

GRANGE HALL

TO

PROMISE LAND

Grange Hall to Promise Land

By Robb Brandt MD

After being delayed on my early hospital rounds I arrived late for the service and as I slipped into the back, the smoke was so dense that I insisted that we all get out for health reasons. Our tiny church plant had found a rustic grange hall outfitted for square dancing that we adapted for church use. We created Sunday school rooms with mattress cardboard dividers that didn't fall over -- too often. Rain leaked into the basement and the furnace smoked -- often.

As the rumor spread that we might be starting a church, the most common reaction I got was – “Why, Doc? The last thing this area needs is another church – there's one on every corner now.” We never intended to start a church, it just sprouted – so we cultivated and fertilized it.

Since we were slowly growing, my friend Del Forsberg and I thought we should jump ahead of any fair weather land shoppers and begin the search for a good site for our church. During that frigid Pennsylvania winter we tramped and tramped, sometimes in snow drifts over our boots, often returning to our frowning spouses with soaked trousers.

One parcel hidden behind a housing subdivision piqued our interest because of its common boundary with a proposed shopping plaza. Although we would have to enter the property through a residential area until the shopping plaza was completed, the parcel promised the possibility of great visibility, good size, easy access and even potential use of the plaza's parking.

One snowy Sunday afternoon we traced the borders, evaluating its potential for our ministry. We decided it had good potential. Knowing the listing realtor lived in the adjacent residential area, we trudged over and surprised him with a knock on his door. Judging by his appearance, I assumed we'd interrupted his Sunday afternoon nap. Although we didn't begin our trek prepared to make a deposit, after turning our pockets inside out, we came up with \$200 of gas and grocery money for our now bright-eyed and thrilled realtor. He agreed to hold the property until we had a chance to run the deal by our church plant group. When we shared our ideas with the others, they agreed that we should move forward, and we did. But word spread like wildfire through the development that our little church was interested in building behind them. They alertly understood that until the plaza was developed our only access to the property would be through their residential streets – which fired passionate flames of resistance. Prior to our proposal the neighbors reportedly lacked interest in cooperating on any topic, but our deposit created a cohesive group, uniting arm-in-arm to fight our plans.

The topic soon became the local buzz. I received calls of support; one at an odd hour from the highly respected township engineer who made clear that his support had to be off the record but that we had every right, legally and zoning-wise to proceed. He was put-off by the way the residents were treating us – and urged me to go for it. Also, an angry call from one of my high school classmates and professional colleague's wife surprised me with, “Who do you think you are -- trying to ruin our community?”

After she calmed a bit, I learned she was mainly concerned about our traffic and their children. I understood, having lost my oldest son after being struck by a car.

The newly organized neighbors demanded and the township leaders soon scheduled a public hearing on our proposal. A standing room only crowd gathered with some occasionally glaring at Del Forsberg, our young pastor, and me. They left little doubt about their concerns -- the tension in the room was thicker than the

smoke in our grange hall on our worst day. I was particularly surprised that some of my otherwise grateful surgical patients were present but seemed to avoid eye contact. One in particular who had been critically ill before life-saving surgery apparently got caught up in the emotion of the moment and was shockingly cool -- until feeling a little guilty and offered, "Don't take it personally, Doc." We all tried to not take it personally.

After impassioned pleas from residents begging the township officials not to grant us permission to build on the property, it became painfully obvious that our tiny church had grown a huge public relations nightmare. Ultimately, only our young pastor briefly addressed the group -- not to counter their concerns -- but to simply explain the type of church we were attempting to become. While leaving, Del and I agreed that we would recommend that our group not "bulldoze" our way into the neighborhood.

I wasn't aware that the local newspaper -- which virtually everyone in our community reads -- had tucked away a reporter in the crowd.

But life goes on.

My next day was filled with major surgery and other sick patients. Moving through the hospital I was surprised to hear that the newspaper printed an above-the-headline editorial with the theme -- "*Since when has a church become a bad neighbor?*" The editor, an acquaintance of mine, felt just like the township engineer, but unlike the engineer who had to appear neutral in public -- wrote a scorching piece. This brought us our first community-wide attention.

A few hospital folks tried to draw me into discussing the article. "Your rights are being trampled. It just isn't fair." But I was too occupied with patients to go there. And beside, although certainly glad the newspaper stuck up for us, I was actually more thankful that the whole mess was finally going to be over, finished, and done-with, soon. I just wanted to put it behind me. But I couldn't help wondering, "*Since our first stab at finding land crashed and burned, what does the Lord have in mind for our baby church?*"

By late afternoon I was beginning to drag, looking for a place to put my feet up and a cup of coffee when my nurse took a call and said to me, "A lawyer wants to speak to you." I thought, *Great, just what I need today.* An acquaintance and good guy, Attorney Ed McClain greeted me with; "*I see in the paper that you're having difficulty finding a place to build a church.*" "*Yes, you could safely say that. It's definitely true.*" "*Well, I called because I have a better place for you to build a church anyway,*" and he gave me the size and location.

Then he explained how he had hoped his son, a veterinarian, would return to our community to practice animal medicine. In anticipation of that he had purchased a prime piece of property near a major expressway intersection. His voice dripped with disappointment as he explained that just before the newspaper editorial appeared his son had called home to inform Ed and his wife that he'd made other plans and would not be returning to the valley -- thus making the property available. Then he added, "*You know, I'd just donate the property to your church but since it's in my son's name, I'll have to sell it to you. Let's get it appraised and the appraisal will be the price.*" Based on his description I was absolutely interested in checking it out.

Suddenly caught in an emotional whiplash, in just a few minutes I'd gone from not wanting to talk about it to being perky about the possibilities of this new piece of property. Instead of being hidden behind grumbling neighbors -- our church could sit on one of the most inviting locations of the community for all to seek and worship Christ.

But then, another glitch. Getting down to details our dream property was close but not actually fronting the expressway. An approximately one acre pie-shaped slender piece separated us from the roadway. Ed McClain

knew that but apparently didn't think it as important as I did. When I expressed the desire that our church own it too, if possible, he agreed to contact the owner. By yet another "coincidence" the small parcel owner was a very devoted patient of mine with a serious illness. He responded, *"If Dr. Brandt wants it for a church and you're selling him yours – sell him mine for the same price. Whatever he wants -- do it."*

That final detail completed our promise land.

And eventually another critical detail surfaced. Those same township leaders required a tall fence be built around the shopping plaza. Had we bulldozed our way in and built our church there, we would have been unable to access our property from the plaza, and would have passed glaring and resentful eyes on every visit to church in our "bulldozer" cars. Not good for planting a church to win the lost.

God chose a jeering crowd to create a scorching newspaper article that linked us to our promise land.

Our tiny church plant did build on our dream property, followed by several additions, used all of it, and then acquired much more -- but with much less drama .

When I encounter the next "jeering crowd" – in whatever form that might take – hopefully I'll remember it's part of God's plan for me – at least for that day – so, let them jeer -- that's exactly where I want to be. (1) Because He knows what's best for me – and will work the details to get me to my Promise land. (2)

(1) I Thessalonians 5:16-18 (2) Romans 8:28

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