

OPENING PHOTO OF AN OIL WELL IN LOS ANGELES COURTESY OF FACES OF FRACKING / SARAH CRAIG

GOD, GUNS, AND OIL

SEEKING THE WELFARE OF

A LOS ANGELES NEIGHBORHOOD

BY CONFRONTING CRIME

AND DRILLING RIGS.

BY BOB SMJETANA

PHOTOGRAPHY BY SAM COMEN

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One of the first things that Richard Parks learned after moving into South Central Los Angeles is that Bible studies and liquor stores don't mix.

In 1992, Parks and a few friends moved to LA following the riots sparked by the acquittals in the Rodney King trial. It was an act of faith, inspired by Parks's experience as a summer intern with John Perkins and the Voice of Calvary Ministries in Mississippi. The friends found a pair of rental houses just off Jefferson Boulevard in the Exposition Park neighborhood and set up a tutoring program at a storefront around the corner.

There was just one problem.

Their new home was not far from Lucky Liquors, a haven for crime in the neighborhood. The store served cheap beer and sold cups full of ice with their liquor, encouraging customers to hang around outside the store and drink, according to city zoning department complaints. Prostitutes and drugs dealers often hung around the store as well, and the street nearby was littered with broken bottles and other trash.

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Then there was the violence. In their first year in LA, Parks says, there was one homicide at the store and more shootings than they could count.

"We quickly learned that gunfire was a call to hit the floor and pray," he said.

One night as the bullets smashed their walls, the friends prayed the Lord's Prayer—"Your kingdom come, your will be done." Afterward, Parks was furious.

He'd grown up in a quiet suburb, where the kind of chaos he saw on a daily basis in his South LA neighborhood would never have been tolerated. So why was it tolerated in his new community?

The next morning, he and his friends set out to answer that question—and to shut down Lucky Liquors as a public nuisance. Parks, with help from his landlord, organized neighbors and local businesses to rally against the store and hounded public officials to take action.

Today that store is home to the El Rey Market, a local grocery store, where neighbors shop for produce, tortillas, and queso fresco.

The violence and chaos once common outside the liquor store have vanished. The gang activity, the drug dealing, the public drunkenness, and the prostitution are gone.

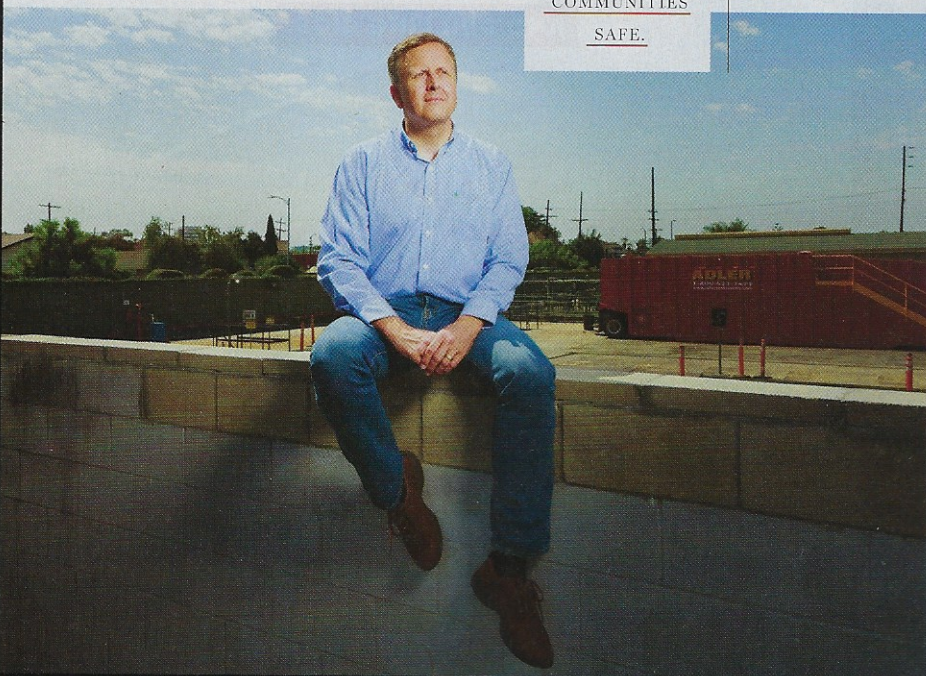
Across the street, 30 kids attend weekly tutoring sessions at Adventures Ahead, a program run in that same storefront Parks and friends rented 25 years ago. Their fledgling Bible study eventually launched Church of the Redeemer, a thriving local congregation, and the Redeemer Community Partnership, a nonprofit dedicated to improving the community. The streets along Jefferson are lined with newly planted trees and will soon feature new bike lanes and repaired sidewalks, part of a \$6 million grant that Redeemer Community Partnership helped obtain for the community.

