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## SYNOPSIS OF AVOIDABLE MISTAKES

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It all seemed so cut and dried at the beginning. In fact, it seemed miraculous. Building a new facility for the church body had seemed impossible. The normal methods and costs associated with such a project had initially seemed so intimidating. Then the committee members came up with bargains, ideas, and shortcuts to reduce the time, expenses, and legalities normally endured in physical expansion. You supported the decision to go ahead, though it all seemed too good to be true. It was.

Nowadays, frustration has mostly replaced optimism. Bargains that were promised have mostly evaporated. Attempting to bypass regulations has only succeeded in alienating regulatory agencies responsible for the oversight of your project. Cost overruns have forced compromises in the scope of the project in order to stay within the approved budget. Speaking of which, the monies promised for the building fund are not coming in as quickly as needed. The congregation is unhappy with the minister because project management responsibilities are interfering with his ability to pastor. He is not exactly happy either, given the difference between the time and money most members could contribute and what is really being given. What went wrong?

What follows is a limited synopsis of a new resource from AFD Consulting. Written for pastors and building committees, it is entitled, "Avoidable Mistakes in Church Building and Remodeling." It is designed to help churches become aware of many potential bargains and shortcuts offered during the process of physical expansion. It should assist churches in realizing some of these benefits, while avoiding the many pitfalls that come with them. The intent is to prevent the work of the spiritual church from degenerating into the building of the physical church.

**Pinpointing the Problem** The very first mistake that should be avoided is placing our goals and desires ahead of the will of God. If that occurs, we have no promise or assurance of God's blessing on our efforts. The work of God's church is supposed to be ministering to the temporal and eternal needs of those around us. The only real purpose of building should be to enhance our ability to fulfill the commandments the church has been given regarding those needs. It is wise to examine ourselves as a church body in at least three ways before we pour time, energy, and resources into building projects which may have no real relevance to our lack of growth.

In my personal ministry to God, do I put His desires ahead of my own? Does His need for an eternal bride override my need for success in the eyes of this world? Do I take more pleasure in being in His presence and immersing myself in His Word than I do in any other type of entertainment? Does His approval mean more to me than that of anyone else? Do I seek the kingdom of God with more fervor than the acquisition of temporal possessions? Do the things that break the heart of God, break mine? Most important, am I willing to humble myself before His glory to obtain His blessings and healing for what ails my world, my church, my family, and my life? The Great Physician makes house calls, but only for those who admit they are sick and call for help.

Are we fulfilling the commandment to love our neighbors? A ministry of love to others takes time and involves risk. When was the last time we opened our arms, our hearts, our schedules, or our pocketbooks

to someone who could not possibly give anything back? How recently have we risked loving beyond reason and then being rejected, hurt, and betrayed? Our Master did, just after He said, "Follow me!"

Do we ministry to one another? The love we show toward our brothers and sisters in Christ is what will really draw the lost to our churches. It is the unusual that attracts attention. That is why we should support one another in our ministries, work hard to spend time in fellowship, and keep so focused on God we do not notice each other's faults and failures. Pruning is the business of the gardener, not the branches. There is strength only in unity. That need for unity may require subordinating our desires to those of our brother or sister. That submission is a pretty classic definition of love.

This initial examination of our ministries is necessary to ensure our efforts in physical expansion are worthwhile. Unless God builds the church, they that labor, do so in vain. Church growth does not occur because of larger facilities, but rather the opposite. Growth occurs as a result of the development of relationships between other members, those who are lost, our God, and us. God repeatedly expressed His desire to be worshipped, not in buildings, but in obedience, in spirit, and in truth. If working to fulfill His will is not the motivation behind our building programs, all we will accomplish will be the creation of newer and better clubhouses.

**Preparation** There is no substitute for preparation before the launching of a project. Any craftsman, cook, or worker assigned to a multi-step task can testify to that truth. The proper materials and tools must be on hand before the work is started. Missing ingredients make following a recipe difficult. An attempt to expand churches without adequate planning results in disastrous building projects.

