



Stewardship requires follow through and evaluation

by Tony Ferraro

The declining economy is hitting hard. Belts are tightening and storehouses are running dry. Yet, even in a fading market, the church is called to be a good “steward.” It is faced with the challenge of finding a return on the resources provided by God. This requires good planning and management. Are you reaping the full benefit of what you sow?

Good stewardship includes:

- Identifying the problem that requires investment;
- defining the plan;
- finding a solution: buyer beware;
- managing the execution;
- evaluating and re-investing.

Identifying the Problem That Requires Investment

The first step toward achieving good stewardship is to clearly identify the need where you’ll be allocating the resources. What is the hole that needs to be filled? Square pegs in round holes will always cost time and money and lead to a lower return on investment.

While identifying the need may seem obvious, it is not always easy. Often, the symptoms of the need present more immediate pain and can distract from finding the actual root of the need. For example, if the church has recently made a capital purchase involving technology,

and the users are failing to use it, most often the response and ultimate solution is to “get rid of it and try something else” because “this doesn’t work for us.” That decision will cost thousands of dollars. Costs include: human capital costs for researching new technology; possible cash costs to acquire new technology; additional human capital costs to train people how to use the new technology and productivity costs as the new technology is integrated into the environment.

What is wrong with this solution? The technology may not have been the issue at all. A leading business analyst reported several years ago that as much as 80 percent of all enterprise initiatives fail. Do they fail because of bad technology? Some do; however, the analyst found that the number one reason was a lack of user adoption. People resist change. So, simply replacing the technology may not solve the problem. Money will be spent and the same issue may reintroduce itself with the new technology, “nobody is using it.”

The symptom was clearly lack of use, however, the actual problem could be that people are not confident using it, need additional training or are resistant to change. They are comfortable with the status quo and are not open to changing what they do. Their attitude is “if it isn’t broke, don’t fix it.” They were perfectly happy with the way things were before the technology was introduced. Typical users are not familiar with the efficiency gains that management was trying to accomplish when purchasing the solution. As such, they resist, fail to adopt and the technology appears to “not work for us.”

To be successful, the right problem must be solved or the environment will most likely suffer the same issue again.

Defining the Plan

Once the need has been clearly identified, the plan must be developed to solve the problem.



The difference between luck and success is planning. In order to be successful, one must start with a goal in mind, develop a strategy to attain it, dedicate the resources and execute. God has not asked the church to play roulette. Rather, He has required stewardship and managing resources to attain a prescribed outcome.

A good plan combines ideas with strategy:

- I**— Identify the Problem;
- D**—Determine a Solution;
- E**—Evaluate the Costs: Money, Time and People;
- A**—Allocate Resources.

After identifying the problem, you will need to develop the solution and this requires hard work and research. Churches must be willing to practice church operations using the proven tools of the corporate world. These might include:

- 1) employee, volunteer and/or member focus groups and
- 2) gathering input from the team to determine the proper solution.

This will go a long way toward creating mindshare within the environment and directly impacting user adoption.

Additionally, churches must cast their nets wide. Often myopia sets in when problem solving. People get stifled believing that because a possible solution has been found, that it is the right solution. Stewardship requires wisdom and frugality. For every solution provider, there are at least three to five other providers solving the same or similar problems. Churches have some level of purchasing power. They do not have to buy or subscribe to the first thing they find; but, rather it is imperative that they find the right solution to solve the right problem at the right price. That combination does exist.

Planning requires solid resource management. Often the costs associated with a project go well beyond simply buying the solution. There are tangible costs, such as training and infrastructure, and there are intangible costs such as lost productivity during the ramp up, and opportunity costs as staff members are taking time away from normal activities to invest in learning. A proper plan will include all peripheral costs associated with the project.

Good stewardship requires strong planning. Although a good plan can help minimize future costs, planning can be tedious and laborious, but well worth the investment.

