

# Adventist Churches—The View from the Road:

*Questions for Motorcyclist, and Pastor Marvin Wray* | AN INTERVIEW BY BONNIE DWYER



Wray at Bryce Canyon National Park.

**Journeys is your book about a motorcycle trip across the US visiting Adventist churches? Why did you go?**

When the Northern California Conference announced that they would allow three pastors a year to take a sabbatical of up to three months, I thought that would be a great opportunity to do what I have wanted to do for some time—visit churches all across the country. And wow, I've always wanted to ride my motorcycle



across the country. So I submitted the proposal, and it was granted.

I spent a year making plans. There were some specific churches I had in mind: Salt Lake City and Las Vegas, for instance. What is working in the headquarters of Mormonism? Is anything particularly effective in a hugely secular city? What is working? Is anything working?

In Las Vegas there are nine churches. I picked one—the Mountain View Church, where I knew good things were happening. However, at least fifty percent of the churches were picked at random according to a route and a reasonable number of miles. I visited a pastor or church leaders every mid-day and every evening.

I had a strong desire to see what was working, who is growing, who isn't and why. I admit I had some preconceived perceptions. I knew that most of our churches are not really growing. Most are trying to stay current, but struggle with building a core group of young adults. In one church I visited the average age was mid-70s. I asked the pastor, "Where do you see the church in twenty years?"

In the book, I tried to emphasize positive aspects about each place, and to generalize criticisms.

**Why did you go on a motorcycle? Did that affect your interaction with the churches?**

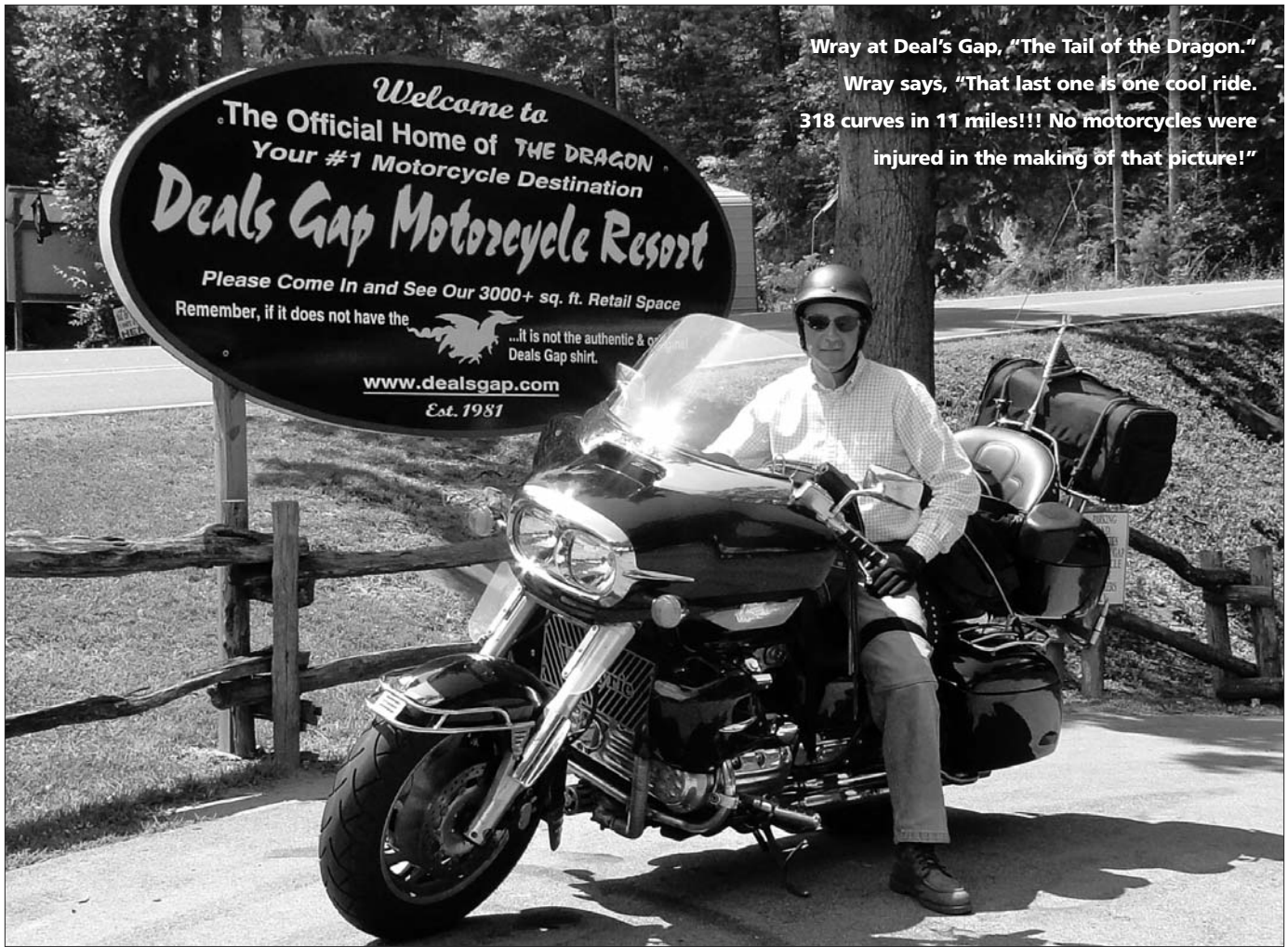
I did that largely just because I thought it would be a lot more fun. I didn't hear any negative feedback. I think it generated interest. I also thought it would make the book more readable for many. And I'm happy to say that after 11,393 miles I only had one really bad segment.