Parks and his neighbors are now taking on a new public nuisance: three dozen 1960s-era oil wells they believe are a menace to the community. It is part of a broad, recent shift in the long tradition of Christian community development, where churches are increasingly confronting local environmental injustices. And it's all part of the same mission, Parks says—bringing the good news of the gospel to life, so the neighborhood can flourish and experience the abundant life that God offers.

BLACK GOLD, TEXAS TEA

Before it was home to swimming pools and movie stars, as the theme song to *The Beverly Hillbillies* puts it, Los Angeles was an oil boom town.

Edward L. Doheny first struck oil in 1892, not far from where Dodger Stadium now stands, according to the American Oil & Gas Historical





Society. Within five years there were 500 active wells in Los Angeles. By the 1960s, a quarter of the world's oil and gas came from California, which exported 133 million barrels of oil each year, according to "Drilling Down," a report from the Liberty Hill Foundation.

Today, the city is home to more than 1,000 active wells, many in the middle of residential neighborhoods.

Most of those oil wells have operated with little oversight. A 2015 audit by California's Division of Oil, Gas and Geothermal Resources found that the office in charge of overseeing wells in Los Angeles had "inconsistent permitting, monitoring and enforcement of well construction and operation," according to the *Los Angeles Times*.

Many of the wells were developed before the Clean Air Act and other environmental laws came into effect. So they operate with little oversight, says Bhavna Shamasunder, an assistant professor in the Urban and Environmental Policy Department at Occidental College in LA.

Among them: the Jefferson drill site, home to 36 oil and gas wells and hidden in plain sight.

The site's walls resemble those surrounding a church or home—covered in ivy, while the grounds outside the walls are decorated with shrubs and palms. During the summer, residents will sometimes set up their hibachis and hold cookouts in the shade of the wall—unaware that on the other side of the wall are dozens of oil and gas wells.

The closest house is three feet from the wall. A neighborhood school is just a few blocks away.

Kevin Blue, pastor of Church of the Redeemer and a longtime neighborhood resident, said church members really didn't worry too much about the oil wells until a few years ago. There were always more pressing things to worry about.

"It's really a hierarchy of needs," Blue said. "If people are getting shot and it is not safe to walk down the street and there is all this public drunkenness, and the schools are struggling—you deal with that first."

The church's activism against the oil wells began with a lesson from the Book of Deuteronomy, Parks says.

Parks, a former Eagle Scout who now serves as executive director of the Sol Price Center for Social Innovation at the University of Southern California, loves to say that God cares about every detail in life. Even zoning regulations and building permits have a place in God's plan, he says.

Sitting at a table at Adventures Ahead in early November, his eyes light up as he recites Deuteronomy 22:8: "When you build a new house, make a parapet around your roof so that you may not bring the guilt of bloodshed on your house if someone falls from the roof."

"It's details that matter," he said. "There is a place for us to be concerned about these nitty-gritty things—there's a biblical mandate to do so."

About three years ago, Parks got an email alert about a permit for some new work at the Jefferson drill site. When he pulled the file at city hall, Parks learned that the site's then-owner Freeport-McMoRan wanted to drill three new oil wells at the site. The drilling could go on 24 hours a day, seven days a week, for as long as two years. And the site's owner had asked the city to waive any public hearings on the permit.

His interest piqued, Parks and some church members began canvassing the neighborhood, asking neighbors about the site. That's when they began to worry. Neighbors would tell them about their homes being sprayed with oil from leaks at the site and about the noise and exhaust from the massive trucks hauling chemicals into the site.

The more they learned, the more concerned they became.

The Jefferson drill site, it turns out, is a relatively late addition to the neighborhood. Most of the houses in the community were built in the 1900s, about six decades before the Union Oil Company of California began drilling in the community. The company bought up a number of homes and tore them down to make way for the oil wells. They also acquired four parcels just to the north

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of the drill site. Two were vacant; two had empty structures on them. The idea at the time, according to the initial zoning approval, was that those vacant properties would serve as a buffer between the operations of the site and their neighbors.

Then in the late 1990s, the company that owned the site sold off those properties.