Finding a Solution: Buyer Beware

There are a lot of companies and people taking advantage of the church. Often, these companies—thinking only of “making the sale” and not about the true needs of the church—deliver a slick sales pitch, new technology and convenient payment strategies. Churches must take the time to educate themselves about product evaluation so they aren’t lured into purchasing the wrong solution.

When financing a car, it is clear that the key concern should be, how much will the car really cost after all payments have been made? In the corporate environment, this is called total cost of ownership. What is the total cost of whatever is being purchased over time?

There are products targeted at churches that take advantage of for-profit savings strategies, i.e. offering Software as a Service (SaaS), also known as a hosted solution, online solution and Application Service Provider (ASP). This model can be quite affordable and is often a good buying strategy because it eliminates the need to buy software, servers and infrastructure; however, it must be remembered, these companies have a plan to make money. While they do need to be profitable in order to remain in business and service their customers, they do want to hit the profitability margins experienced by Fortune 500 companies and will do so at the expense of the church.

If a company is charging more than a couple of hundred dollars per month to host a database system for your church, you are paying too much. There is not enough time to examine all of the actual costs involved in providing such a service; however, they are minimal. Some churches are paying as much as \$2,000 to \$3,000 per month for an online database management tool. Once software is developed, the remaining fees are mostly profit for the developer. Creating new instances of the environment in a SaaS model, i.e. setting up your instance, is typically little more than a day’s work, and there is no cost associated with the soft-

ware unless there is extreme customization.

Providing services to the church should be a means by which a company claiming to be Christ-based is using their talents to serve the church, investing their talents in the Body of Christ. A company's ownership's Christian story should be more than a convenient point of entry to sell their product.

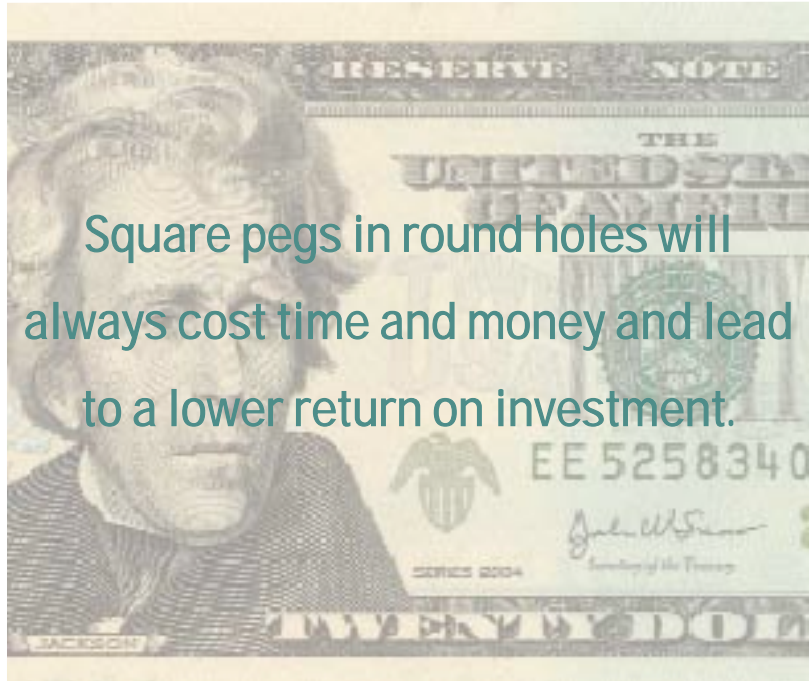
Buyers must beware. Competitive products exist. Products that were not available just a few years ago are thriving now and being offered by companies that have a ministry mindset and are willing to offer special discounted pricing for churches.

Further, in tandem with determining your plan, church staffs must evaluate whether or not they really need all of the bells and whistles being sold to them. While the latest and greatest is produced by Company X, the latest and greatest might not be required to accomplish the goals previously set by the church. The bottom line is that sales people like to sell, and as a result, can uncover a plethora of world-ending problems in your environment that you never knew you had. Unfortunately, just because something looks cool doesn't mean it is the right purchase decision. Church after church after church has purchased thousands of dollars of software that has gone unused and resulted in wasted funds.

