get to the referenced sites. It may be necessary to copy the link, go to your browser and paste it into the browser.

*Pick's Disease* shares some characteristics with the far-better-known but equally tragic Alzheimer's, but its early symptoms usually affect the personality and emotions rather than the memory. A person with Pick's may develop urges to consume large quantities of food and may display other forms of out-of-character behavior. As these symptoms intensify and speech and other activities gradually slow down, MRI examinations of the brain show a telltale Pick's-pattern loss of tissue. There is no known current medical protocol to reverse Pick's, though medications can alleviate symptoms and tests are under way to study promising new treatments. Pick's patients, on average, survive eight years after the appearance of first symptoms, which may strike as early as age 45. Other forms of Frontotemporal Dementia are known by other names.