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# Barefoot evangelist shares his message, but not his name

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The Midland Daily News,  
Jan. 18, 2003  
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Sandra Sutton, The Midland Daily News

It's been about six years since he wore shoes. It's been almost 12 since he shaved or cut his hair. Sometime between, he set aside traditional clothing in favor of a white robe.

The transformation leaves him looking, well, like what most people imagine when

they think of [Jesus Christ](#).

"I don't think I'm Jesus and this is not a costume," he said.

He doesn't use his legal name and hasn't for years. Many people who've come in contact with him call him "What's Your Name?" or WYN for short. He's a traveling evangelist who, by his own account, has been in 47 states and 13 other countries, including Ireland, England, Belgium, Israel, Mexico and

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Guatemala.

He came to mid-Michigan several months ago. He said he spent the first couple of weeks in Midland, but did not feel welcome, so he moved on to Bay City, where many people have opened their homes as well as their hearts to him.

"One of the reasons I came here was the diversity of Bay City," he said, explaining he thought he would be more accepted there.

He knows his appearance affects people's opinions of him — not only before they meet him but also after they've known him.

"It's a big reason that I'm able to reach people," he said.

It also is one reason he is unable to reach some people. He is harassed or shunned in some places.

"It saddens me," he said. "In some places there's not much of a spiritual hunger."

He said Americans are attracted to "exotic" religious beliefs and practices, probably because of the novelty.

He calls himself a "traditional [Christian](#)" with a simple message.

"To love God and love everyone else — that's the basic message," he said.

On and off for the past several weeks, he has lived with Al and Delores LaFramboise in Bay City. Delores met him at church, invited him to breakfast, then to stay in their home. He uses the LaFramboise residence as a sort of headquarters. He travels — usually on foot — throughout mid-Michigan, talking to people on his way to churches, schools, hospitals or nursing homes, where he is often invited to speak.

In February 2000, the [Washington Post reported](#) his legal name is Carl J. Joseph, he was 39 at that time and his parents and brother are from Ohio.

But when asked where he is from — or almost anything else about his background — he said previous reports were erroneous and that he doesn't disclose such information to protect his parents' privacy and keep people's focus on God.

What he will say is he grew up with very little religious education. He was baptized when he was 12 but didn't practice any religion and lost his faith, though his mind stayed on issues of the spirit.

"I became fascinated with people who would give up all their possessions, though I never thought I would do it," he said.

He struggled with what he calls "the most difficult time in my life" when he was about 17.

"It was the consequence of evil and not having a relationship with God," he said.

His dad, in an effort to help, gave him a copy of the New Testament.

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"I just knew Jesus was the answer," he said.

He calls this his "serious conversion."

He began reading more: the rest of the Bible, Scripture commentaries, the history of Christianity, writings by early Christians and the saints.

"I began to have a clearer understanding of who Jesus is and what the mission is for his church," he said.

He became friends with other "more traditional evangelists" and they published material about their Christian faith. But almost 12 years ago, he decided to set off on his own.

"I didn't want (to carry) money, therefore no haircuts and no razors," he said, motioning to his beard and hair.

Six years ago, his shoes had worn out and his barefoot days began.

"I figured if God allowed Peter to walk on water, God would allow me to walk without shoes," he said.

He owns one robe at a time and he launders it daily, if possible. When it wears out, someone always offers to make him a new one. A large woolen sash is usually draped across one shoulder but it can be worn as a hood or used as a blanket.

He has no pockets, accepts no money and has never seen the [website](#) devoted to his mission and updated by an acquaintance from one of his travels. The only thing he carries is a devotional that includes Scripture and prayers. The book is beyond dog-eared.

The LaFramboises said they don't know anything more about his background than he has shared with others. What's more, they don't care.

"This man doesn't talk about basketball, he doesn't talk about the trivialities that other people do. I think he's very serious," Delores said. "It's as if it's Jesus; like he's Christ and you're doing whatever you can do to be [Martha and Mary](#)."

Al said this traveler's lifestyle is not a scam or a gimmick.

"If it is, it's a pretty funny way to do it, to give up everything you own," he said.

The LaFramboises trust him completely and said he comes and goes as he pleases, though he doesn't have a key to their house. "He hasn't got a pocket," Delores said.

"He's not my child. He doesn't check in with me and let me know where or when he's going," Delores said.

"I've made all kinds of motherly suggestions, like if he'd like to wear a pair of long underwear. But he said this is how God wants it so I stopped offering. He knows I'll get it for him if he wants it."

He realizes his appearance brings with it certain expectations.

"When people identify you with Jesus, it's a big responsibility," he said. He recounted a time he dropped a piece of pizza while eating. As the food fell to the ground, he swore. "It just slipped out," he said, adding how badly he felt for the people who were offended.

"You've got to be very careful of scandalizing people," he said.

He also knows that his appearance may confuse some people looking for someone to follow.

"I discourage that right from the outset. I do my best to make it very clear that I'm a follower of Jesus,"

he said. "It's very important to keep that clear intention."

He is traveling by bus Monday to Washington, D.C., with a group of people from mid-Michigan. An anonymous donor bought his ticket. He will take part in Wednesday's March for Life, protesting Roe v. Wade, the Supreme Court decision that legalized abortion in the United States 30 years ago. After that, he will go to Pennsylvania, where he has an offer to participate in the making of a cable television program based on his mission.

Beyond that, he's unsure.

"My favorite joke is: How do you make God laugh? Tell him your plans. " I'm not thinking that this is what I'm going to do forever. Its moment by moment."

### **Opinions from missionary on sacred and secular topics**

The barefoot evangelist has much to say on many topics. Here's a sampling:

On television: "I have a weakness for it but often the things that are on it are not edifying."

Longest trek on foot: from Mexico to Philadelphia to Washington, D.C.

On reading Scripture: "I am immersed in the Bible daily."

Enjoyments: singing, nature

Are you a prophet?: "I am in the sense that all Christians are called to be prophets, priests and kings. God is allowing me to bring a message to people."

Places he'd like to go: "If it's God's will, I'd like to go to the Far East. China and the interior of India haven't heard the Gospel."

What do you do when you're ill?: "I'm rarely ill. I do get offers from doctors to come to their offices. But I rarely get ill."

On skipping church for other pursuits: "God wants us to be a community. We can learn from (each other). If we're honest, there's probably not a lot of praying on the golf course. There's a lot we can't get anywhere else but church, like Communion."

On walking barefoot: "It changes your life, going without shoes. You have to be very conscious of every step."

On planning a route: "I have a tentative destination in mind based on where the next church is because I want to be there for worship the next morning. I worship daily."

On dangerous neighborhoods: "Jesus said 'Fear not and let your heart not be troubled.' Paul said, 'If Christ is for us, who can be against us?' I even purposely go into these neighborhoods because they need help. That's part of the problem: People stay away."

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