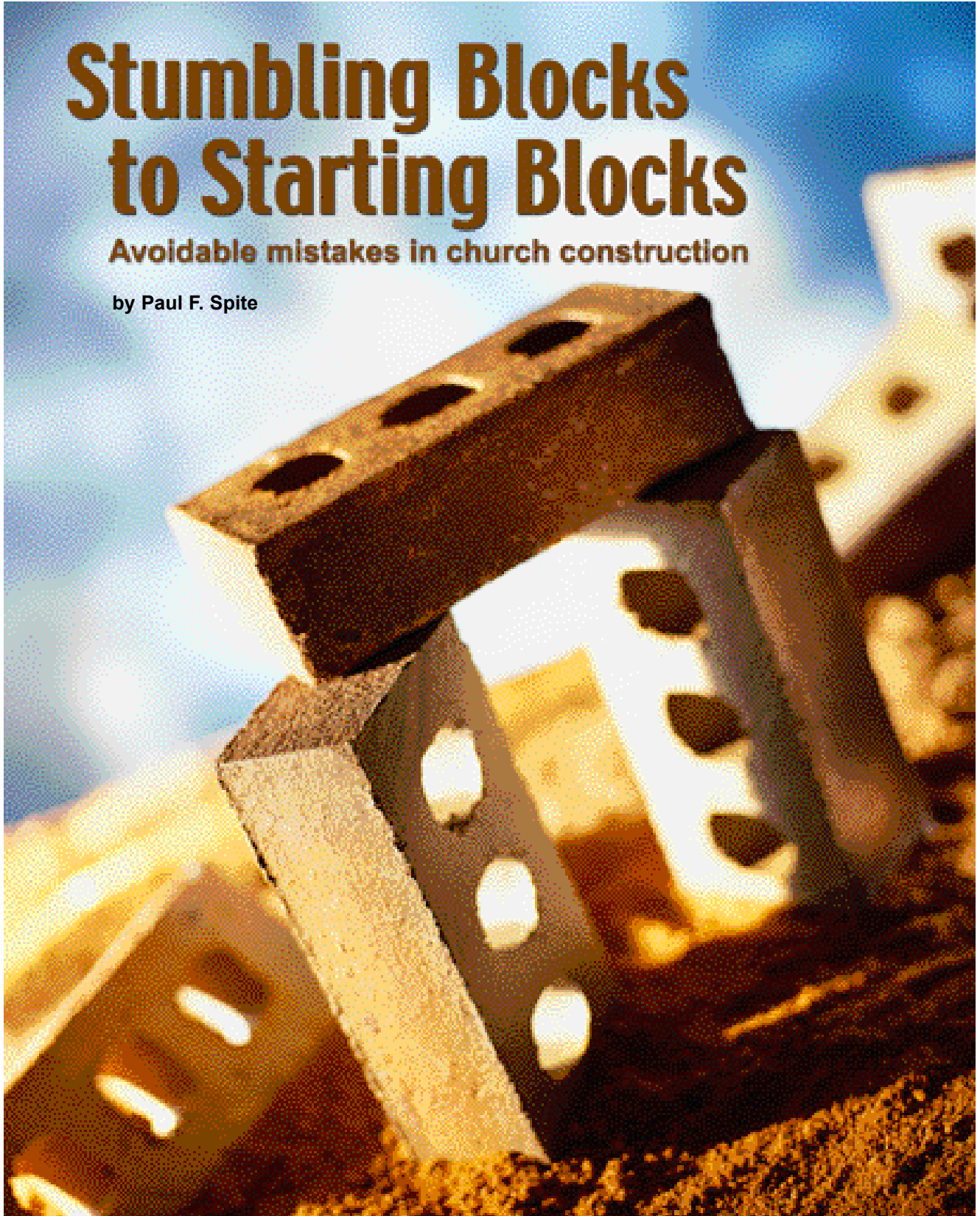


Stumbling Blocks to Starting Blocks

Avoidable mistakes in church construction

by Paul F. Spite



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 that would reduce the time, expenses and legalities normally endured in physical expansion. You supported the decision to go ahead, even though it all seemed too good to be true. It was.

Nowadays, frustration has mostly replaced optimism. The bargains that were promised have mostly evaporated. Attempting to bypass regulations has only succeeded in alienating the regulatory agencies responsible for the oversight of your project. Cost overruns have been forcing compromises in the scope of the project in order to stay within the approved budget. Speaking of which, the monies that were 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 of the congregation could contribute vs. what is really being given. What went wrong?

