



Systems Strategy Series

Stewards of More

**Leading Like You Mean It: Systems, Strategy, and the
Business of Faithful Ministry**

A Companion Brief to *Faithful Over a Few Things: How to Map What You Have and Put It to Work*

April 2026

The Herron Group, LLC

Note: The Herron Group integrates AI-assisted tools into our research, analysis, and document development processes to enhance quality and efficiency. All strategic direction, client engagement, and final deliverables are led and reviewed by THG team members. We take your privacy seriously. Client information is treated as confidential, is not used to train AI models, is not shared with third parties, and is used solely in service of your project.

The Parable Revisited: Talent as a Management Principle

The Parable of the Talents in Matthew 25:14-30 and the Parable of the Minas in Luke 19:11-27 are two of the most direct leadership frameworks in Scripture. In both, a leader distributes resources to his people according to their capacity, then leaves. Two of them invest what they received and return with more. One buries his portion and returns it unchanged. The leader does not discipline the one who buried his share for losing it. He disciplines him for not using it.

This is not just a spiritual metaphor. It is a systems principle. The workers who succeeded applied three disciplines that any well-run organization depends on: they assessed what they had, they understood those resources had growth potential, and they put a strategy in motion. The one who failed did not lack resources. He lacked the mindset and the method to steward them.

"For to everyone who has, more will be given, and he will have abundance. But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away." Matthew 25:29

This companion brief is for church leaders and faith-based organizations who are ready to move beyond that third posture and into the first two. It is for leaders who recognize that managing a ministry well is not a compromise of the sacred. It is an expression of it.

A New Season Calls for New Tools

Pastoral leadership has always required wisdom, discernment, and a deep commitment to people. The pastors and faith leaders serving communities today bring those qualities in abundance. What has changed is not the character of the leaders. What has changed is the environment in which they are leading.

Economic pressure is reshaping how families give and what they need. Communities are asking more of their faith institutions than ever before. And the tools available to help organizations communicate, coordinate, and demonstrate their impact have advanced rapidly in ways that most ministry training programs simply have not caught up to yet. That is not a reflection on any leader. It is a reflection of how quickly the landscape has shifted.

Seminary and ministry formation programs are rightly focused on theology, spiritual care, and pastoral practice. They prepare leaders to shepherd people through the full arc of human experience. What they have not traditionally included, and what this season is increasingly demanding, is practical grounding in organizational systems, strategic resource planning, and the use of technology to extend what a ministry can accomplish. These are learnable tools, not innate traits. And leaders who add them to their pastoral toolkit become more effective, not less faithful.

This is not a season for churches to do more of the same. It is a season to lead more strategically, collaborate more broadly, and communicate more clearly, so that the mission receives everything it deserves.

The good news is that these tools do not require starting over. They start exactly where the companion brief to this document begins: with what you already have.

Running a Ministry With a Corporate Mindset: What That Actually Means

When people hear the phrase "run your church like a business," it often triggers discomfort. The church is not a profit center. Ministry is not a product line. Relationships are not transactions. These objections are right. But they misidentify what organizational disciplines actually contribute, and why leaders in this economic moment are finding them so valuable.

In a strained economy, every dollar given is a sacrifice. Every volunteer hour is precious. Every program that does not deliver real impact is a cost the community cannot afford. The operational disciplines that help businesses and well-run nonprofits thrive are not foreign to ministry. They are expressions of the same stewardship ethic the Parables of the Talents and Minas model. They help leaders direct limited resources toward maximum impact for the people they serve.

A well-run organization, whether a business, a nonprofit, or a ministry, shares a set of operational disciplines that have nothing to do with profit motive and everything to do with faithful stewardship. These include:

- **Purpose.** Clarity about what the organization exists to do and for whom.
- **Strategy.** A plan that connects resources to outcomes rather than just activities.
- **Accountability.** Transparency about how money is received and spent.
- **Continuity.** Systems that allow good work to continue even when specific people are unavailable.
- **Feedback.** Measurement that tells leaders whether they are making the progress they intend to make.
- **Coordination.** A culture where collaboration and shared goals replace competition between ministries.

None of these disciplines conflict with the mission of the church. In fact, they strengthen it. When there is clarity about purpose, energy goes where it matters most. When there is a strategy, resources flow to the highest-impact work rather than to whatever is most urgent in the moment. When there is transparency, trust grows. When there is measurement, leadership can make confident decisions about what to continue, what to change, and what to invest in next.

