

Meeting God at the Finish Line

Before Saddleback moved to its present location, we bought a big chunk of land. While I thought at the time it was a dream come true, it turned out there were giants in the land.

The county began heaping on ridiculous requirements. First they wanted to allow us to build on only nine acres of the property.

Then they instructed us to build a berm — an eight foot ridge of dirt — along the front of the property to hide the building.

Then they decided we'd need to move 150 trees from the back of the property to the front of the property and plant them on that berm.

Next, they told us we couldn't build a 7,000-seat worship center. Instead, we could build a 1,000-seat worship center and have seven services.

Then they demanded that we put in a charcoal filtration water system so that the water that ran off the parking lot would be nice and pure as it went into the gutter.

Then they told us we couldn't build a parking lot. We'd have to build a parking garage.

Finally, they decided we couldn't build a preschool because "that's not a legitimate church ministry." We said, "Since when did the government start deciding what is and what isn't legitimate church ministry?"

We battled for four years. Some 25 articles appeared in The Los Angeles Times and The Orange County Register during that time with headlines like, "Church Project Delayed" and "Church Project Delayed Again."

I asked our people to write to the county supervisors. Shortly after, this headline came out: "Pro Canyon Church Project Letters Flood the County Offices." Letters were coming in at the rate of 400 a day. Finally the county supervisors called me and said, "Please stop. You're clogging up our mail system."

The Orange County Register published an editorial supporting Saddleback Church called "A Church Beset, A Church Under Siege." It said, "The church's congregation has grown in 9 1/2 years from nothing to 7,500, but still meets in a high school gym. What this really amounts to is county bureaucrats trying to force and control their use of property along a pre-determined path. What gives people the arrogance to presume they have the right to do such a thing?"

Finally I took our church directory to our county supervisor. I laid it in front of that supervisor and said, "There are 18,000 names in this directory. They all vote and they're all in your district."

And that's how we swapped for the piece of property we now own. We paid \$3.5 million for the

first piece of land. During the four-year battle it went up in value to \$6.5 million, and we traded it evenly for a piece worth \$9 million. We walked onto our Lake Forest property with \$6 million in equity. That is so God!

The new land had more visibility, more usable space, more accessibility, a six-lane road on one side, a six-lane road on another side, and a toll road that goes up and down the entire county, putting one third of Orange County — or a million people — within a 20-minute drive of this church. God knew what he was doing.

Were the risks and the battles and delay worth it? Absolutely. Because what God starts he finishes.

Some in our congregation have said, “I really regret missing some of those early exciting tests of faith that Saddleback was in on. I wasn’t here during that time.” But the most exciting part of any race is not the start of the race. It’s the end.

Good things are ahead not just for your congregation, but for all of God’s people. We’re all in a battle, but we already know we’re going to win it because the Bible tells us. I don’t know a more exciting time to be alive.

As a pastor, there are many things you don’t have control over. You didn’t choose when or where you’d be born or what your natural talents would be. God, in his sovereignty, chose those things for you. But there is one thing you do have control over and that’s the most important thing: It’s how much you choose to believe God.

Philippians 1:6 says, *“And I am certain that God, who began the good work within you, will continue his work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns”*(NLT).

You can trust him. Whatever he starts, he finishes — and finishes well.

> [Read more from Rick.](#)