The deed filed with the sale acknowledged that the site could be considered a nuisance to the community. According to the 1998 deed:

Buyer shall acknowledge and agree that the operations of Seller or its successors or assigns may emit noxious odors and fumes, and may cause vibration, loud and continuous noise, safety hazards, unsightliness and/or extensive truck traffic. None of the foregoing matters, or any other operations of Seller or its successor or assigns on and in the Jefferson Street Drill site, shall constitute any nuisance to or for Buyer or its successors, assigns or tenants.

In the early days, getting oil and gas out of the site was relatively easy, Parks says. The oil company could simply drill wells and pump out the fossil fuels. But those days are over.

“All that easy-to-obtain gas and oil is gone,” he said.

These days, the site’s owners use more extreme techniques to extract oil and gas from the site.

Among those techniques is “acidizing,” which Parks refers to as “fracking’s toxic big sister.” It involves pumping tens of thousands of gallons of hydrochloric and hydrofluoric acid down the oil well—to clean out the rust, scale, and other debris that clog up pipes; to dissolve sand, clay, and other sediments that block oil from flowing; or to fracture the rock below the surface, according to the American Petroleum Institute (API). It’s a method that requires between 10 and 500 gallons per foot of pipe, according to the API.

What that means at the Jefferson site is that tanker trucks hauling as many as 20,000 gallons of toxic chemicals regularly show up at the site.

Some of those chemicals are stored less than ten feet from a neighborhood’s homes, says Niki Wong, community organizer for Redeemer Community Partnership.

Standing on a railing in the alley outside the drill site, Wong peers over the wall and points out the tubs containing chemicals stored at the site.

Among them: Sufatron DQ-86, hydrogen sulfide, Nalco EC60191A water clarifier, and Chemco Odor Control Jasmine—all of which come with warnings about being known carcinogens or endocrine disrupters, “suspected of damaging fertility or unborn children,” says Wong, who holds a master’s in public health.

The chemicals used on the site could hurt residents of the neighborhood for generations to come, she says.

And neighbors have almost no protection from chemicals used on site. During so-called “acid drops,” Wong says, workers are decked out in full hazmat gear, while neighbors pass by on the other side of the wall.

“What really gets me is how many kids live in the area,” Wong says. “There is an elementary school just two blocks away, 700 feet away, from the drill site.”



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Compounding concerns about the well is that the Exposition Park neighborhood already has other public issues. This part of Los Angeles has a higher rate of infant mortality and a higher percentage of babies born with low birth rates than other parts of the city, Shamasunder says.

Rates of asthma are also higher. Using these chemicals on the site can make things worse, Shamasunder says.

“We do know that this area is already impacted—and that these chemicals do have an impact on public health,” she says. “So we can ask whether we should be adding to that burden by allowing this well to operate.”

A CHURCH OF NEIGHBORS

John W. Mack Elementary School on South Catalina Street, about a two-minute walk from the Jefferson drill site, is also the place where Church of the Redeemer worships on Sundays.

A fold-up chalkboard sign by the front entrance greeted worshippers on a Sunday morning this past November.

“Church of the Redeemer, 10 AM,” it read. “All are welcome.”

In the auditorium, the praise band warmed up with a bilingual version of Michael W. Smith’s “You are Holy” as volunteers set up chairs for worship. The church draws about 125 people



most Sundays. The congregation numbers about 200, including kids. It's as diverse as Los Angeles itself, with a mix of Hispanic American, Asian American, African American, and Anglo members.

Many are former USC students or alumni of Servant Partners, an urban ministry internship the church partners with. There are also a fair number of neighbors like Marvin Aragon and his wife, Claudia Guadron, who joined after their kids were invited to the church's youth group.

Almost everyone in the church lives nearby. Their kids go to local schools and many have long-term roots in the community.

"It's a church of neighbors," Blue says.

Before the service began, Corissa and Nathan Pacillas Smith sat at a picnic table on the playground behind the school. They live across the street

from the drill site, where they've got a bird's eye view of the goings-on from their porch. Downstairs, their neighbor's porch is littered with scientific equipment—a local college's science project to monitor the air quality outside the site.

Moving to the apartment across from the drill site was part mission, part practical concern. Nathan and Corissa needed a bigger place, with room to host a weekly Monday night Bible study from the church.

They also knew it would be helpful to have church members living near the site to keep an eye on things.

Soon after they moved in, they began to experience the headaches of living so close to a drill site. Some of the worst days, Corissa says, are when a 50-foot tall oil derrick is up at the site. It's an eyesore, she said, and so loud it rattles her brain.

"It will often shake the house," she said. "Like a minor earthquake. That's pretty disruptive, especially since I often work at home."