**How many churches did you visit?**

I met with representatives from 70 churches, including 48 pastors.

The view of the church was often clearer, less biased, from members rather than pastors. But some pastors really opened up and talked about not being able to do what they wanted to do because most of the time the membership does not turn the leadership over to the pastor. Even in the more professional churches, they are hesitant to truly allow the pastor to lead. They want him

*I thought [a sabbatical of up to three months] would be a great opportunity to do what I have wanted to do for some time—visit churches all across the country. And wow, I've always wanted to ride my motorcycle across country.*



Wray at Deal's Gap, "The Tail of the Dragon."  
 Wray says, "That last one is one cool ride. 318 curves in 11 miles!!! No motorcycles were injured in the making of that picture!"

*Conferences need to encourage true creativity ...you've got to turn the pastors loose a little bit.*

to preach and do the visitation. The place I really saw the greatest opportunity for pastoral leadership was in church plants where they just started something new and didn't have a long history. The longer the history of the church, the harder it is to embrace change and to be cutting edge.

**Were the pastors embracing change and being cutting edge?**

The majority of them wanted to, yes, but very few of them were actually empowered to do it either by the conference or by the local congregation. I would also say that most of them were not getting continuing education that would encourage and inspire them along those lines either.

David Newman, in Fulton, Maryland, is a good example of working on the cutting edge. I don't think that he started New Hope Church. But he went there when it was young and grew it.

He has built up and empowered his staff as well as his lay leaders very effectively.

Conferences need to encourage true creativity. There are so many ways to use the new technology. We always need a balance, but we do need to embrace changes in technology and generational needs, and our administrators need to find fresh approaches to equip our pastors to teach old truths in new ways. You've got to turn the pastors loose a little bit. Several conferences were hesitant and were not going to encourage real creativity.

Another problem is that I feel too often conferences are simply filling pastoral slots with whoever needs to move instead of matching the gifts of a pastor with the needs of a church. We need to address anew the value of a ministerial secretary. There are not many conferences where a ministerial secretary has the role of pastoral placement. The pastors need a pastor as well as someone that will lobby with administration for them.

**What was your methodology? What were you looking for in your visits?**

The first question for the pastor was, "What's happening in your church that you are passionate about?" There are all the standard things that have to be cared for, but is there something that is creative, is there something that could really make a difference in your church? I wanted candid responses. They had to really think about that. In many cases it caught them off guard. I think many of them are lacking the tools, the idea bank.

