

BLIND SPOTS

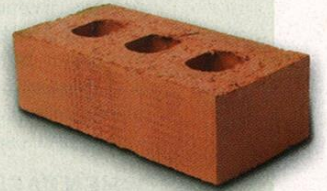
Why we sometimes can't see problems with our facility.

by James Rodgers

BLIND SPOTS

Why we sometimes can't see problems with our facility.

by James Rodgers



My daughter was reaching out to Daddy. What a joy to see our nine-month-old longing for me from the arms of the nursery worker following our mid-week service. Hannah was being gently rocked by the wife of one of our elders, but it was clear she wanted down.

I thanked the woman for watching our daughter while I led a prayer group and my wife taught some of the older children. She assured me that she held Hannah the entire time, except when Hannah was sleeping in one of the stacked cribs. While I appreciated her diligence, I let her know that Hannah enjoyed crawling.

"I'm not comfortable with her crawling on this floor," the worker replied.

The floor was carpeted and vacuumed regularly, so I asked why. With a look that conveyed a terrible secret, she confessed, "The carpet may look clean, but it's laid on a wood floor that was built on top of the original tile floor because we have a water problem. I'm sure you smell the mustiness."

I acknowledged the damp smell. She continued, "I don't want to get anyone in trouble, but look at the wallpaper." She

pointed out some dark spots that crept up from below the carpet level. "I don't let any babies crawl on this floor."

About that time my wife joined us in the nursery. When I showed her the marks on the wallpaper, she said she knew about them and also tried to keep little ones off the floor. The elder's wife explained that they had moved the nursery downstairs to create a church office upstairs. Since water often leaked in that corner of the basement, they built the wood floor to allow for carpet on the floor of the new nursery.

On the way home, I asked my wife why she didn't tell me about her concerns sooner. With the look of a supportive spouse, she gently responded: "We've been here less than a year, and I know you have several other areas of ministry that need changing first. Since Hannah is the most consistent baby in the nursery, it will look self-serving if you try to change something they just built the year before we arrived."

Ouch. Talk about feeling convicted. And clueless.

I realized changing the nursery was not just a facility issue, but really a ministry issue. I'd heard the clichéd facility priority list—take care of the nursery and the women's restroom above everything else. But in this case, I felt the issue personally. Though I overcame my





Blind Spots

guilt—thanks to a supportive wife—I intensified my zeal to address the nursery issue.

With a nursery that smelled musty and had mold marks on the walls, we were sending a terrible message to visitors: “Your babies may not be safe here, and we aren’t doing anything about it.”

Why did I miss this clear message? I love my children. I look out for their best interests. I had a child in the nursery. So why did I miss something that should have been so clear?

As I reflect back on that situation, I realize several issues commonly cloud our perspective of our facilities. Now as I work with a church architect, I find myself working with pastors to pull back those clouding issues to understand the messages our facilities send.

WHEN FACILITY ISSUES ARE MINISTRY ISSUES

The first clouding factor is determining what facility issues are indeed ministry issues. Many views exist on this. At the two ends of the spectrum are quality and humility, each of which can be supported biblically.

Proponents of quality suggest that God deserves the best of everything. The quality of the Temple, tabernacle, and worship elements provide our example for highest quality in our church buildings.

Those who espouse humility point out the vitality of worship by Christians through the centuries and around the world that meet in crude structures—if any at all. Since we are greatly blessed with any facility compared to other Christian cultures, we should limit effort and expense on our facilities.

Both positions reflect some truth.

Given the location of our church, there were basic community standards that people expect to be met. And basic cleanliness and freedom from molds in the nursery were certainly community standards. At that time, the news reported accounts of children dying due to exposure to the mold *Stachybotrys*. Were we possibly endangering our children?

Calls to several environmental services taught me more about molds than I ever imagined! I reasoned that if I could prove that we had *Stachybotrys*, then everyone would have to agree to remodeling or moving the nursery. However, several different molds resembled *Stachybotrys*, so we could only be sure through a costly

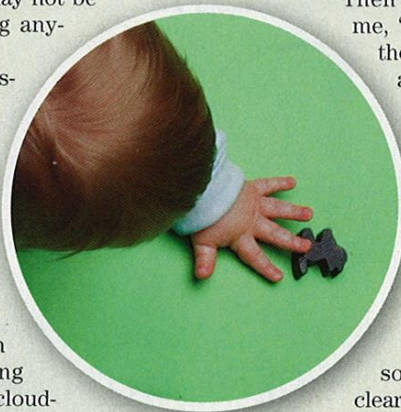
environmental analysis. Trying to limit expense for our congregation that was stretched financially, I initially kept probing for other options to verify if we had a potentially deadly mold.

Then one environmental expert asked me, “If this is for a church nursery, are there really any molds that would be acceptable—whether they are deadly or not?”

His question brought clarity to a situation I’d been cluttering with irrelevant detail. In our community, there should be no molds on any nursery walls. It is a clear ministry issue to remove health hazards for our children.

Duh!

Why had I been slow to grasp something that should have been so clear? Because of a second clouding issue.



HOW MANY “CHIPS” IT WILL COST?