Then there are the smells—diesel fumes and odors from the chemicals used on the site. Most days Corissa keeps the windows closed because the smell is so bad. Since 2010, community members have filed about 30 complaints with the South Coast Air Quality Management District, according to published reports.

And there's constant anxiety that something could go wrong.

The couple plans to stay in the community despite the concerns over the drill site. Both feel a call to live in the neighborhood and have made deep ties to the church. Living in the city, in a

parish-model church that's focused on the community, has strengthened their faith, they said.

They have both come to see being a good neighbor as an essential part of their discipleship.

"The reason I was attracted to this community is that there is a certain intentionality and even at times a certain relentlessness in their approach to discipleship," Nathan said.

Corissa and Nathan know they are lucky. They're young, well educated, have lots of friends and family—so they have options if there's an accident at the drill site. They worry about their 90-year-old neighbor, who has lived in the same apartment for more than 50 years. Where would she go if something went wrong?

It's not out of the realm of possibility. In October 2015, a gas leak at a storage facility in Porter Ranch, a wealthy suburb about 30 miles away, forced thousands of residents out of their homes for months. The Southern California Gas Company paid a \$4 million fine and pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor for a delay in notifying local authorities about the leak, according to the *Los Angeles Times*. The company still faces civil lawsuits from residents.

If there's an accident at the Jefferson site, Nathan and Corissa plan to grab their neighbors and run as fast as they can.

"Our plan is to get as far away as possible, as soon as possible, with as many people as possible," Corissa said.

MAKING JEFFERSON BEAUTIFUL

There are signs that the community's advocacy is working. Church members showed up in force back in 2015 to oppose expansion at the site, causing Freeport-McMoRan to give up on plans to expand the site. The company later sold the site to Sentinel Peak Resources.

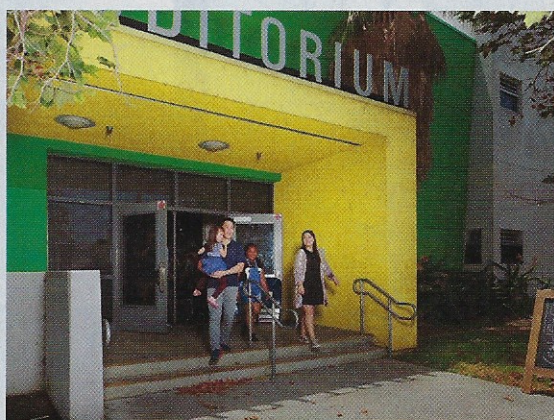
This past fall, church members and other community leaders filed a nuisance complaint with the city, asking for the drill site to be shut down permanently. It's the same tactic they used against Lucky Liquors. In February, church members again showed up in droves at a hearing on the nuisance complaint. They hope to hear a ruling later this year.

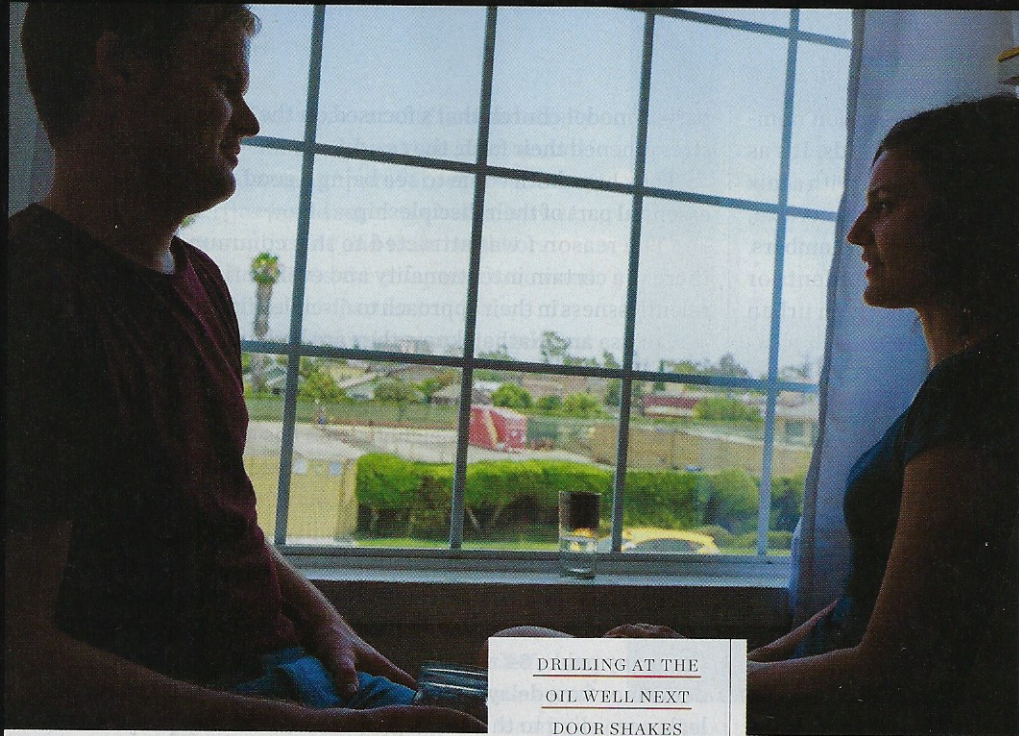
They've also had support from the media and from celebrities. Last February, Mark Ruffalo, Leonardo DiCaprio, Rashida Jones and other members of Hollywood United—a group of celebrities opposed to neighborhood drilling—toured the neighborhood and got a firsthand look at the Jefferson drill site. The Redeemer Community Partnership also produced a short documentary about the site.