I get tons of ideas reading both from within as well as outside of the Adventist church. I really get inspired by Mark Batterson's *In a Pit With a Lion On a Snowy Day*. He wrote another one, *Primal*, that is fantastic. Another great read is David Platt's *Radical* and the sequel, *Radical Together*. Batterson founded the National Community Church in Washington, D.C. They started by opening up a coffee bar right across from Union Station. Now they have branches in movie theatres connected with subway stations.

Some of the pastors I visited are not encouraged to read from outside sources, but we don't supply them with the same energy from within very often. I have appreciated George Knight's books, and Jon Paulien's devotional on Revelation is great. I would also greatly encourage every pastor to read his latest book, *Where Are We Going?* But I also believe we should be in touch, for example, with David Kinnaman's books such as *Unchristian*, and his latest, *You Lost Me*.

The majority of pastors that I visited were in small churches or districts. They were not exposed to much creativity, and often they are fairly isolated from other pastors. I'm so lucky to be working in Napa and to have Roy Ice as my sidekick. It doesn't get much better than that.

**Were you recommending materials?**

Yes, but mostly I was encouraging pastors simply to read, and to read widely. In some places they just think that is a terrible idea. We're missing so much. We don't have to take it all, but don't miss it all either.

**You said members were more creative in answers?**

Lay leaders who were willing to meet with me were there because they had something that they were passionate about.

In Roswell, New Mexico, it was late when I pulled in. I'd had a long hot ride. Three members met me at the church, and after we had visited for awhile they asked, "Would you like to see our prayer ministry?" We walked to what I thought was a storage building, but it was their prayer ministry.

It was set up so beautifully. First, I went into a waiting room. One of the prayer ministry people met me there and explained what I was going to be doing at the seven or eight stations. I had time to meditate, to write down my burden, and I picked up a brick to go with it. Then I went on to another space where I wrote in sand what I had written on the paper, and then I smoothed out the sand and laid my brick down. I picked up a link of a chain that had been broken. The whole thing amounted to identifying my burden, laying it down, and believing that Christ could answer my prayer and then coming out and having my burden lifted. I went through it with them, and I was moved just walking through it.

The members want to make it available to their community 24/7. This was a ministry with lay-led passion.

**Did a lot of people from the community utilize it?**

The word was getting out. They wanted people to know that if they had a prayer in the middle of the night, there was a place that they could go.

This was a new Adventist family that was doing this. They were passionate. They had tears in their eyes as they told their story. The passion showed all over their faces.

The next day I told the next pastor about my experience the night before. He said, "We have the same thing." All the same steps were laid out, but not nearly as attractively. And he said they were talking about turning the space back into Sabbath School rooms. The differ-

*[Their] prayer ministry... amounted to identifying your burden, laying it down, and believing that Christ could answer your prayer and then coming out and having your burden lifted. I went through it with them, and I was moved just walking through it.*

*As I rode hours, going from state to state and church to church, I had a lot of time to reflect on what I was and wasn't seeing.*

ence was that in that church they had no one passionate about that ministry.

That is not necessarily a bad thing. I just thought, there is no one program. All you need is one program that somebody is passionate about.

**You mix in your personal spiritual journey with your physical journey. Why?**

While I was riding down long, hot roads, scenes from my own spiritual journey came to mind. I thought it would build a greater readership. I didn't know a book title before I left, but I began to think about two journeys. There was the Sabbatical journey to the churches, and there was my journey. I had been through a lot of personal change. I just wanted to set that out, too.

**How did your physical journey impact your spiritual journey?**

It had an impact on my ruling passion to get my emphasis in the right place. As I rode hours,

going from state to state and from church to church, I had a lot of time to reflect on what I was and wasn't seeing and to think about the need for growth in my own life.

More and more I feel that we have to get the message of Christ's grace and compassion out there in front where it needs to be. There are a lot of churches that are not doing that really well. I'm really worried about our denomination's overall health. There is so much that we can be doing in a broader scope of revival and reformation. We need revival and reformation, but perhaps we need to look at how we need to reform the Adventist church because I don't think the next generation is going to pay the bills in the same way past generations have.