What follows is a limited synopsis of a 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 the benefits of these, 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 in 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.

The first area of examination is 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.

The second area of examination involves whether the body is 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!"

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The third area of examination involves our 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 much of our focus on God that we fail to notice each other's faults and failures. Pruning is the business of the gardener alone, not the branches. There is strength only in unity. That need may require subordinating our desires to those of our brother or sister. That submission is a pretty classic definition of love.

This examination of our ministries is necessary to ensure that our effort of physical expansion is 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 ourselves. 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. Likewise, winging the expansion of churches can result in disastrous building projects.

It is wise to ascertain what steps and decisions will have to be made before starting out. 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 have to be made that range from finalizing a budget to picking styles of door knobs. It is prudent to anticipate these decisions and have a procedure for finalizing them set in place before they become of enough concern to turn the attention of the church to the building program instead of 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 there are enough financial resources available 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 following the shepherd.

When those who love God have given sacrificially to His work, it is imperative that those funds be used for that work. The only proper purpose for building is the betterment or addition of ministries that the church provides. The creation of a means of salvation was the primary calling of Jesus Christ. The meeting of the physical needs He encountered was His secondary work. Fixing the social ailments of His community was of little importance, as 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 either too large or too small can harm the church body. Growth occurs partly as a result of 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 of the factors into consideration, including the budget, making the best guess possible, and then designing the facility with enough flexibility to permit necessary changes.

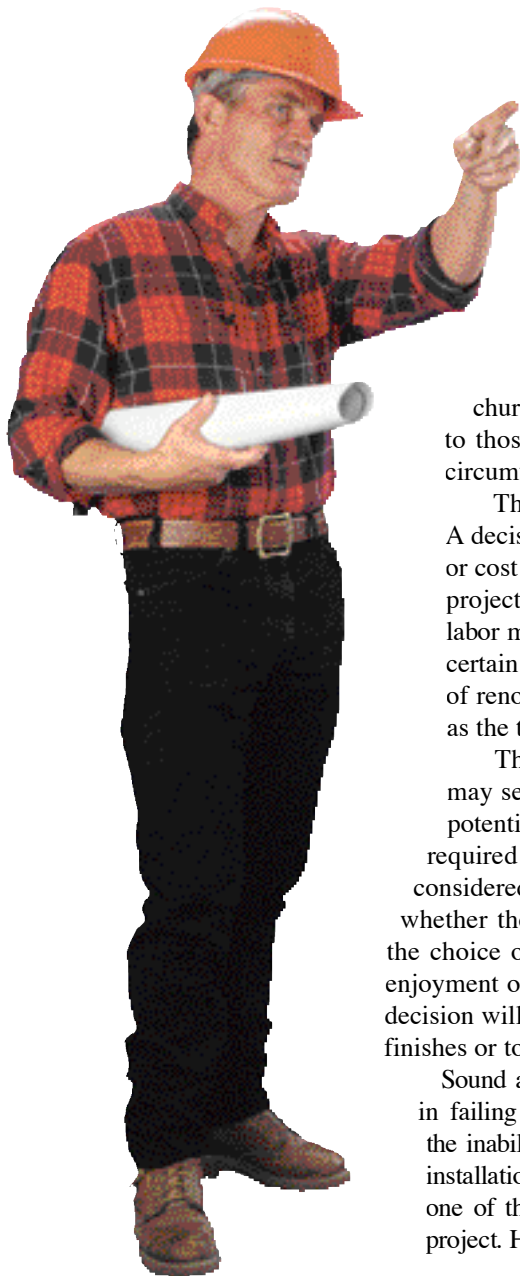
For the sake of the next generation, planning should consider the decades ahead, before designing for the present. This requires an analysis of the human and material resources God has blessed the church with. It is surely His way of preparing the church for the work to which it has been called. It also requires an honest appraisal of who 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 be offering in its future. That plan will influence all of the present decisions involving current needs. In essence, an upcoming project is then treated as the first phase of a long-term plan for growth. That plan also matches facility growth to the growth of ministries, in addition to financial and numerical growth.

Guiding Concepts

As a church approaches the actual design of a facility, there are a few guiding principles that are 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* is the art of designing a building in such a way that it will not inhibit the performance of effective ministries, now or in the future.
- ▶ *Relationship* between people is the glue that holds 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 the *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 with 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 both enjoyable and 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 are giving of themselves.