The city of Los Angeles has already shut down at least one nearby drill site. In 2016, the oil company AllenCo agreed to pay a \$1.25 million fine to settle a lawsuit against a drill site less than two miles from the Jefferson site. The site could re-open in the future, with strict restrictions.

In the long term, members of Church of the Redeemer want to

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see the Jefferson site shut down. At the very least, they want the kind of protections that better-off communities get.

The Pico-Robertson neighborhood, about eight miles away, is home to a pair of drill sites, including the 175-foot-tall

DRILLING AT THE

OIL WELL NEXT

DOOR SHAKES

CORISSA AND

NATHAN PACILLAS

SMITH'S HOUSE

'LIKE A MINOR

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The nearest home is about 125 feet away, and again, the sound of the pumping is barely audible over the sound of traffic.

"We don't have that here. All we have is a 10-foot wall," Corissa said.

Shamasunder says that Church of the Redeemer has a crucial role to play in deciding the future of the Jefferson drill

Cardiff Tower. There are 40 active wells on that site, according to StandLA, enclosed behind an ivy-covered stone wall at least three times as high as the one at the Jefferson site. Most of the wells are enclosed in the tower. The closest house is 100 feet away—as opposed to the 3 feet at the Jefferson site. Among its neighbors are a synagogue and school. A gentle whoosh of the drills can barely be heard over the sounds of traffic in this busy neighborhood.

About six miles away from the Cardiff Tower, another 51 wells at the Packard Well Site are enclosed in the shell of what looks like an ordinary office building at 5733 West Pico Blvd.

site and other neighborhood wells. They bring up ethical concerns that scientists and zoning administrators sometimes overlook.

“The church raises some really important moral and ethical issues,” she says. “Should these oil wells be there? Should a child be living next to a drill site? Should a pregnant woman be worried about her pregnancy because of where she lives? Scientists don’t do as good a job asking these questions.”

For Parks, shutting down the oil well is part of a bigger story of how the gospel is transforming the Exposition Park neighborhood. Members of Church of the Redeemer have tied their fate to the fate of the community. They want to see their neighbors flourish.

Shutting down oil wells or nuisance liquor stores, planting trees, tutoring kids, holding neighborhood Bible studies, and making friends with neighbors during a community service project are all part of how a neighborhood is reached with the gospel, Parks says.

“In the context of friendship—there are normal, natural opportunities to talk about our love for Jesus,” he said. “Our church is made up of people that our kids go to school with, our kids play soccer with, neighbors that we clean up trees with. That is how the gospel is going out in our community.”

His favorite night of the year in the neighborhood comes on Halloween, when the church holds its annual harvest carnival.

When Parks and his friends first moved into the

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neighborhood in the early 1990s, Halloween was a dark night with a lot of gang violence. Most families either locked their doors and stayed home—or drove their kids to the city’s west side where there was more candy and less violence.

So Parks and his friends organized a neighborhood carnival instead. They blocked off the street, put up a jump castle, organized some games, and gave away candy. They also surveyed

neighbors about their concerns and offered to let folks sign up for neighborhood Bible studies.

“Every year, we get about 30 people who want to join a one-on-one Bible study,” Parks said. “I don’t know how to find 30 neighbors who want to study the Bible except to have a harvest carnival. It’s amazing. It’s just such a sign to us that God takes what is dark and broken in our neighborhood and he redeems it—just like he does in our own lives as well.” **CT**

BOB SMJETANA is senior writer for *Facts & Trends* magazine and a CT contributor. He lives near Nashville, Tennessee.