**Let's talk about some of the specific churches: the Aldergrove Church in British Columbia was one of your favorites from the trip. Why?**

It had younger leadership. The average age



The wall in the children's division at Aldergrove, British Columbia. Wray's comment: "FANTASTIC!"



in that church appeared to be 40 or under, and yet there were older people there who were intensely involved. It was alive with young adults. They had a well-organized community outreach. They do an extreme home makeover each year. They supply one or two vans to single moms. They do oil changes and tune-ups for single moms. They also have the more traditional programs, such as health outreach. It is a very attractive church. I walked in and went down to their children's division. On the stairwell going down there were paintings beautifully done showing children and animals. I think there was also a map of the world with children in native costumes, but the faces were the faces of the children from their own church family.

I felt relaxed and welcomed. They had a praise team, no drums. They were not trying to be contemporary or traditional, just worshipping the lord with what they had. I don't think it takes a big bank account to do what they are doing. It takes working together. When we work together, we can do a lot.

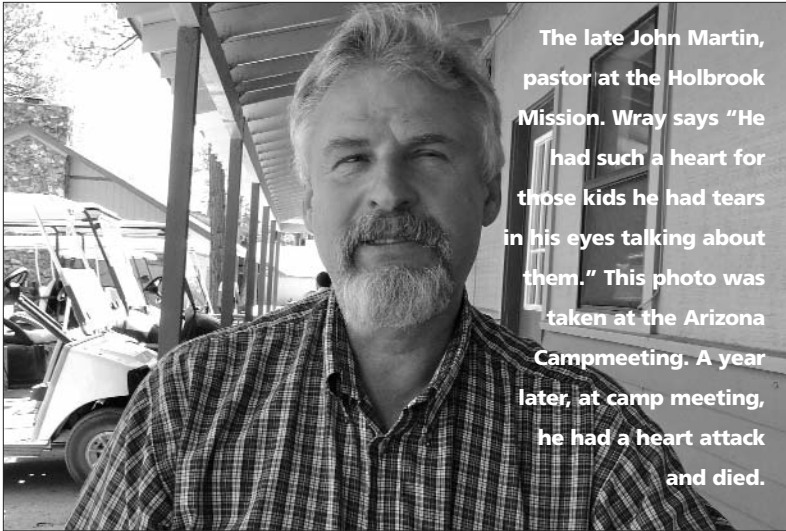
**In Battle Creek, Michigan, you say that the church had just distributed 45,000 copies of the *Great Controversy* in anticipation of a fall evangelistic series. Do you have any idea of what results came from that distribution?**

No, I don't. They were doing very traditional outreach. Things seemed to be doing okay. The church has a rich history and beautiful sanctuary. It was nicely up-to-date. They will do all right because of the history. But I don't think they will attract large numbers of new, young families. But maybe that is not everyone's goal.

There are a lot of churches that want to draw people in, but they want them to adjust to what we already are. They expect people to make changes in their lives and adapt to what their church already is.

**In your last chapter on what you learned, you say that more should be done to empower the local church and church pastors. What specifically would you like your conference to do for your church in Napa, California?**

*They were not trying to be contemporary or traditional, just worshipping the Lord with what they had.*



The late John Martin, pastor at the Holbrook Mission. Wray says "He had such a heart for those kids he had tears in his eyes talking about them." This photo was taken at the Arizona Campmeeting. A year later, at camp meeting, he had a heart attack and died.

*Somebody has to stand up for the young guys that still have 25 years of ministry ahead of them.*

Hmmm, is my president going to read this? We need to find a way to funnel more of the money back to the local church. There is not much funding available for creativity, and some of it takes money. I feel blessed in my church and in my conference. I'm not forced to do any top down programming. We're building and growing, slowly but safely. I'm not getting pressure to do any specific programs. Give me options. Give me ideas. Again, we've got to find a way to get resource funding back to the local church. The conferences and unions have cut their staffs, and I think that's good. We're still not using up-to-date technology as effectively as we could. I would like to see all conferences make a stronger effort to immerse their pastors in creative ideas and encourage them to experiment.