What donors and congregants deserve is not just a faith statement. They deserve to see the system their generosity is funding. Transparency about how giving connects to impact is not a corporate imposition on sacred work. It is a form of respect and gratitude for the people who trust the church with their resources.

Thinking Lean: The Parables as an Optimization Framework

Lean is a methodology developed in manufacturing and widely adopted across healthcare, education, and nonprofits. Its core principle is deceptively simple: identify what creates value for the people you serve, and eliminate everything that does not. Lean is not about cutting corners or reducing care. It is about directing energy toward what actually matters (Womack & Jones, 2003).

In Lean terms, the worker who buried his talent was running a system full of waste. Not waste in the sense of extravagance, but waste in the sense of potential that was never converted into value. Lean identifies seven classic categories of waste that apply directly to how many churches operate:

| Type of Waste | How It Shows Up in Churches |
|-------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Waiting | Decisions delayed because the right people are never in the same room. Volunteers waiting on leadership to clarify direction. |
| Overproduction | Events and programs launched because they have always been launched, not because they are serving a current need. |
| Underused Talent | Members with professional skills sitting in pews while the church pays outside vendors for the same expertise. |
| Defects | Communications that go out with errors, events poorly planned, programs that do not deliver on their stated purpose. |
| Motion | Leaders duplicating effort across ministries because there is no shared system or coordination structure. |
| Inventory | Resources stored but never deployed: equipment, rooms, curriculum, relationships, even budget reserves that sit idle. |
| Transportation | Information that has to pass through too many people or approvals before anyone can act on it. |

Applying a Lean lens to your church does not mean eliminating tradition or cutting community-building activities that seem inefficient on paper. It means looking honestly at how the church

spends its time, money, and attention, and asking whether those expenditures are producing the ministry outcomes the congregation exists to achieve.

The talent buried in the ground was not lost. It was simply never put to use. Lean thinking asks: what would it look like to unbury what you already have?

Sharing Community Resources: The Collaborative Model

One of the most underused strategic opportunities for faith-based organizations is the one that is right next to them. Most churches exist within a few miles of other congregations, nonprofits, schools, and community organizations that are working toward overlapping goals and struggling with overlapping constraints.

The solo model of church operations, where every congregation runs its own food pantry, its own after-school program, its own counseling ministry, its own financial literacy class, is expensive, duplicative, and often less effective than it could be. It is the organizational equivalent of every family on a block buying their own lawnmower, their own pressure washer, and their own ladder, when none of them use those tools more than twice a year.

Shared resources multiply impact. Isolated resources produce diminishing returns.

What a Collaborative Resource Model Looks Like

Churches that move toward a collaborative model start by mapping what they have, using the asset-based approach outlined in the companion brief (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993), and then looking for organizations with complementary strengths and overlapping missions:

- Three congregations sharing one full-time social services coordinator rather than each trying to maintain a part-time position none of them can fully fund.
- A church with a commercial kitchen partnering with a culinary training nonprofit to run a certification program that serves community members and generates facility revenue.
- Two churches with adjacent youth populations pooling their after-school program resources to offer a stronger experience than either could provide alone.
- A faith community with a large parking lot partnering with a Saturday farmers market to generate traffic, community connection, and modest income.
- A network of churches creating a shared volunteer database so that skilled members can be matched to needs across the community rather than staying siloed within one congregation.

None of these require dissolving organizational identity. They require a shift from scarcity thinking, where protecting what you have is the primary posture, to abundance thinking, where sharing what you have multiplies it.

This is exactly what both parables model. The workers who succeeded were not holding their resources tightly. They were moving them into relationship with the world, putting them to work in ways that created more than they started with.

The Three Service Areas: Where THG Comes In

The Herron Group works with mission-driven organizations across three interconnected service areas. Each one is designed to help faith-based organizations build on the strengths they already have while adding the tools and systems that this moment demands.

| Measurement Design | Systems Strategy | AI Implementation |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Define what success looks like | Map organizational assets | Automate routine communications |
| Track giving transparency | Redesign workflows | Build volunteer matching tools |
| Measure ministry impact | Coordinate across ministries | Analyze giving patterns |
| Build donor dashboards | Build collaborative structures | Create intake and referral forms |
| Report outcomes to community | Eliminate operational waste | Support pastoral care workflows |
| Connect programs to results | Align people to purpose | Extend staff capacity |

Measurement Design: Proving the Work

Many churches measure faithfulness by attendance and giving. These are useful numbers, but they do not tell the full story. How many people in your congregation experienced a material improvement in their wellbeing because of a ministry you run? How many community members received services they could not have gotten elsewhere? How many volunteers grew in skill or confidence through their service to the church?

