

## Outreach to Bikers

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*By Ti Eller*

*On the road and after the parties—sharing the biking life wins Christians a hearing*

Officiate at weddings. Lead memorial services. Bless bikes. Soul Man, a chaplain to bikers, offers these services and more to his "rolling congregation."

Better known as Steve Martin outside biker circles, Soul Man, a tall, dark, bushy-bearded man, believes that these services "make church real for people." For a biker, church may mean a long morning ride to a memorial service for a fallen friend," said Martin. Or it may mean accepting a bike-side prayer.

One biker swears that Soul Man's prayer for safety saved him from dying. The 73-year-old biker had suffered dehydration and heat stroke after riding and partying during a heatwave. Martin believes he's called to "be light in a very unpredictable world."

Martin's ministry requires a willingness to seize the moment. At one bike rally, he substituted engine oil for the anointing oil he'd forgotten to bring. No one thought it inappropriate.

He gets together with his congregation not in a building, but on the road and at events. Most, says Martin, are down-to-earth "working types who like to share the freedom of the road with buddies and afterwards let their hair down. Society, though, is less enthusiastic when bikers take over the road in mass formations and party late at campgrounds.

At trade shows, Martin occasionally connects riders in other subcultures. RUBies (rich urban bikers) are usually aged 40-50 with corporate backgrounds. Affluence has let them realize their dream of riding a great bike. Speed demons ride the devastatingly fast Japanese supersport bikes.

Bike rallies keep Martin and his wife and ministry partner, Crystal, especially busy. By day they connect with people buying biker gear, checking out who's riding what, and listening to music. By night, after the parties and drinking end, people drop by their campfire, wanting to talk.

Darkness is a good cover for bikers from outlaw clubs, like the Vagabonds, Hell's Angels, and Rock Machine. Being seen seeking counsel or help from an outsider could make them vulnerable. These "one percenters," a term coined in the 1950s, have to appear strong and can't risk raising the suspicion that they've broken club confidentiality.

At a large rally, a one-percenter who wanted his bike blessed came to Steve at night. The biker carefully said, "You have to understand--I can't," meaning he couldn't appear needy. So Martin offered, "If you would be so inclined, I could bless your bike silently as I walk by it, and I could say a blessing for you."

The seasoned biker accepted the offer.

A long-time staff member of Sanctuary, a Toronto ministry for the alienated and marginalized, Martin has a strong commitment to "his people." Rarely in the office, Martin works the streets of downtown Toronto. He also coordinates the street outreach teams and handles the street orientation for urban outreach educational sessions.

His compassion for marginalized people started early. It grew from his fringe involvement with street culture as a teen and out of own struggles.

On the Sanctuary web site, Martin has written, "I believe God has brought me to Sanctuary to befriend people, living or working on the streets of the downtown core, and to be the presence of Christ in their lives - offering love and acceptance without conditions.

"My goal," he says, "is... to plant seeds of Christ's love, which God can bring to maturity and fruitfulness, which He can then harvest... As I minister to others in their pain and suffering, God ministers to me in mine."

Martin's road ministry is a natural and official extension of his work at Sanctuary.

His role as chaplain to ABATE (Association for Biker Awareness, Training and Education), gives Soul Man further legitimacy. Riding with the secular bikers' rights association also opens access in the biker world. Wearing ABATE's insignia or "patch" signals to other riders that he is safe to associate with. In particular, they "read" that he's not recruiting [members] to a club.

Chaplaincy to bikers is a relatively new phenomenon. Many Christians do outreach but riding officially with a secular association is rare. Steve, who's been chaplain for two years, has not heard of other chaplains to bikers in Canada and of just one in the United States.

In riding season, Martin, Crystal, and their supporter go where the bikers gather. They set up a tent at ABATE rallies where riders connect with old friends and associates, discuss business, and party. At his first ABATE rally Martin learned from the one complaint he received from the 1,500 bikers attending. One person objected to the lack of a chapel service. The next year Martin and his supporters provided one.

On a seasonable day, they join thousands of bikers from all the states and Canada on the road to Port Dover, Ont. There the Martins set up camp among "his people," declining invitations to stay at Christian campgrounds. At night with a fire going, Soul Man's office stays open.

Bikers' openness to Soul Man and spirituality is not surprising. They are acquainted with death; many have suffered a hard and violent or violated childhood that has led them to find belonging among bikers.

Yet Christianity's reputation among bikers makes following up on the potential for openness a challenge. Shy Mapano, vice president of the 20-member Christian Riders Motorcycle Club (CRMC) in Toronto speculates that it's hard to present the gospel because of stereotypes of Christians.

"Christianity also has a reputation of hypocrisy and Bible thumping. Bikers don't trust easily and are very suspicious, so if you don't keep your integrity, you're dismissed. The real fight is against Christian hypocrisy."

At rallies Christians' reputations take a hit, when bikers notice their leaving sites when partying gets wilder after their presence was quite evident during the day. Crystal Martin recounted painfully, that late one night a biker sincerely asked, "Where are all the other Christians?"

For all the apparent differences between outreach to bikers and traditional ministry, some approaches have universal effectiveness--like building relationships and friendships.

"This is an often-generous brotherhood that shares the love of biking," said Martin. "We're just being Christians in their midst. We're there as an introduction to Christianity, in essence asking, " 'What can I offer you?' "

"We make friends. Friendship turns to trust," said Mapano.

Building respect is crucial. "One-percenters tend to perceive Christian club members as flakes so we work hard at mutual respect," said Mapano. At swap meets where bikers sell and buy bikes and bike equipment, leathers, and paraphernalia, members of outlaw clubs may talk with the Christian Riders. That confuses the police, commented Mapano, because "one-percenters have a reputation for not hanging out with other clubs." Socializing is a sign of unspoken approval, something which must be earned.

In building respect, Mapano counsels "the same thing works everywhere. Don't be pretentious. We use the phrase: Be real. Be strong."

As is true in any cross-cultural ministry, Christians have to understand a culture to work in it. Former outlaw bikers have that edge.

Before meeting the Lord, John "Mad Dog" Robins, of CRMC was involved in drugs and crime. He was shot and nearly killed and still brandishes a tattoo of a smoking revolver from his outlaw days. He says he couldn't have changed without Jesus, describing himself as "delivered" from his former lifestyle. He now teaches law part-time at a community college, works as a law clerk, and is studying to become a lawyer.

"Many bikers feel they are way into the dark side already," says Robins. "If you come up to them [Bible] thumping, and tell them they are guilty, that just confirms the rejection they own already and pushes them further away. You have to not only share the gospel; you have to share the love of Jesus.

He counsels patience. "We shouldn't be giving up on anyone because we're all going through something. Be there for people. Stay with them."

"Our gospel means nothing till we live it out," said Crystal Martin. "Like that verse says, 'Let us not weary in doing good for in due season we will reap a harvest.' You may not see the fruit. Someone else might."

A meeting at a Durham bike rally affirmed the Martins' philosophy. A tattoo-artist said to Steve, "I know you. Years ago when I left home I came to Toronto. I was cold. I knocked on a church door. You gave me mitts and a scarf on a cold night. I remember what your Christianity did for me."

"Wherever you are, just be faithful to being there," urges Soul Man.

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