It is wise to ascertain what steps and decisions will need made before beginning. All of the costs of a project are not financial. The project will take its toll in stress, disappointment, and frustration as well. Decisions will need made ranging from finalizing a budget to picking styles of door knobs. It is prudent to anticipate these decisions and set a procedure for finalizing them before they become of enough concern to turn the attention of the church to the building program, rather than its ministries.

There is a point in a project where haste is important, but not in the preparation stage. Failure to properly investigate a site is usually costly. Discounting the value of what professional expertise can bring to your project should be done only after an informed discussion. Making sure of sufficient financial resources beforehand is Biblical wisdom and admonition. Before any attempt is made to launch a project, make sure the support of the people is behind the leadership. Dragging a few sheep is not the same as having the flock follow the shepherd.

When those who love God have given sacrificially to His work, it is imperative those funds be used for that work. The only proper purpose for building is the betterment or addition of ministries the church provides. Salvation was the primary purpose of Jesus Christ. Meeting the physical needs He encountered was secondary work. Fixing the social ailments of His community was of lesser importance, evidenced by His words, "The poor, you have with you always." Our priorities, especially when spending His resources, should be lined up with His priorities.

It is important to determine beforehand exactly how much seating should be planned for, and why. Building too large or too small can harm the church body. Growth occurs partly from the way the leadership governs the church and it occurs in stages. It can be, and often is, inhibited by crowding beyond a certain percentage of occupancy. A number of emerging societal trends are making it difficult to accurately anticipate growth. The best solution to finding the correct seating number seems to involve taking all factors into consideration, including the budget, making the best guess possible, then designing the facility with enough flexibility to permit necessary changes.

For the sake of the next generation, planning should anticipate decades ahead, while designing for the present. This requires analyzing the human and material resources God has given the church. It is surely His way of preparing the church for the work to which it has been called. It also requires an honest appraisal of what the church really is and wants to become. Then a master plan can be developed that fits and prepares for the ministries the church will offer in its future. That plan will influence all present decisions involving current needs. In essence, an upcoming project should be treated as the first phase of a long term plan for growth. Facility growth should also be tied to the growth of ministries, as well as financial and numerical growth.

**Guiding Concepts** As a church approaches the actual design of a facility, there are a few guiding principles worth incorporating. These are not as tangible as space needs and they may be of little or no importance to most congregations. Nonetheless, in choosing to discuss these, a great deal can be learned about the attitude of the church toward worship and other functions of the assembly. Incorporation of these principles, when possible, will not create a financial burden, but will greatly enhance the spaces under consideration. They are as follows:

- An *inviting* facility is one that has characteristics designed in to make members and visitors both feel welcome and at home.
- *Flexibility* involves designing a building in such a way it will not inhibit the performance of effective ministries, now or in the future.
- *Relationship* between people is the glue holding the church body together. The design of the facility can enhance or inhibit the ability of the users to visit and interact.
- Electronics have become the primary medium through which the message of the church is *delivered*. Available and emerging technology should be considered for inclusion into the design.
- If possible, the experience of worship should involve *physical senses* as well as the heart.
- As members of our society demand and receive more and more *personal space* and identity, should this trend be encouraged or discouraged when planning church facility expansions?
- *Co-planning* should occur as ministry leaders prepare growth strategies to be launched as better facilities become available.
- The purchase of *expertise* can be very beneficial to the church as the complexity of projects continues to increase.
- Paying careful attention to *group dynamics* can enable using the negative aspects and natural disruption inherent in building projects to restructure existing ministries, establish and cultivate new leadership, and effectively create a new church with a new base of founding members.
- A careful plan should be laid out on how to best utilize *volunteer* help, should it become offered.
- Motivating church members to sacrificially give is the surest path to *financing* a project. It results in blessings for the church and for those who give of themselves.

**Execution** Many mistakes are made in planning and executing the first phase of facility expansions. Most of these, given enough time, can be recovered from. They are nonetheless painful.

