

Land to Build a Church - A PLC Miracle Story

Written by Pastor Jerald Borgie

Rancho De Los Peñasquitos, a 15,000-acre former Mexican Land Grant, located twenty miles from downtown San Diego was purchased by land developer Irvin Kahn in 1962. His goal was to build a planned community of over 100,000 residents.

His first project was to build an 18-hole golf course and a first-class hotel with a plan to surround the course with luxury homes. In order to win City Hall approval, he then commenced to build 330 low-income housing units with a nearby elementary school. A fatal heart attack in 1971 brought all his grandiose plans to a screeching halt.

The public was informed that Irvin Kahn had received a loan of nearly one billion dollars (today's value) from the International Brotherhood of Teamsters Union. A concerned City Hall placed a total moratorium on the sale of all of the late Irvin Kahn property. This moratorium would drag on for several years while the courts sorted out a multitude of issues.

In the meantime, retired Army chaplain Ernst Karsten and his wife Elva had settled in nearby Rancho Bernardo. Karsten spent much of World War II as a prison chaplain serving German POWs.

He was active in civic affairs in his new community and made friends with several Lutheran families who asked him to start Sunday morning services, ideally in nearby Rancho Peñasquitos where not a single religious service of any stripe existed. First services were held in the Werner Utheman garage, located across the street from the golf course. In the meantime, the Roman Catholics had started Sunday mass, renting on Sundays a small commercial building next to a recently opened 7-11. For a while, the two congregations shared the facility. Eventually, Karsten and a dozen families moved to the multi-purpose room at the Doubletree Golf Course for their Sunday services. The time had come to seek affiliation with a national church body. Since Karsten was a product of Wartburg Seminary, operated by the American Lutheran Church, it was logical to seek affiliation with this group. Official acceptance was received in 1971. This congregation would be a mission of the ALC with the promise of some financial help and assistance in establishing a constitution, by-laws, etc. The congregation voted on a name. It was to be "The Lutheran Church of the Covenant".

Karsten continued to serve as uncalled and unsalaried, except for a meager monthly stipend. The congregation seemed content with this working arrangement. However, Karsten knew that this could not continue indefinitely. After all, he was retired. Finally, he and Elva announced that they were moving to Hawaii. He informed the ALC of his plans and requested that the Lutheran Church of the Covenant be sent a full-time pastor with "mission status." (This means the ALC would subsidize his salary and provide other assistance.) His request was granted and a "mission pastor" and his family arrived in Peñasquitos.

In the meantime, a building moratorium was put in place for Rancho Peñasquitos. There would be no buying and selling of undeveloped land and no new homes being built. Surely difficult conditions in which to build a young church. Add to that marital difficulties which led to a divorce, a decrease in worship attendance, and the ALC's decision to decrease subsidy all combined to convince the pastor it was time to resign.

Only a handful of LCC's members remained. Should they disband? No. They had their toe in the door and were determined to regroup and to convince the ALC mission board to send them another mission pastor, provide some subsidy and give them a second chance. The message was sent to the national ALC "wrapped in fervent prayer." Members of the South Pacific Mission Board (located in Los Angeles) came for a visit, went on a tour with the local congregational leaders, and then returned to LA. By a vote of 4-3, they agreed to assist the church. The majority were confident in PQ's potential to "someday have a thriving congregation of up to 300-400 members."

Names of candidates for the new pastoral position were given to the congregation's call committee and with high hopes, the search got underway. In the meantime, a retired interim pastor led Sunday service, now held at Peñasquitos Elementary School. The call committee had on their visitation list Jerald Borgie, the pastor of First Lutheran Church in Compton, CA. Following the service, they visited a nearby restaurant for lunch and a get-acquainted time.

A short while later, Pastor Borgie received a telephone call and was invited to come to Rancho De Los Peñasquitos for a visit. A spark was ignited between the call committee and the pastor. The council recommended to the congregation that Pastor Borgie be asked to accept a call to pastor the LCofC. The congregation accepted the recommendation of the call committee and then informed the District President of the Synod of their decision. He endorsed their choice and said the synod would agree to provide moving expenses and subsidy for three years.

Jerald Borgie received the call in December of 1976. The day after Christmas, he informed the call committee he would accept the call to be their pastor. He and his family would be moving to San Diego as soon as all details could be worked out.

The call committee recommended a local realtor to help the Borgies find a suitable home. The plan was to locate in PQ since that was where the bulk of the ministry would take place. Very quickly, a house was found on a quiet cul-de-sac, a wonderful place to raise two small boys, ages 3 and 5.

January 16, 1977, an installation service took place at Peñasquitos Elementary School and the ministry in this place was relaunched.