It isn’t a very spiritual analogy, but I’ve never forgotten a *Leadership* article by Leith Anderson that compares pastoral credibility and influence to winning and losing chips at a poker game. His point: you need to know your current chip count before spending your leadership stake on activities that may cost more chips than you’ve got. I realized there was wisdom in that article.

Since I’d only been at the church for a year, I was still assessing my chip count. I assumed that I would lose chips by pushing a nursery renovation, and I thought I needed to save my chips for other new initiatives. But when the environmental expert asked whether any mold was acceptable in a church nursery, this clouding issue disappeared.

I realized I could move “all in” because no one can rationally defend allowing any molds around infants. In fact, identifying such a readily solved problem could actually gain chips.

We proceeded to move the nursery back upstairs near the sanctuary where it made much more sense for young families. The office moved downstairs to another space. In the room with the mold problem, we tore out the carpet, wood floor, and moldy dry-wall. A special paint coating and new tile floor provided a space that could get wet if we experienced leaks. We also addressed the cause of the water leaks as best we could.

I think I actually gained chips through the process. With a reasonable presentation of the case, everyone was on board with the changes.

This prompted me to lead the renovation of the next clichéd priority space—the women’s restroom. Since it was also in the basement, guess what kept appearing on the walls? Black molds. Since we’d



Jim Rodgers is
Architectural Pastor at

www.FacilityMinistry.org

FRESH EYES FOR A CLEARER VIEW

■ A congregation on Chicago's North Shore area built a new worship center two decades ago. When they called a new pastor two years ago, he was shocked to find steep steps leading from the entry area to the worship center. He called them "the climbing wall."

But recently when I visited the church and commented on the steps, he said that he had gotten used to them and had forgotten how imposing and intimidating they appeared to him as a newcomer.

In a short amount of time, we can lose our ability to see our facilities as a newcomer sees them. We lose our objectivity in evaluating facility issues.

Here are a few ways to look at your building with clear eyes.

• **Recall your first days at the church.** When you first visited the church, your objectivity was fresh. Think back to your first impressions.

• **Ask your spouse.** Men and women notice different things. My wife knew all about the mold issue in the nursery long before I noticed it.

• **Read past prayer or planning journals.** If you journal, skim through past entries. You may have jotted down facility issues you wanted to address—but have forgotten. Reading past records may jog many helpful recollections.

• **Prayerfully walk around the building by yourself.** The church building seems a much different place when no one else is there. The quiet moments in prayerful reflection may enable the Holy Spirit to open your eyes to an entirely new idea.

• **"Visit" the church with a friend who's never been there.** A true visitor to the church will have a completely fresh perspective. Also, asking a non-Christian for his perspective may open your eyes to the facilities—and Lord willing, his eyes to the gospel. —JR

already dealt with mold issues, I reasoned that similar reasoning for renovating the women's restroom would be welcomed by all.

Wrong again. Because of a third clouding issue.

CONDITIONS THAT HAVE BECOME "NORMAL"

We become easily attached to what we've grown accustomed to over time. When we enter a space for the first time, we notice the abnormalities. But as we grow accustomed to our own spaces, we quickly lose objectivity—and those abnormalities disappear from our minds. That's why it's easier for guests to recognize faded wallpaper than for most residents.

Renovating the women's restroom was more complicated than I realized. Repeated efforts in the past to paint the block wall surfaces were only a temporary solution as the molds kept reappearing. We hired a couple of contractors to perform special tasks: sealing the walls, floor, and ceiling to keep the molds from reappearing. As a result the project cost more money than the nursery changes. But the fixtures, colors, and finishes produced a room everyone would appreciate.

Well, almost everyone.

Following the project, one woman sat in my office complaining about the money spent on the women's restroom renovation. Her judgment was clouded by the first issue—she couldn't discern that this facility issue was a ministry issue. She tried to appeal to the humility position—that we had wonderful facilities compared to a Third World country. Why did we spend so much money on the renovation?

"We could have sent the money to our missionar-

ies," she said, playing the humility trump card. She only shook her head when I countered that sending the money to missionaries in the "utmost parts of the world" is important, but we also need to invest in areas that help us reach our own "Jerusalem."

I reasoned that moldy walls are as unacceptable to the women's restroom as the nursery. So I reminded her of the molds on the restroom walls and also some of the stall partitions.

"I don't know, it kind of had a homey feel to it," she responded. I ended the conversation as graciously as I could.

When I told my wife that comment, she was stunned and countered, "Well, not our home." Today we laugh recalling this event. But it clearly illustrates how clouded people's judgment can become. What we overlook, we learn to accept. What we accept, we eventually become attached to. And what we become attached to, we resist changing—even unclean or unsanitary conditions.

This situation taught me that there will always be resistance to change, no matter how well prayed for and planned. Realizing this fact gave me renewed energy to address a full sanctuary renovation—a project I always knew would meet some resistance. But we made it through that project as well to enjoy a renovated facility—a facility I believe pleases God.

Any facility change will meet resistance. Since none of us likes resistance, we can become tentative about the facility changes that are truly necessary for healthy ministry. But getting past the blind spots and pulling back the layers of clouding issues can provide us with clearer vision to see what God wants our facilities to be. (L)