

# Roots in Ripon

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*Chuck Roots*

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## A Miraculous Impact

It was the fall of 1998. I had just accepted the call to be the senior pastor of the Ripon Free Methodist Church.

Before I could begin my ministry in Ripon, I needed to complete a military commitment I had made which required me to spend all of September working on creating a new web page for the Navy Chief of Chaplains at the Pentagon. It was a great time! I was able to stay at my brother's home just outside of our nation's capital, commuting into D.C. every morning, wending my way through the insanity which is the Beltway gridlock, and going for a run on the streets of Washington D.C. during my lunch hour.

However, I was anxious to return home to California and begin my new ministry in Ripon. My family and I were living some 20 miles south of Ripon in the town of Turlock where we had settled after I had left active duty as a Navy chaplain. In August of '98 the superintendent for the Free Methodist Church asked me to prayerfully consider being the pastor of the Ripon church. Isaura and I definitely heard God's call to Ripon, and made all preparations to assume this new venture.

Jerry and Gayle Mottweiler had been members of the Ripon Free Methodist Church since the mid-80s. When I arrived they were in their early 60s. Each had grown up in the Free Methodist Church. Jerry's father had been a pastor, serving churches in the Mid-West and California. Jerry's older brother was also a pastor and had even become a superintendent. Gayle was from the Pacific Northwest, eventually meeting Jerry in Sacramento.

This couple is what all churches need when it comes to commitment and dedication. They served in leadership positions without fanfare or the need for recognition. In the nearly twenty years since we first met there was not one instance when they did not step forward and accept the challenge of ministry, which included numerous short term mission trips to Africa, South America and the Caribbean.

Jerry was the delegate for our church, representing our congregation within our conference and the denomination as a whole. Gayle became my secretary, serving alongside of me for fourteen of my sixteen years as the senior pastor.

But here's the kicker: All of our future experiences very nearly never occurred because of an accident Jerry and Gayle were in while I was in Washington D.C.

One Friday evening in September of 1998 they had finished an early dinner and decided to drive to town to do their weekly grocery shopping. They live fourteen miles out in the country so even to drive to the small town of Ripon had to be planned. The drive was almost entirely through farm land. Street lights were not on these country roads.

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Jerry was driving them home from the store when the unexpected happened. As they came around the curve of a road where there was an entrance to a trucking yard, their car, a Ford compact, felt like it had exploded. Stunned and dazed, Jerry realized they were parked on the side of the road. Confused, he and Gayle were now in a tangled mess that once was their bright red car.

Here's what happened. Nighttime had settled in while they were shopping, so they were driving home in the dark. A truck hauling metal I-beams had pulled into the driveway of the trucking yard. The truck had not fully entered the yard, leaving extended I-beams sticking out into the roadway. Coming around the curve, the headlights had not picked up this danger before Jerry and Gayle's car slammed into the protruding beams. The top of the car was nearly sheared off from the impact with all windows being shattered.

People came running to their aid as these two godly people extricated themselves from the tangled mess. Apart from bumps, bruises and some nicks by flying glass, they were both in sound body and mind. Nonetheless, they were placed on back-boards and transported to a nearby hospital where they were x-rayed, and then released to go home. They kept hearing others say, "You just don't walk away from that kind of an accident." Indeed!

Jerry's words say it best. "The distance from the point of impact to the place where our car was stopped was at least one hundred yards. The car had reached that point having avoided any oncoming traffic on that two-lane road, and then coming to a stop between two power poles off on the right side of the road. We could not have seen through the shattered windshield to steer the car, or to bring it to a stop, even if we had been aware of what was happening (which they were not!). We found the engine running and the automatic transmission was in the Park position. Our eyeglasses were unbroken, lying on the floor of the car."

I learned of this accident a short time later and was amazed that they had not been killed, or at least seriously injured. I saw the pictures of the car. Wow!

Jerry and Gayle became very dear friends to Isaura and me. I often referred to Jerry as "Mr. Free Methodist," and that his job was to keep me in line with his knowledge and background in this denomination. Gayle likewise was as faithful and loyal a secretary to me and our church as you could ever have asked for.

Last November Jerry left us for his heavenly home after having reached his octogenarian years. Gayle has moved to Colorado to be near their daughter and grandchildren.

I miss them both, but I am so grateful that God allowed our paths to cross. Their lives were a tremendous impact on ours. Jerry said it best: "I do not know why we were spared in this accident, but it appears evident to us that God is not finished with us on this earth. We will continue to give him all the credit for our still being here and will continue to do whatever we can for Him with whatever time we have left."

Amen, Jerry! I'll see you again, my friend.