

Book Review: 'How Wide is my Valley'

reviewed by John Haines

How Wide is my Valley, Abe Wiebe, self published 2006.

Introduction

In mid-July 2006, my wife and I flew to Toronto, Canada to spend time with our son John and his wife. At the end of our short visit, we spent two evenings with Abe and Joyce Wiebe, colleagues from our earliest days in Casablanca. Joyce, returning to Morocco after home leave in the USA, travelled on the boat with us in 1964. Shortly after her return, she and Abe were married at the French Reformed Church in Casablanca. During our visit to Toronto, we procured and immediately began to read the book that I am now reviewing, *How Wide is my Valley*.

Some of the qualities of Abe's life especially stood out in that visit – such as his ability to relate to others in spite of his self-avowed introversion. Abe's rich and varied experiences emerged often during our conversations. Now we have an account of his exceptional life recorded in this book.

Much of what we read in the early chapters of the book left my wife and me smiling, reminiscing and rejoicing over lessons learned from mutual friends and even mutual mentors in some cases. (Abe himself was one of my own mentors.) Further on, as we read details of his life and work, we discovered unfamiliar ground. Though Abe spent a great deal of his career in administration, he seemed *always* to find Muslims to relate to and Muslim Background Believers to encourage.

I particularly noticed in the final chapter how he was dealing with retirement and its meaning. Granted, his work ethic is unique. A colleague once said, when asking Abe why he didn't take the rest of the day off, that Abe replied: *I can't*. He was driven to work hard, not only by his past training, but also by his relationship to Jesus Christ and his determination to get the job done.

Overall value of the book

This book gives a very personal glimpse of one missionary's life. Yet it goes far beyond that. In it we have ministry highlights as well as personal experiences and reflections on them. One such example is Abe's involvement through the long and difficult period of dealing with possible mergers of Arab World Ministries with other missions.

The author also includes three of the many messages he gave on different occasions over the years. These sermons are important because they were a blessing to those who heard them. They help many of us to see the issues of ministry and spiritual relations in his story in the light of Scripture. His countless illustrations from scenes of ministry help to impress biblical truth on the reader.

Why did Abe Wiebe have such an impact on his world?

I observed certain strong points, several of which are unique to Abe. They are:

- Early Christian examples and training
- A capacity for work in early life
- A love of history, which 'lured' him into work with Muslims in North Africa and beyond
- An exposure to other cultures from his Mennonite background (early fluency in both German and English)
- An early conversion and growth in a Christian environment, as well as training in two Christian Bible colleges. I came to know him for the first time at his second college. I never dreamed then how long that relation would last and how far it would lead. Since then, our paths have crossed quite often to the benefit of both my wife and me.

- A love for people from all walks of life. This comes out, for example, in chapters 6 and 7, which tell of his experience in Algeria. We find that, while Abe wasn't a social gadfly or natural extrovert, God prepared him in the skill of relating to people and helping them; at the same time, he greatly appreciated what their friendship also meant to him. The Wiebes' home has always been open, with both Abe and Joyce ready to hear the burdens and fears of others. Many of us have found good counsel or a sympathetic, listening ear when visiting them.

What makes his story and this book unique?

- It comes from a man of widely varied experiences in several lands and cultures.
- It includes not only the messages mentioned, but also samples of his poetry. (I wish he had put in my favourite of his, about Muslim zeal and spiritual need: 'Sun sets on eastern rim, where men kneel to pray'. It is one of the most moving defences of missions I have ever read.)
- The book unintentionally proves to be a most useful survey of the history of ministry in an important part of the Muslim world. Furthermore, a great number of our early spiritual forefathers came from this region.
- Abe's wide interests make personal discovery of this brother in Christ a challenge to all who read his story. We learn of his love for sports (fostered by early radio reporting of Dodger games) and for history. He tells of his advanced studies and his improvement in language skills – both Arabic and French. He keeps up on current events. We see him also as an excellent husband and father.
- Abe Wiebe's scholarship is indicated by his success at university and by the many articles he has written throughout his career.
- We are impressed with his honesty, both with regard to himself, and in his relations with others.
- Under an outward seriousness, he hides a real sense of humour. He enjoys – and tells – a good joke. One personal example is that he encouraged me in doodling cartoons during council meetings.

Conclusion

Is this, then, just an 'in-house book', only of interest to missionaries in the Muslim world and others who have known Abe Wiebe? My emphatic reply is 'No'! Personally I am disappointed that this book, which merits wider recognition, had to be self-published. I think of the many missionaries and Christian workers I have met around the world who would be inspired by such a story. It is for this reason that I would encourage wide dissemination of this autobiography.

I would like to close with a recommendation from my wife, Margy.

I finished Abe's book and really appreciated it. It was special to have a long friendship with the author. He includes a good balance of success and disappointments while showing the earthen vessel that God has used. God was looking for a man to stand in the gap and He certainly found that man in Abe! We pray that the book will challenge many to invest their lives in the Muslim world.

Margy and I would like to encourage those who read this review to buy an extra copy of the book and pass it on.

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