Execution

Many mistakes are made in planning and executing the first phase of facility expansion. Most of these can be recovered from, given enough time. 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 the occurrence of worship to these spaces alone. Stewardship principles would seem to dictate that more is better than less in the utilization of resources given to God for use in His ministries. Therefore, it would seem that the more ministries that can be supported by space built with such resources, the better the church can fulfill its commission to minister to the needs of those around it. Especially if the creation of multi-use space makes the housing of all of the church's ministers possible while reserving some spaces for single, sacred functions means that some ministries will have no space and must be abandoned. Although there are attendant logistical, manpower and storage problems inherent in the use of multi-purpose spaces, these are easily handled.

Not so easy to handle are the many rules and regulations that govern the creation or expansion of spaces for public use. Deciding that 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 the people using the church's 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 be fraught with costly errors. A decision will have to be made as to whether including an architect is necessary or cost effective. If historic preservation funding is available and applicable to the project, will what is lost by accepting the funding be worth the gain? Volunteer labor may wind up costing more than the 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 when such costs as the temporary rental of another facility find their way into the budget.

There are many small decisions that must be made in every project. Some may seem petty, but cannot be ignored. These include an analysis of 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 the needs of the users upon its completion. Even the choice of finishes for the walls, ceilings, and floors will determine the level of enjoyment of future inhabitants. When it comes to considering costs, the most critical decision will be whether to build more square footage with a more economical level of finishes or to build less of a facility, but finish it as ultimately desired.

Sound advice should always be sought and heeded. Problems with sound occur first in failing to control the transmission of noise between spaces. They continue with the inability to control reverberation. These problems are sometimes worsened by the installation of an inadequate, cobbled together or poorly designed sound system. 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 the church exits the ministry and goes into business. Too many fundraisers make it difficult for the community to believe that the focus of the 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 those companies in our communities that must compete against us, handicapped by having to pay taxes. Raising money can easily 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 funding growth that should be at least 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 upon the hearts and minds of men. Another is for churches that are 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, the money can be sent to another congregation that has the need, but not the 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 that judges 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 that we should count all of the costs before beginning a building project. The key to doing this successfully is to realize that there is a vast difference between the cost of a building and the cost of a project. Land costs, financing costs, regulatory fees, engineering, systems, landscaping, insurance, sound systems and other expenses can take churches by surprise. This is especially true when the budget was formed on the basis of a projected square-foot cost for a particular building type.

Seeking the lowest possible price on every conceivable service and material that makes up 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 upon the low end of estimate ranges, on donated materials, on free land, volunteer labor and bargains. It can be guaranteed that the church will not settle for the quality level of labor or material that is represented by the lowest end of an estimated cost range. Free materials are usually worth

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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 which require heavy expenditure to overcome. Finally, projects tend to expand in scope when probable bargains seem to have made more space affordable than expected. It is then difficult to cut back in scope in the middle of construction when problems mentioned earlier begin to create financial constraints.

Making decisions that allow 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 in order to build 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 the future ramifications should be made before a decision is made.

Package deals, design/build services and turnkey projects are all offered to minimize the difficulties faced by churches striving to improve their 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 cannot 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. The expenses necessary to make the land usable, such as culverts, drainage, etc., should be added to the land costs when comparing and evaluating different site options.

Low cost building shells are also an attractive concept that many churches consider in order to get a project quickly under roof. Metal buildings and pole buildings are prime examples of these structures. 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, the cost of disguising the basic construction, and often being required to upgrade the building to meet minimum code requirements for assembly buildings, will change the price tag. Even so, low-cost pre-engineered shells also carry an inherent value in a savings of time that impacts financing costs, rental costs of intermediate facilities and quicker occupancy—permitting the launching of church and ministry growth programs.

The easiest way to save money on a church project often seems to be the use of 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 not do both jobs at once—at least, not well. Asking tradesmen that are a part of the congregation to donate their labor and expertise is both insulting and punishes them for their 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 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.

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 a manual of the same name by Paul F. Spite, vice president of architecture for J&S Construction in Cookeville, Tenn. Information on ordering this manual and other resources can be obtained by visiting www.kconline.com/afd/publications. J&S Construction can be contacted at 800.933.1121. Ministry advice on church building is also available through the National Association of Church Design Builders (NACDB) at www.nacdb.com.