

Michigan? WHY

By Christopher Burton

More than 20 years after I returned home from serving in the Michigan Lansing Mission, my neighbor invited me to take a DNA test offered by the family history company he worked for. I had been adopted and had no idea of my biological ancestry. As far as I knew, my children were the only blood relatives I had ever seen, so the invitation appealed to me. The test would help me discover the countries of my ancestral origin.

The results came back showing I was entirely Scandinavian on one line and part Finnish and part Russian on my other line—not too surprising considering my light skin and blue eyes. What *was* surprising was the list of possible DNA matches that linked me with others who had also taken the test: the results showed a “close family” match and predicted with 99 percent confidence that this was a close family member or first cousin.

For years people had asked me if I wanted to find my birth parents, and while I was definitely curious enough to take this test, I was content with my life. I already had a family I loved. They had raised me, so I wasn't sure how far I wanted to go down the path in search of another family. What would happen if I found them? Would we have a relationship? What if we didn't? I was okay with not knowing, but now here was a match to my biological family.

I had always believed that the Lord inspired my mission calls, but it was 20 years before I realized the full blessings of having served in Michigan.

Reuniting with Relatives

My wife, children, and the neighbor who had given me the test were all with me, excitedly looking on as I viewed the DNA results for the first time. But in the midst of their excitement, they didn't know the trepidation that had suddenly hit me in my stomach. I didn't know what to think. And before I knew what was happening, they were composing an email to send to this “close family” match.

Within minutes an email came back. How old was I? Where was I born? More excitement filled my living room. More trepidation filled my stomach. We sent the answers.

I didn't get another response until late the following night. It turned out the “close family” match was my half brother. The person sending the emails was my birth mother, and she wanted me to call her.

The next morning I dialed her number. As we talked, she told me the story of my birth. It seems strange to me that it should matter, but I asked if she had held me. When she said that she kept me with her for those first



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two and a half days before I was placed for adoption, I felt such relief and comfort. We talked for almost an hour, and I began to sense the fulfillment of a need I hadn't even known I had. I also felt deeply grateful to my birth mother for her gift in giving me to the family I grew up with.

At the end of the call, I asked about my biological father. She told me his name, that he had light skin and blue eyes, and that she thought he was from Lansing, Michigan. Lansing, Michigan? A light switched on in my mind.

Remembering My Missionary Service

More than 20 years earlier, I had opened my mission call to the Michigan Lansing Mission. This was the letter I'd been waiting for my whole life. In high school I had taken three years of German and two years of Spanish. I had dreamed of tracting through Europe or hiking to the remote mountain pueblos in South America. But Michigan? I didn't know what to think. I wondered, Why Michigan? Now I discovered that my biological father was from there!

After hanging up the phone, I got on the Internet, and within minutes I was confident I'd found him. He was living in an area close to where I'd served for six months of my missionary service. With more digging, I discovered

that he also had a sister in the area who had lived there while I was a missionary. Had I met her?

I had always suspected that if I found my biological family, I might hold some resentment toward my biological father. So until now I didn't think I wanted to contact this man whose DNA I shared. But with the dawning realization that as a missionary I had been sent to a place where I had biological relatives, suddenly I had a desire to reach out. I sent an email. The response the next morning confirmed that this person was my biological father.

In a subsequent email, my father said that his sister and her husband were coming to Utah, and he asked if they could visit me. I was excited to meet them and to see if I might possibly remember them from my mission.

As they walked in my door, I felt an instant familiarity. Suddenly another light turned on. The man's hair had gone from black to silver, and I didn't recognize his first name because I had never used it (always "Brother" followed by the last name), but suddenly I saw in front of me the ward mission leader from the Grand Rapids Ward with whom I had worked for a large part of my mission. For months I had been at his home weekly. I had played with his children—my cousins—and been with my aunt and uncle and hadn't known it.



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Understanding the Inspiration

In light of my discovery, I knew why I had been called to serve a mission in Michigan. I had gone there and unknowingly interacted with my own biological family. My “newfound” aunt told me the story of how she and her brothers joined the Church, but her mother

(my grandmother) never did, nor did her family before her. My biological family was spread all over Michigan in the places where I was called by prophecy to serve my mission. I knew now that this was truly a call by inspiration specifically for me.



CALLED BY REVELATION

“It is by the great love of the Savior that His servants know where these wonderful young men and women, senior missionaries, and senior couple missionaries are to serve. . . . Every missionary called in this Church, and assigned or reassigned to a particular mission, is called by revelation from the Lord God Almighty.”

Elder Ronald A. Rasband, Senior President of the Seventy, “The Divine Call of a Missionary,” *Ensign*, May 2010, 53.

Thankfully this is not the end of my story, and I wasn't shown these things just to have a glimpse of what might have been. Rather, I believe that my Heavenly Father revealed all of this to me because there is still work to do—work I began as a full-time missionary and work I have been called to continue throughout my life. And next time I'm tempted to think that I've been assigned to a random calling in a ward with haphazard boundaries, I just hope it won't take me 20 years to find the faith to see the purpose in it. ■

The author lives in Utah, USA.