**In the two years since your trip, are there additional insights that have come to you because of the journey?**

I am more and more passionate about what I see, and getting bolder with what I say and how I say it. Somebody has to stand up for the young guys that still have 25 years of ministry ahead of them. The church is full of professionals who are doing what they do because they are allowed to do it their way. Yet, some of those same people will not turn the church over to a professional. Very few churches are willing to accept their pastors as a professional.

**How has the journey with the book compared with the journey on the motorcycle?**

The motorcycle was more fun for sure. The hard work was the year before in planning and the year after in the writing and the rewriting. I self-published; it was my own investment. The journey with the book has been very rewarding, but in ways other than money. I'm not making any money on this journey. But I've got one lady whom I've never met who has bought 70 copies of the book, and she has sent them to church leaders and conference leaders. The book renewed her faith in God and changed her life. I find that to be very humbling and immensely rewarding. I've sold 400 copies so far. My goal is 1,000 copies.

I'm sitting back now, and I'm feeling good about what I did and how I grew with it. I have a deeper passion to keep the main message. It is a book that has a timeline that doesn't have to die. If I had it to do over again, I would definitely make two-thirds of the churches I visited be non-Adventist. That would give a broader perspective and increase readership.

**In the preface of the book you say that changes (in opinion) are the hope of the church for the future. Have you seen recent changes in the church that give you hope for the future?**

No, not really. I early on coined the phrase, "pockets of hope." I saw precious few places that showed me much hope for real growth. I saw some places where they could do some significant things and grow. But for the church as a whole, am I seeing things that will lead us to growth? No. I'm seeing the opposite. I'm seeing more attempts to do the same things we've been doing for the past many decades.

We have got to engage the thinking of the 20-30-somethings. They do not have the same carte blanche commitment to tithing or to Adventist education, and yet they are sincerely committed Christians many of whom want to be part of the SDA church. But they want to see things done differently. We've got to turn a greater segment of the church over to these people. I don't think that we have to go away.

I'm not a scholar. I don't have any arguments with our doctrines. I don't think we need to change anything in substance. But there are aspects that I have questions about and things I don't fully understand. I want to be in an environment where I can ask questions.

In our worship we have to present messages that people feel completely safe bringing their unattached family and friends to experience. Worship services have to be experiences of worship and praise where we send people out with more hope than they came in with. Then let's study with them in a more personalized format.

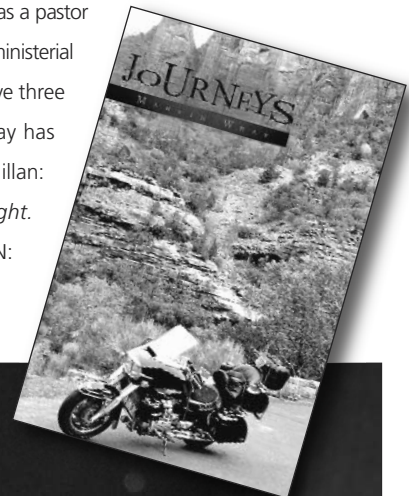
I tie that with assurance. A whole positive experience. I'll challenge them in their spiritual walk, but I want them going out whistling a tune, not a funeral dirge. I want them to think and be challenged.

The bottom line from my sabbatical is that

not many of our churches are positioned and ready to embrace the young families in today's world. We will retain a portion of those who have grown up in the church, but I don't see much happening that will take our beautiful message to young adults who would be hearing it for the first time. Somehow, I think that is what we're supposed to be doing. ■

**Marvin Wray** has been the lead pastor of the SDA Church in Napa, CA, for the past 12 years. He has served as a pastor throughout the U.S. and Hong Kong and as a ministerial director for five years. He and his wife Ingrid have three grown children and five grandchildren. Wray has co-authored two other books with Len McMillan: *First-Class Male* and *Putting Up with Mr. Right*.

Wray, Marvin. *Journeys*. (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2010).



One of the stations at the prayer ministry in Roswell, New Mexico.