

REFLECTIONS

By Dudley C. Rutherford



Go West, Young Man, Go West!

A few months ago, while hosting a tour of 33 people on a “Footsteps of Paul” journey, I found myself in ancient Philippi. You remember Philippi, right? Paul was preparing to go east into Asia with the gospel. But the Holy Spirit said, “Go west young man! Go west!” So, trying his best to follow the leading of God, the mission-minded apostle traveled westward to Macedonia. (I imagine that Lydia and the Philippian jailer, to name two, were eternally thankful for the diversion of the gospel in their direction.)

The chain of events that followed was quite remarkable. Faithful couriers took the gospel to Rome, the center of the Roman Empire, then to the rest of Europe. Eventually the founding fathers brought it to America. Paul’s decision to be obedient to the leading of the Holy Spirit had monumental consequences.

So often we, like Paul, have our plans set, yet God, through His wisdom and Spirit, leads us in another direction. It is my hope that God will direct others to a destination that has the potential to impact the entire world.

My Journey West

As I stood in Philippi giving a brief devotion to 33 travel-weary pilgrims, my mind flashed back to when I lived in the Midwest. I was fresh out of Bible college, comfortable in knowing I was safely and securely positioned to minister in the area of our nation known as the “Bible Belt.”

The Bible Belt is a little like the Milky Way. It’s this shadowy gray mass of shining stars that forms a large swath of light across an otherwise dark and dreary background.

Oh there are indeed Christians all over the United States, but in the Bible Belt, pardon the expression, they are “thick as thieves.” It seems like, in some areas, there are churches on almost every corner. It is a very safe and comfortable place to live and raise

a family. God is so good!

Having been raised in Kansas and educated in Missouri, as well as having pastored my first church in the good ol’ Midwest, I was set for a life of helping the Bible Belt acquire a bigger buckle.

And then, I heard the call: “Go west, young man. Go west!” I thought, *Oh no, not me Lord!*, but what can you do? When God calls, one must listen.

So just like Jed Clampett of *The Beverly Hillbillies* (minus the money from his “black gold, Texas tea”), I loaded up my family and headed to Cal-i-for-ni-a!

It was a long way from the wheat fields of Kansas, but, just like the apostle Paul, I was on a real live missionary journey. (One difference: I’d have indoor plumbing. Yeah, God!)

For more than 15 years, I have been ministering in one of the most ethnically and culturally diverse—and highly populated—areas of our nation, the City of Angels, or, as most people call it, Los Angeles. And like the big cities in which Paul

ministered, Los Angeles features the materialism and focus on worldly values that bring unique challenges to the ministering of the gospel. Los Angeles has:

- outrageous housing costs
- soaring car expenses
- high crime rates
- crowded freeways
- and Hollywood, the entertainment capital of the world, pumping it’s immorality to the entire world.

Even with all those minuses weighed against the plus of having year-round warm weather, California (the West) remains the burden of my heart.

My Burden for the West

Unlike the Bible Belt, in California it is very difficult to find a church that holds the biblical positions we hold dear.

In 1990 there were only 300 Christian churches in California. Alarmingly, the number has declined. The most recent *Directory of the Ministry* lists only

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217 Christian churches in California. With an estimated 36 million residents in the state, those numbers don't bode well. Friends, we are headed in the wrong direction, both spiritually and numerically!

Our churches in California are closing their doors in record numbers. We are a more endangered species than the spotted owl of Washington. Even in the San Fernando Valley, where I live, with a population of 1.5 million people, the last 12 years has seen the number of Christian churches decrease from 13 to five. Hey, I can count that on one hand!

You may be asking, "Why is California so important?"

I'll answer with another question. "How many times have we seen a certain fad or trend take root in California and then sweep across the rest of America?" In fact, because Hollywood is the media capital of the world, such trends have the potential to become international in scope.

If this is true with the trend of churches closing their doors, then watch out, for church closings may soon become an epidemic sweeping the nation. What is needed is an understanding of the urgent. We are losing both the battle and the war.

In Matthew 9:35-38, after seeing the crowds in the towns and villages of Palestine, Jesus was moved with compassion to issue this edict to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few."* I've often wondered what He would say if He saw the mass of lost humanity in Southern California.

If He asked for workers to be sent forth into the fields of Israel, ripe for harvest, what would His prayer be for the fields of our nation's most populous state?

My Prayer for the West

I pray that God would speak to the hearts of others as He has spoken to mine saying, "Go west, young man! Go west!"

I believe you're not going to change America unless you change California. We need workers, missionaries, preachers, teachers, youth ministers, worship

leaders, financial resources, church builders, church planters, and Bible college graduates to head west—not for the wealth of the 1849 Gold Rush, not for the beautiful beaches and mountains, but for the purpose of making a difference in our world at large.

The spread of the gospel, recorded in Acts, was the strategic plan of God to utilize the largest pagan, metropolitan centers to begin fulfilling the Great Commission of Matthew 28:19, 20. In the same way today, California holds the greatest potential to reach the world as part of the Lord's final harvest.

People by the tens of thousands move to California each year seeking fame, fortune, and good weather. Yet the glitter and gold of Tinseltown, (which, by the way, is nothing more than a mirage) will ultimately never satisfy the longings of one's heart.

Jesus said, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal" (Matthew 6:19, 20).

If you want to invest in your heavenly bank account and make a strategic, end-time contribution for all eternity, and you'd like . . .

- to be used of God, to take the gospel to a land that is spiritually bankrupt
- to minister in an ethnically diverse culture and yet still live in America
- to stem the tide and reverse the trend of churches closing their doors
- to understand the ripple effect the West Coast produces and the influence it has on the rest of the nation
- to have the joy of knowing you're on the front lines
- to know that the only thing farther west is the Hawaiian Islands (smile)

Then you, too, should consider the call: "Go west, young man. Go west!"

*Scriptures are from the *New International Version*.

Dudley C. Rutherford comes from a preaching family. His grandfather, father, uncles, brothers, and in-laws are all preachers. He earned his bachelor's degree in church growth from Ozark Christian College, Joplin, Missouri, and his master's degree from Pacific Christian College, Fullerton, California. In 1987, he became pastor of Hillcrest Christian Church in Granada Hills, California, and helped grow the church from 350 to 1,000 people. In 1995, Hillcrest merged with Shepherd of the Hills Church. The resulting Shepherd of the Hills Church has grown to average more than 5,000 people weekly. He has served as vice president of the North American Christian Convention and has spoken for several professional sports teams. Dudley and his wife, Rene, live with their three children in Porter Ranch, just north of Los Angeles.