Although traditional and desirable, the creation of space considered sacred and set aside for one use only seems to be a mistake best avoided. The creation of spaces used solely for worship tends to relegate worship to these spaces alone. Stewardship principles would seem to dictate more is better than less in using resources given God for use in His ministries. Therefore, it would seem the more ministries supported by space built with such resources, the better the church can fulfill its commission to minister to those around it. Especially if the creation of multi-use space makes housing of all of the church's ministries possible, but reserving spaces for single sacred functions means some ministries will have no space to continue. Although there are logistical, manpower, and storage problems inherent in using multi-purpose spaces, these are easily handled.

Not so easily handled are the many rules and regulations governing the creation or expansion of spaces for public use. Deciding the church is above these restrictions will only lead to problems. While the ministries of the church may be constitutionally protected from the control of the government, the safety of those using the facilities is very much within the jurisdiction of the state. Submission to those who have authority over us is commanded by God. Seeking ways to circumvent that authority dishonors the church in His sight and that of men.

The process of renovating a facility can also result in costly errors. A decision must be made whether including an architect is necessary or cost effective. If historic preservation funding is available and applicable, is what is lost accepting the funding worth the gain? Volunteer labor may wind up costing more than anticipated savings. Deciding to postpone certain renovation expenses can lead to very costly deterioration. Unforeseen costs of renovation will also impact the decision to upgrade a facility. One example is when the temporary rental of another facility must be included in the budget.

There are many small decisions that must be made in every project. Some may seem petty, but none can be ignored. These include analyzing the site for potential problems or concerns. Requirements for parking areas, and the materials required for these, are contained within local zoning laws. Small items to be considered in the design of the facility, such as space for coat racks, will determine whether the building truly meets user needs upon its completion. Even the choice of finishes for the walls, ceilings, and floors will determine the enjoyment of future inhabitants. When considering costs, a most critical decision will be whether to build more square footage with less expensive finishes to be upgraded later, or build a smaller facility now, finished as ultimately desired.

Sound advice should always be sought and heeded. Problems with sound occur first by failing to control the transmission of noise between spaces. They continue with the inability to control reverberation. These problems are sometimes worsened by installing inadequate, cobbled together or poorly designed sound systems. Any one of these problems, much less all of them together, can negate the purpose of a project. How can the Word be ministered if the speech cannot be comprehended?

**Money Matters** Funding a project is easily the most daunting and dangerous aspect of building expansions. It should come as no surprise that many mistakes are made in this area.

The first of these mistakes is made when church exit ministries and go into business. Too many fundraisers make it difficult for the community to believe the focus of a church is ministry to the needs of others. The effort to raise funds turns us toward self-sufficiency and away from dependence upon God to supply, much less determine, our needs. Our business endeavors can also anger companies in our communities that must compete against us, handicapped by their requirement to pay taxes. Raising money can become a substitute for the work to which we have actually been called. If not carefully handled, the building of larger and better facilities can become the primary work of the church.

There are alternate approaches to obtaining funding that should be considered, even if they are discarded afterwards. The most scriptural is informing God of the need and waiting for Him to supply it by moving on the hearts and minds of men. Another is for churches currently debt free and expecting to grow in the future to begin making monthly mortgage payments to an interest bearing account. If the need for growth does not occur, money can be sent to another congregation with need, but not finances. Property and buildings can be designed to produce an income stream through rental to others. A final, interesting, and very Biblical way to fund growth is to continually split off and support daughter works until they can stand on their own financially. This is not popular in a society judging the success of a church by the size of its congregation rather than its success in reaching the lost with the gospel.

The scriptures admonish us we should count all costs before beginning a building project. The key to doing this successfully is to realize there is a vast difference between the cost of a building and the cost of a project. Land costs, financing costs, regulatory fees, engineering fees, special systems, landscaping, insurance, sound systems, and other expenses can take churches by surprise. This is especially true when a project budget is determined from a projected square foot cost for a particular building type.