Measurement Design helps churches move from counting bodies to documenting impact. This matters because it changes the conversation with current donors, attracts new funders, and gives leadership the feedback it needs to make good decisions about where to invest energy and resources.

Transparency in giving is a specific application of this service area that matters enormously for churches that want to grow. When people understand how their donations are used, how they connect to real outcomes in real people's lives, they give more and they give more consistently. Financial transparency is not a vulnerability. It is a growth strategy.

Systems Strategy: Redesigning How You Work

A church is a system. It has inputs (people, money, time, relationships), processes (how those inputs move through the organization), and outputs (what the community experiences as a result). When the system has not been intentionally designed, even good leaders with abundant faith can find their energy absorbed by coordination problems, duplicated effort, and programs that do not connect to a larger purpose. When the system is built with intention, even modest resources can produce significant impact.

Systems Strategy helps churches examine their organizational architecture with fresh eyes. How are decisions made? How do ministries coordinate? Where are resources concentrated that could be redistributed? What processes exist to onboard, develop, and retain volunteers? Who owns which outcomes?

This is the work of building an organization that is designed to achieve its mission at the highest level possible, honoring the traditions that define a community's identity while creating the structures that allow that community to grow.

AI Implementation: Extending What Your Team Can Do

Artificial intelligence is not a future technology. It is a present one, and faith-based organizations are already using it, often without a strategy for doing so intentionally. AI Implementation helps churches move from accidental AI use to purposeful AI use.

Practical applications include:

- Automated follow-up communications for new visitors so no one falls through the cracks after their first Sunday.
- Volunteer matching tools that connect member skills to specific ministry needs without requiring a staff member to manually manage the process.
- AI-assisted drafting of newsletters, grant applications, and donor reports to extend the capacity of small staff teams.
- Giving analysis that helps leadership understand patterns, identify lapsed donors, and communicate more effectively with different segments of the congregation.
- Intake and referral tools for social services ministries that reduce paperwork and improve the experience for community members seeking help.

None of these replace pastoral presence or human relationship. They free up the time of pastors and staff to do more of the work that requires a human heart and less of the work that can be handled by a well-designed system.

A Strategic Framework for Getting Started

For church leaders who are ready to move from the map to the strategy, here is a practical framework organized around three horizons. This is not a prescriptive timeline. It is a way of sequencing your work so that each step builds on the one before it.

Horizon One: See What You Have (Months 1-3)

- Complete your resource map across all five categories.
- Identify your top three underused assets.
- Map your current organizational structure: who does what and who decides what.
- Assess your current measurement practices: what do you track and what do you not.
- Identify two or three potential partner organizations in your community.

Horizon Two: Design What You Want (Months 4-9)

- Develop a simple strategic plan with three to five priority goals.
- Redesign or clarify your decision-making and coordination processes.
- Create a basic impact measurement framework tied to each priority.
- Begin transparency reporting on finances, connected to ministry outcomes.
- Pilot one collaborative resource-sharing arrangement with a partner organization.
- Introduce a simple AI tool in one administrative or communication workflow.

Horizon Three: Build for Scale (Months 10-18)

- Establish a shared measurement framework across ministry areas.
- Expand collaborative arrangements based on pilot results.
- Create a community resource directory based on your network map.
- Develop a giving transparency report for the congregation.
- Build a volunteer skills inventory and matching system.
- Assess AI implementation results and expand intentional use.

The Cost of Staying Still

The worker who buried his talent did not lose money. He did not make mistakes. He simply returned exactly what he had been given. And yet the leader's response was sharp. The absence of growth was itself a problem. In an economy where community needs are rising and household giving capacity is strained, standing still is not a neutral act. It is a choice with consequences.

Churches that do not move toward greater transparency, strategic coordination, and outcome-oriented ministry face a set of compounding risks that are worth naming directly. Not as a warning, but as a realistic picture of what is at stake.

Congregants Give What They Can See

Research on charitable giving consistently shows that donors, including faithful church members, give more when they understand how their giving makes a difference. A study of more than 14,000 nonprofits published in the *Journal of Accounting, Auditing & Finance* found that organizations that improved their transparency saw an average increase of 53 percent in total contributions the following year, and that the level of transparency was associated with greater future contributions even after controlling for other factors (Harris & Neely, 2021).

When congregants cannot see how their tithes and offerings connect to real outcomes in real lives, they do not necessarily stop giving. But they often stop growing in their giving. And in a season when every household is making hard choices about where limited dollars go, that stagnation has real consequences for the church's capacity to serve.

