

Jeeps, Geology, and Slippery Slopes

By Gary A. Nowlan

To spend a week dealing with complex issues of faith and science while preparing for a long-planned canoeing/touring trip in British Columbia seemed somewhat formidable. I had some trepidation about how the paper I planned to present would be received since it departed from orthodoxy in some respects. Despite these misgivings, I found the chance to be part of an event with the potential importance of the 2003 Faith and Science Conference an opportunity hard to turn down.

The opportunity to listen to and socialize with some of the preeminent scholars of the Seventh-day Adventist Church was very appealing. My experience as a career geologist for the United States Geological Survey (USGS), together with my commitment as an Adventist for over fifty years, put me in a rather unique position to share the struggles I have had of trying to reconcile my religious beliefs and the science I worked with every day. Attending almost every session, I found the experience extremely worthwhile.

Each day, as I negotiated the mountain roads between Glacier View Ranch and my home forty-five minutes away in Boulder, Colorado, memories surfaced of past experiences along the route. Here I

learned geologic mapping and came to understand physical principles of geology and the sequence of sedimentary rocks in this part of Colorado and beyond.

The road passes through the village of Jamestown, formerly a major gold mining town. Because of extensive prospecting and mining in the past, the Jamestown area has many old trails, inviting places for those of us who like the challenge of off-road travel. Long before SUVs, we drove our CJ-5s, Broncos, Scouts, Land Cruisers, and other four-wheel-drive vehicles into these relatively wild areas to test our driving skills and enjoy the isolated mountain scenery. Whether the excursion was impromptu or planned in advance, we knew what someone meant when they asked, "Want to go jeeping?"



The conference was characterized by good organization, a credit to its planning committee, led by Ben Clausen of Geoscience Research Institute. I liked opening each day with worship, something that does not happen at typical scientific meetings. The speakers and other features for worships were excellent. The Church is blessed with a wealth of good singing voices, which the congregational music reflected.

geoscientist, I was glad to see that theologians recognize that resolutions to faith/science issues may come from better understanding of Scripture, as well as better understanding of nature. Speakers were able to present what may seem to be radical theories today, but those theories may help us find better answers in the future.

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The fact that three of the six vice presidents of the General Conference attended the entire conference emphasized its importance in the eyes of church leadership. They led out in various ways but by no means dominated the agenda or any of the activities. From my viewpoint, they took a hands-off approach to the presentations and deliberations of the scientists and theologians.

In addition, other General Conference officials were there for all or part of the conference, as were administrators from the North American Division, union conferences, and local conferences. Based on what I heard and observed, church administrators are trying to foster the process of finding solutions to issues of faith and science.

As someone who has dealt with issues of faith and science for many years, I was gratified by the openness, frankness, cordiality, and tolerance that participants showed. Many of the service personnel at the camp are friends of mine who attend the Boulder Seventh-day Adventist Church. One of them reported to me one day, "Well, I hear no fist fights have broken out yet!"

I appreciated the general recognition of how complex the interpretation of nature is and the acknowledgment that simplistic explanations are not adequate for many scientifically informed, loyal church members. As a

professionals in the field of applied geology to advance the mission of the Church resonated with me. For example, experts in the areas of water quality, soil preservation and restoration, and geological engineering, such as landslide mitigation, would enhance the capabilities of Adventist Development Relief Agency.

Contrary to fears expressed by friends of mine who did not attend that the outcome was predetermined, I am pleased to report that I found a spirit of openness and inquiry, and that no single point of view dominated. I am hopeful and even cautiously optimistic that the spirit will continue. After conversing with a number of college science teachers, I have greater appreciation for the challenge before them, which is to help their students understand modern principles of geology without undermining faith.

Questions and challenges still loom in my mind as we in the Church become more knowledgeable about geology and related subjects. I was surprised that my own journey from a position of naïve certainty to one of informed uncertainty with regard to issues of earth history struck a responsive chord with so many attendees and others who read my paper. Some of those in attendance told me that they lacked access to people who could serve as sounding boards to explore ideas that

"Want to go jeeping?"

might seem contrary to traditional Adventist beliefs.

Among scientists at the conference and elsewhere within the Church, there is a strong tendency to accept the biblical accounts of creation week and a worldwide flood as literal events, but not to restrict them to events about 6,000 and 4,500 years ago, respectively. This apparent deviation from traditional Christian thought and the words of Ellen White is recognition that those

that contributes to this relative lack of knowledge is the historic tension between Adventist beliefs and geologic principles. For example, my major professor at Union College, a friend in the chemistry department, expressed concern about me losing my faith when I decided to pursue a graduate education in geology.

In spite of the cordiality and openness of the conference, I believe tension exists between those who have a

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periods were not long enough for the processes that have resulted in the world we see today.

Accepting the possibility that a mass of precursor earth material existed before creation week and that the sun, moon, and stars also existed before creation week is a way of recognizing such physical realities as the validity of radiometric dating of rocks, the age of the stars, and the speed of light.

Looking at the papers related to geology through the eyes of my geologist colleagues at the USGS, I found that some would have been viewed as making a valuable contribution to the study of geology and would have passed the process of peer review with little or no change. Some would have been accepted as valid scientific studies with valid conclusions when applied locally, but any attempt to extrapolate the results to a larger area would have been rejected. Some would have been viewed as attempts to find support for a religious belief and therefore would not have been taken seriously. And some would have been considered ridiculous. Of course, some ridiculous theories in the past were later proven true.

The lack of trained geologists within the Seventh-day Adventist Church is a definite handicap when it comes to understanding issues of earth history. And a major factor

quite literal view of the Genesis accounts of Creation and the Flood and those who do not. For me, probably the most negative part of the conference was the implication, which some plainly stated, that those who do not regard the Creation and Flood stories as literal accounts are not really Seventh-day Adventists. I respect their right to hold this belief and to express it in public. But I believe that being a Seventh-day Adventist is much deeper than particular convictions about earth history.

One term used several times during the conference was “slippery slope.” This reminded me of my former days “jeeping” on the trails around Jamestown. One of the challenges we faced was crossing places where disaster was possible but where there was also the prospect of reward in the form of beautiful scenery or simply reaching a destination. Even though avoiding the literal slippery slopes was safer, the wise and experienced driver who understood the vehicle, the terrain, and his or her own level of skill was willing to challenge the slopes because of potential benefits, a lesson for those of us now wrestling with issues of faith and science.

A resident of Boulder, Colorado, Gary A. Nowlan is a geologist for the United States Geological Survey.