Seeking the lowest possible price on every conceivable service and material for a project seems initially to represent good stewardship. More often, it is also a recipe for disaster. It is even worse when budgets are formed based on the low side of estimate ranges, on donated materials, on free land, volunteer labor, and bargains. Members will almost never be satisfied with the quality level of labor or material represented by the lowest end of an estimated cost range. Free materials are usually worth what was paid for them. Verbal promises of bargain prices rarely materialize when the time comes to actually acquire the materials. Free land is usually undesirable for use by the donor and often for reasons requiring heavy expenditure to overcome. Finally, projects tend to expand in scope when probable bargains seem to make more space affordable than expected. It is then difficult to cut back in scope in the middle of construction when problems mentioned earlier begin creating financial constraints.

Making decisions allowing the church to just get by for now can be either beneficial or detrimental to a project. In areas such as room finishes, choosing cheaper materials with a shorter life expectancy to permit building more space makes sense. Installing inadequate equipment, such as HVAC units or sound system components, does not make sense. If people are uncomfortable or cannot understand what is being taught, changes will be made in short order. When that occurs, the initial expense of the inadequate systems will have been wasted. When choosing to compromise on quality on any part of a project, a realistic appraisal of future ramifications should be made before a decision is implemented.

Package deals, design / build services, and turnkey projects are all offered to minimize difficulties faced by churches striving for improved facilities. All have some degree of value and all have inherent flaws. These include the loss of the check and balance system in a traditional building process as well as the loss of truly competitive bidding by subcontractors. It is also difficult to ascertain the true cost of each component of the package. Nonetheless, the difficulties of these building processes can be overcome. If used carefully, package deals can be a real asset to churches.

Free or low cost land can be a real blessing or a real problem to a church. Refusing an offer can be insulting to the donor and probably should not be done unless an obvious liability would transfer with the land. Then, if the land can not be used directly by the church, it can always be sold to raise building funds. Any land purchase or acceptance is best done only after a thorough investigation of the property, its history, and its suitability for your intended purpose. Any expense of making sites really usable, such as culverts, drainage, etc., should be added to land costs when evaluating different site options.

Low cost building shells are also an attractive concept many churches consider in order to get a project quickly under roof. Metal buildings and pole buildings are prime examples. These are fine as long as the church does not mind worshipping in a metal building or a pole barn. If that is a problem, add to the budget the cost of disguising the basic construction, and necessary upgrades to such buildings to meet minimum code requirements for assembly buildings. Even with these drawbacks, low cost pre-engineered shells carry an inherent value in a savings of time impacting financing costs, rental costs of intermediate facilities, and quicker occupancy and subsequent launching of church and ministry growth programs.

The easiest way to save money on a church project often seems to be using volunteer labor. While this has value in leadership training and in fellowship, it rarely has long term monetary value. Pastors can either minister to their congregations or manage construction projects, but it is difficult to do both jobs. At least,

it is not possible to do them well. Asking tradesmen in the congregation to donate their labor and expertise is both insulting and punishes them for loyal membership and support. Inexperienced workers can cost the church in accidents, damaged materials or equipment, slowing other trades, delaying project completion, and in the destruction of camaraderie if time is not evenly donated. If a construction loan has been obtained, payment of interest begins after the first draw against the loan. Any delay after that point by the use of volunteer labor has a direct monetary cost. For these, and many other reasons, it is best to decide beforehand to limit the use of volunteer help to tasks that are safe, independent of other trades, and enjoyable.

**In Conclusion** The purpose of this work was not meant to be overly critical or focus entirely on the negative. The subject matter just makes it seem that way. The purpose was to illuminate the path on which the race is being run. We rarely stumble over obstacles we see coming. Indeed, once seen, stumbling blocks over which others have tripped can become our starting blocks. The majority of pastors and building committees, despite a few mistakes, tend to complete projects well. They simply get up, dust themselves off, and keep running. A little more cautiously and a little more wisely, but looking ahead to a glorious finish.

This synopsis is excerpted from “Avoidable Mistakes in Church Building and Remodeling” by Paul F. Spite of AFD Consulting. That resource and “From A to Z in Church Building and Remodeling” can be ordered by contacting Paul at (931) 261-3269 or [afd1@frontiernet.net](mailto:afd1@frontiernet.net).