These risks can be minimized by doing two simple things. First, as discussed, shop around. Second, identify a solution provider that shares your values. Again, if a company is not providing their service as an act of ministry, then hold them to a stricter level of financial accountability. Companies today should be positioned to add value to your mission. That requires that they share your ambition and value structure. If they do not, the relationship will cost you more over time as they continue to add on new functions and identify more problems that you did not know you had.

Managing the Execution

Whether the plan to solve the identified need requires a capital purchase or creating an event, the execution of the plan must be managed.



All plans in their execution can easily suffer scope crawl, having the execution of the solution grow beyond the original plan. Scope crawl can be quite costly. It can lead to not only wasted money but also time and human resources. This is especially true when executing Internet-based strategies to solve a particular problem.

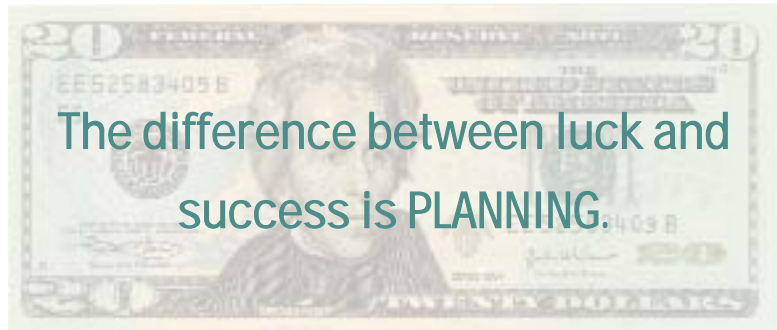
An advantage to using the Internet is that there are millions of people online doing things differently. It is very easy to find fresh ideas and new things to try. The disadvantage of the Internet is that so many ideas can become distracting.

As plans transition to execution, it is very easy for stakeholders to identify ideas and solutions that they had never thought about as they browse the Internet. This is similar to the problem of the creative salesperson mentioned above. As people browse the Internet, suddenly there are dozens of features and functions that they cannot live without, even though they did not know about them five minutes ago.

Good stewardship requires managing those experiences by pressing forward with the plan that was developed. It also requires that there be a great effort put towards staying on schedule. If people are not held accountable, they will not be. This means that a solid project manager must be put in place to make sure the plan stays on schedule so that goals are met. This individual must be disciplined enough to stay on course and be willing to put boundaries around those that want to go off-course.

Insuring success following the implementation will also depend on squarely identifying who will be responsible for the success of the project. Who will be the “project champion?” The project champion will press through obstacles as the plan is implemented and insure that the new system is being integrated into the use of the environment. The champion’s job is to insure success. They must be clearly identified and empowered to do so.

Managing the execution of the plan is critical. If the problem is clearly identified and the right solution is determined, but the process is not managed, all of the time and effort that has been spent will most likely be lost. Too often, good intentions lack follow-through. In football, the most difficult yards to gain are the



ones immediately in front of the end zone. Wasted efforts cost money and lead to diminished returns.

Evaluate and Re-Invest

The final phase of good stewardship, as seen with the parable of the talents, is to evaluate what you have done and then re-invest. The “master” in the parable saw that the good stewards had multiplied his money, so he gave them more.

Often times, churches forget to take a look at what has already been developed to determine whether or not the return on investment has been accomplished. If they’ve fallen short in achieving their goals, what can be done to improve things? If so, can performance be increased even more?

Also, it is critical to have organizational integrity regarding investments being made with the church’s money. If planning was properly done on the front end, expected returns and benchmarks were set. Those things become the grading sheet: did we do it? Again, the difference between luck and success is simply planning.

Stewardship requires follow-through and evaluation. As a result, the church must look itself in the mirror and determine whether or not it is using the resources God has given it to build stewardship within the congregation and achieve goals. This can be done by leveraging the many benefits of the Internet and taking advantage of tools and practices already established in the business world. These can help you maximize efficiencies within the church, while growing stewardship and encouraging fellowship.❖

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