Consider the practical chain: a church builds a simple impact report showing that its food pantry served 340 families last year, that its after-school tutoring program improved reading scores for 28 children, and that its emergency assistance fund prevented 12 households from losing their utilities. Members who see that report now know what their giving accomplishes. Some of them will give more. Some will recruit others to give. Some will volunteer because they want to be part of something they can see is working. That cycle, transparency leading to trust leading to generosity, is how churches build the giving base that allows them to hire staff, expand programs, and stop asking the same volunteers to carry the same load indefinitely.

The Volunteer Ceiling

Many churches are running at the limit of what their volunteer base can sustain. Programs that depend on a small group of committed members to function are fragile. When those members experience burnout, life transitions, or health challenges, the programs falter. This is not a failure of dedication. It is a structural problem: the organization is designed around individuals rather than systems.

Research from the Do Good Institute at the University of Maryland found that volunteer engagement was among the top operational challenges facing nonprofits, and that organizations with clearly defined roles, training systems, and leadership pipelines retained

volunteers at significantly higher rates than those without (Dietz & Grimm, 2023). The difference was not the quality of the volunteers. It was the quality of the systems supporting them.

Churches that do not build those systems will continue to rely on the same people until those people cannot continue. Churches that do build them create the conditions where volunteer capacity grows, where new leaders emerge, and where the organization can eventually make the case to its congregation for hiring staff because the systems exist to support and deploy that staff effectively.

The Funding That Goes Elsewhere

Faith-based organizations have historically been strong candidates for community development grants, government contracts, and philanthropic partnerships. But funders in this environment are increasingly requiring grantees to demonstrate impact with data, show financial accountability, and describe the systems they have in place to ensure programs deliver on their stated purpose.

Churches that have not built measurement or reporting systems are not eligible for many of these opportunities, not because of any failing in their ministry, but because they cannot yet speak the language funders require. That represents real money that stays on the table while organizations with stronger systems receive it.

The cost of doing nothing is not zero. It is the sum of every resource that was never deployed, every partner that was never found, every donor who never saw why their giving mattered, and every program that ended because the systems around it could not sustain it.

None of this is inevitable. Every one of these outcomes is addressable with intentional systems work. The question is whether to begin now, from a position of strength and choice, or to wait until the pressures of a strained economy and a stretched volunteer base force the conversation.

The Mindset Shift That Makes Everything Else Possible

The worker who buried his talent was not lazy. He was afraid. The text says so directly. He was afraid of losing what he had been given, so he protected it by hiding it. That fear is understandable. But it cost him everything the resource could have become.

Change of any kind, even change in the direction of greater impact, can feel risky. There may be concern that asking new questions about organizational effectiveness signals that something is wrong. There may be uncertainty about how the congregation will respond to new reporting or new ways of working. There may be hesitation about learning tools that feel unfamiliar. These are honest responses to a genuinely new moment.

"The same God who calls churches to make disciples also calls them to be faithful stewards of the resources those disciples trust to them."

Stewardship is not a passive concept. In both parables, the workers who were commended did not simply guard what they were given. They made it work. They took risk. They operated with intentionality and skill. And because they did, they were entrusted with more.

The invitation for every church leader is the same. See what is in your hands. Understand what it is capable of. Put a strategy in motion. Invite others into the work. And build the systems that will let that work outlast any single leader, any single program, or any single season of ministry.

That is not a corporate vision. It is a Biblical one.

About The Herron Group

The Herron Group, LLC helps mission-driven organizations measure their impact, redesign their systems, and implement practical AI solutions. We serve churches, nonprofits, educational institutions, healthcare organizations, and public-sector entities that are ready to move from good intentions to great outcomes.

Website: theherrongroupllc.net

Email: marshah@theherrongroupllc.net

References

Dietz, N., & Grimm, R. T., Jr. (2023). *The state of volunteer engagement: Insights from nonprofit leaders and funders*. Do Good Institute, School of Public Policy, University of Maryland.

Harris, E. E., & Neely, D. G. (2021). Determinants and consequences of nonprofit transparency. *Journal of Accounting, Auditing & Finance*, 36(1), 195-220.

Kretzmann, J. P., & McKnight, J. L. (1993). *Building communities from the inside out: A path toward finding and mobilizing a community's assets*. ACTA Publications.

Womack, J. P., & Jones, D. T. (2003). *Lean thinking: Banish waste and create wealth in your corporation* (2nd ed.). Free Press.