

## **Interview: Wayne Wyatt** (interviewed by Annabel Robinson)

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*Wayne and Marlene have a remarkable story to tell. Visiting them reminded me of how God can give us meaning and purpose at any stage of our lives. It also impressed on me how precious it is to get to know one another . . .*



***Wayne, were you born in Saskatchewan?***

I was born at Rocanville, near Moosomin.

But after seven successive bad harvests my father left Rocanville and came to Regina, with nothing, almost a refugee. I was two years old.

He got a job as a machinist at a place called Regina Industries. In the course of time he became shop steward, and then the Saskatchewan representative of the Trades and Labour Congress of Canada (now the Canadian Labour Congress). He became a good friend of C.C. Williams, (a member of the Legislature and later mayor of Regina), who later introduced him to the Queen. I attended Luther High School for grades 11 and 12, and remember Tommy Douglas speaking at our graduation: "Don't be afraid to accept change, but don't throw out the good things of the past."

***Did you attend university here? And what did you do after you had graduated?***

I went to the University of Saskatchewan and did a BA in psychology. While I was there, I was very active in IVCF. After graduating from U of S, I went to Teachers' College in Regina where I assisted in starting an IVCF group.

The following year I was employed by the Regina Board of Education. My first year of teaching was at McVeety School and

the next year taught at Grant Road School. After teaching at Grant Road, I was offered a position of administering Intelligence tests and a few years later became Educational Psychologist for the school board.

While working at the school board, I decided to become more professionally qualified enrolling in Graduate School at the University of Oregon. A large school with 25,000 students. There were 500 students in my graduating class. Seven out of 500 graduated with Great Distinction and two of my good friends and I were among those seven. (Wayne dropped this piece of information with a lot of humility).

***How did you meet Marlene?***

We met in the tower of the Legislative Building, which was open to visitors at the time. Some time later I was visiting Faith Baptist Church, where Marlene attended, and with the encouragement of her sister, Marge, I was able to accompany Marlene to “Singspiration” being held at the Canadian Bible College after evening Church services.

***. . . and after you were married, you had three children?***

Yes, Marnelle, Lisa and Landis. Marnelle and Lisa are nurses. Landis married someone who is now involved in charitable work in Liberia, rebuilding infrastructure after their civil war. They helped start a honey business in Liberia to provide Liberian farmers with additional income. (*Ask Wayne or Marlene about this. The story is fascinating, but too long to tell here.*)

***Do you have any hobbies?***

I love canoeing and kayaking and have done some hunting. I've spent time canoeing in Northern Saskatchewan, the Nahanni River in Yukon, as well as Haida Gwaii and Mexico. It was in the

quiet of the wilderness that I felt the presence of God. I became President of the Historic Trails Canoe Club.

***You mention Faith Baptist Church, and you said something about the Alliance Church. How did you come to FBC?***

I was involved in the Alliance Church for some years, where we made many friends that we still have to this day. but their constant exhortation to become a better Christian discouraged me and political differences were stressful. For several years, we did not attend any church.

But Marlene's brother, Walter Frolic, encouraged us to come to FBC. Our girls were teenagers at the time, and they enjoyed the Youth Group and Katepwa Baptist Camp. We found George Baxter's preaching very refreshing.

***You and Marlene have been very involved with the Karen people. How did that happen?***

For some years we were what I called "Balcony Christians." We sat in the balcony on Sunday mornings and didn't get involved in a lot of church activities. Then in 2006 the Karen came to Regina and at the request of Open Door, the people of FBC became involved in hosting Karen families. The Karen people came from jungle Thailand refugee camps where living conditions were primitive with no electricity and thus no refrigeration or stoves. Almost overnight they were transported into an urban city. The differences between the two were extreme, and many Karen did not speak English. Open Door and FBC hosts had a lot of work to do.

***I asked Wayne about how he first got involved with the Karen.***

Walter Frolic was very involved in helping them, and my wife, Marlene, got involved. One day Walter asked me if I would do

something for the Karen, and I said "No." It sounded like too much work. And as time went on, I found out I was correct. It was a lot of work, but God had given us a mission, and even though we were in our late 60s we had our orders from on High.

I quickly learned that while it was a lot of work, there were many rewards, and Marlene and I ended up in getting involved in adventures that we never dreamed would happen. As time would go by, we were reminded of Scripture verses such as Proverbs 3:6: "In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will direct your paths." And in Matthew 25:40: "And the King will reply, whatever you did for one the least of these brothers of Mine, you did for Me."

### ***And then you went to Thailand and Burma!***

In November 2007, we decided to go to the two refugee camps in Thailand where most of the Karen in Regina had come from. Say K'Paw (Pusay Ly) was able to communicate with the camps and get things set up. We were housed in the Karen Baptist Bible School in the Mae La Oon camp. We were very well treated and sleeping on a bamboo floor was a new experience. The visit was of great value in many ways, but primarily it helped us to better understand the Karen people that we were trying to help in Regina. It was also here that the idea of a national organization of Karen churches in Canada was first discussed with a refugee camp pastor, Pwei Sei, whose son resided in Regina. This trip was followed up by two more trips. This time we would be going not just to Thailand, but also into Burma itself. We were not able to visit the Karen State in Burma as this was off limits to all foreigners because of the civil war between the Burmese army and the Karen National Liberation Army. But we did visit many churches in the rest of Burma and discovered that the Karen Baptist Union is doing very well and is growing through missionary work. Visiting the large Judson Church in Yangon

(formerly Rangoon) was a highlight. We also found out that Karen people are discriminated against and must be careful about what they say about the Burmese government.

***You talked about unconditional love for the Karen . . .***

In Regina, the Karen Baptists were thankful to FBC for providing a place to hold their church services, and to people such as Krista who looked after their financial affairs. They were also thankful that FBC through the Development Fund of CBWC was able to get grants of \$30,000 to help establish the Karen Church in their early years. The goal of the Regina Karen Baptists was to get their own church. This was not encouraged by some FBC leaders, but the Karen Baptists were determined. With the help of Wyn Noe, Karen Board Chairman, I was able to get the First Karen Baptist Church (FKBC) incorporated and registered with the Canada Revenue Agency. This put them in a position to obtain a mortgage if needed.

In 2009, after a lot of travelling across Canada and conferring with Karen Canadian church leaders, it was decided to form the Karen Baptist Fellowship of Canada, now called the Karen Baptist Churches of Canada. The foundational meeting was held in Regina at FBC in May 2009 and they now have a strong national group of Karen churches across Canada. It is of interest to note that local businesses, such as Loraas Disposal, Crown Shred and North Forty Furniture were able to provide funding for the national Karen conference. Canadian Baptist Ministries also provided considerable help.

Marlene and I continue to keep in close touch with FKBC and Karen Baptist communities across Canada. Our workload has diminished over the years as the Karen people have become more independent, and that is a good thing for us as well as the

Karen. We are now both in our 80's and not as healthy as we were 12 years ago. I do have concerns about my health.

Helping Karen people has been and continues to be wonderful experience for my wife and me. We have learned that following the call of God has many rewards. Christian service makes Christianity come alive.

Praise be to God from whom all blessings flow.

***I asked Marlene about all the time they spent with the Karen people, when they didn't understand a word of their language. Marlene's answer was simple: "We love them to bits." I think Jesus would like that.***