The following Sunday, there were 37 people present for Sunday worship. The sermon theme was "Fear not Little Flock, For it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the Kingdom" (Luke 12:32). Numbers were very small, but commitment and enthusiasm were very high.

(THIS NARRATION WILL NOW SHIFT TO THE FIRST-PERSON PRONOUN)

I prepared the annual report to be sent to the synod office. We reported our average attendance at worship was 39, Sunday school was 23; one youth in Confirmation class. Total annual income was \$7,884. Total assets were \$416.

I set a personal goal. I would call on every home in Peñasquitos. In most cases, I found no one at home but, I did leave an invitation to Sunday services currently held at Los Pen School. I discovered that many religious groups had attempted to provide Sunday worship in PQ, maybe a dozen or more, but very few suitable places to rent, and no vacant land available to build on had caused them to abandon the area and restart in nearby communities.

It was obvious to me that we needed to find land and build a church building. This would give a sense of permanency to our mission, evidence that we planned to be in this community for the next hundred years!

After several years of litigation, the court awarded all of Kahn's PQ development land to the Teamsters Pension Fund. A land office was reopened and the buying of land and building of homes and commercial buildings kicked into high gear.

The Teamsters had built a temporary office in the heart of PQ and various house developers were standing in line waiting to buy plots of ground. I scheduled an appointment with the head honcho, a teamster vice-president.

I started the conversation in all my naivety stating that we were interested in buying 3 or 4 acres and building a church, which would surely help provide a quality of life for new home buyers. He replied, "Homes here are selling like hotcakes and there are no churches here.

Frankly, churches are not on our priority list. Parks, schools, grocery stores, and restaurants are all in demand so we're setting aside desirable plots for such endeavors. Our master plan has no prime sites for churches. It's simply not profitable." He let me know then that our conversation had ended. I felt like I'd been kicked in the teeth as I left his office.

"Lord," I prayed, "I don't see how any good can come out of this ... please show me."

I was convinced his assumption was wrong. Home buyers would want to come to a community where churches existed. I decided to do a house-to-house survey and ask new homeowners what they perceived to be the five biggest needs for PQ. It was an unscientific survey to be sure and my sampling was only about 40 families. What do we need? 1. A grocery store 2. McDonalds 3. A playground park for kids 4. Post Office 5. And a whole host of other suggestions. A nearby church was on no one's priority list. I was stunned. The Teamsters boss was right.

Some members of the congregation suggested that we give up on trying to purchase any land in PQ and instead look for space in nearby Mira Mesa or maybe west Rancho Bernardo. I thought that there must be some plot of ground in PQ not controlled by the Teamsters. Well, yes, there was a beautiful 3-acre site across from the Doubletree Golf Course but every realtor in town had been unsuccessful in trying to contact the owner. His name was Morris Shenker. His home address was St. Louis, Missouri. He refused to answer any mail or take any calls. One realtor estimated an acre of land in PQ is worth at least \$100,000, depending on location, maybe a bit more. (These were 1977 prices- multiply by ten to reach today's prices).

"Lord, help me. Somehow, I have to figure out a way to meet 'Morris Shenker.'" Guess what? A short time later, the San Diego Union newspaper ran a feature story about a notorious lawyer, Morris Shenker. He had been accused of all sorts of underworld activities, including a multi-million-dollar bogus cancer clinic in Murrieta, money laundering, land fraud with Mafia connections, and countless other illegal activities. He had been indicted by the FBI nine times but was never convicted. He was Jimmy Hoffa's lead attorney at the time of Hoffa's disappearance and had done much work for the Teamsters Union.

The newspaper article stated that he had just purchased the Dunes Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas. He planned to make that his corporate headquarters.

"Lord, I believe you want us to build your church on this beautiful site ... perfect location ... just a block from the under-construction interstate highway. But how do we connect with Shenker?"

The Scriptures declare that our "Lord moves in mysterious ways His wonders to perform." I was to discover how true that is.

My friend, Lanny, who was a member of our former church in Compton, was coming to San Diego on a business trip and called to see if we could get together for a cup of coffee while he was in town. In casual conversation, he asked how our church-building plans were progressing. He heard the whole story and my wish to somehow meet Shenker. "Did you say the guy you want to meet owns the Dunes?" He broke into a broad smile, "I recently sponsored a young man to join the Shriners. He just informed me that he got his dream job. He has been hired as manager of the Dunes Hotel in Las Vegas."

My heart jumped ... this could not just be a coincidence. "Do you think he could connect me with his boss?" Before long I was writing down Shenker's private line phone number in my little red book.

A fervent prayer was followed by a call to Shenker. The man himself answered, "This is Morrie." Quickly I identified myself. "You have 3 acres of land in PQ. We'd like to buy it and build a church on it. I would like to meet with you personally and discuss this possible sale." There was a pause while I held my breath and then a friendly "OK". I asked "when?" His response, "I'll be in my office tomorrow." "Wonderful. I'll see you tomorrow morning." "OK." End of conversation.

"Marcia! I'm going to drive to Las Vegas tonight and meet Shenker tomorrow morning. Get the prayer chain going ... "

"Lord, you seem to be opening doors. Something good will surely come out of this."

It was early morning when I arrived in Las Vegas after a 300-mile drive. I decided to fortify myself with a time of prayer followed by a good breakfast. "Lord give me the words and soften Shenker's heart." On to breakfast. My order was placed. Ten minutes. Twenty minutes. No breakfast. An apologetic manager approached my table. "Your waitress just quit and walked out with your breakfast order in her pocket. I'm so sorry. Your breakfast today will be free." Now it's too late. I had an early morning appointment, so I left the restaurant without any breakfast. "This is not a good omen I thought but here we go."

I arrived at the Dunes and took the elevator to the top floor where corporate headquarters was located. A secretary sitting behind bulletproof glass asked me to place my ID in the slot to my right. She checked Shenker's calendar and then unlocked the door to a small room containing four chairs and some reading material. I'd only been there a few minutes when two big guys in business suits joined me. Strange. I assumed they must have an appointment with Shenker sometime that morning. Then they introduced themselves. They were Shenker's bodyguards and needed to frisk me before I entered his office. They found nothing in my pockets but a wallet, car keys, and a New Testament.

The door to the office was opened for me and closed behind me. I found myself all alone in this plush office filled with all kinds of exotic items, none of which I remember. I just stood in the middle of the room feeling the beating of my heart.

Soon a side door opened and Shenker appeared. I had never even seen a photo of him, but he was exactly like the mental image I had. Around 70 years old, a shock of white hair covering his head, sport shirt with top buttons opened, a gold medallion around his neck and a deep tan.

He looked me in the eye, reached out his hand, shook mine and asked, "Remind me who you are and why you're here." I repeated our phone conversation and told him I was prepared to offer him \$250,000. His response, "It's worth more than that." "That may be true, but you will receive your quarter million dollars in cash, no middleman, anytime you want it."

"No middleman, cash, before the end of the year?" (This was mid-October.) "Yes." He took a moment to ponder our conversation then grinned, placed his hand in mine and announced, "We've got a deal."

I left his office in a daze. What just happened? I promised him \$250,000. How weird! All I had was a \$20 dollar bill in my wallet. Now I've got to convince the powers that be to loan us \$250,000.

The next morning, I called Fred Wimberly, our synod mission director, to inform him what I had just done. "You committed us to a quarter-million-dollar deal? You can't do that. There's nothing in writing, is there?" "No." "Good! I'll call Minneapolis (ALC national headquarters) and I'll try to be your advocate but I can't imagine they'll approve of what you did. Did you really think you could get a loan of \$250,000?" (Multiply by 10 for current value.)

He was right. "Three acres of vacant land is not worth \$250,000 no matter where it is located" was the response.

Now what? Somehow word got out that we now owned this choice piece of property. I was approached by a representative of a medical firm which was looking for suitable property in PQ. He was prepared to offer \$350,000 for it. I got to thinking, "Lord, you are continuing to work in mysterious and wondrous ways, aren't you?" I asked him to please put that offer in writing-which he did.

The offer was forwarded to our Minneapolis office. They couldn't believe the sky-high prices in southern California but said they would now reconsider our request for a loan of \$250,000.

It was mid-November when I received a call from Shenker's office. "Just to let you know that Mr. Shenker has received another offer for his PQ property that was substantially larger than your offer, but he said that he had a handshake gentleman's agreement with a pastor from San Diego and he intended to honor that agreement."

I was stunned. This suspected organized crime figure that many thought should be behind bars was honoring a simple handshake agreement.

Christmas was approaching when a call from Shenker's office came through: "Mr. Shenker wants to know if you would be open to a gift of one-third interest in the property you are purchasing?" Would we be open to accepting a gift valued at \$83,000 (Remember this is 1977 so multiply by ten)? "Of course. Thank Mr. Shenker. God bless him." I could hardly believe it. Why was this notorious character being so generous and kind?

The national office of the ALC reconsidered our request and agreed to loan us the money needed. We reminded them that we had committed to getting the money to him before the end of the year (now less than two weeks away).

On Friday, December 30, Fred Wimberly, our local mission director, was en route to San Diego with our check. It was raining and he was delayed. Finally, at 4:00 pm, we forwarded from our bank the funds necessary to fulfill our promise of "cash before the end of the year."

On Monday, January 9, 1978, the Grant Deed arrived in the mail. The property was ours. We are ready to build Christ's church.