

UN-BARRED

Find what's lost.

White Paper

Growth vs. Faithfulness

A Framework for Measuring Mission Organization Health

Command of Care

Executive Summary

Two questions recur across the boardrooms and donor conversations of mission organizations, asked in language so similar it might as well be scripted: “When will this be self-sustaining?” and “How do we scale this?” Both sound like responsible stewardship. Neither is a neutral question.

Financial sustainability and organizational scale have become the default proxies for success in this sector, borrowed largely intact from a business world built to measure a different kind of enterprise. Applied without translation to a spiritually-led endeavor, they exert a particular and predictable pressure: toward growth that is fundable and measurable, and away from the relational, sacrificial, often slow qualities that made the work trustworthy and spiritually authentic in the first place.

This paper names that pressure directly — not to dismiss financial responsibility or ambition for impact, both of which are legitimate — but to separate genuine stewardship from a growth logic that quietly erodes the thing it claims to be building. It describes, through composite and anonymized patterns, what that erosion actually looks like from inside an organization. It then offers five alternative marks of health — harder to answer than a balance sheet, but far better correlated with whether an organization remains what it was called to be. It closes with concrete recommendations for boards and for donor communication.

I | The Problem

Borrowed Metrics

Sustainability and scale are not bad questions in themselves. Every organization has to eat, and every organization that is doing real good should want to do more of it. The problem is not the presence of these questions. The problem is their promotion to the primary measure of whether an organization is succeeding — and that promotion rarely happens by accident. More often it is a deliberate transplant: a challenge issued by leadership chasing growth for its own validation, credit claimed by board members eager to point to expansion as their contribution, or a question donors ask because they have been trained by the wider culture of giving to expect it as the mark of responsible stewardship. The vocabulary of scale and sustainability is carried in on purpose, most often by people whose working lives were built inside businesses and boardrooms, applying the only success metrics they have ever been trained to trust to a kind of work those metrics were never built to measure.

A commercial business is, by design, measured by revenue and growth, because revenue and growth are reasonably good proxies for the value it is delivering. A spiritually-led organization was never built on that logic. Its value is delivered in changed lives, restored dignity, and faithful presence — outcomes that resist a spreadsheet far more than they resist description. When a board or a donor base defaults to financial and numerical metrics anyway, it is because those are the metrics its leaders already trust and already know how to ask about — not because anyone tested whether they were the right ones for this kind of work.

What “When Will You Be Self-Sustaining” Actually Asks

Underneath this question is often a donor's own weariness — a fatigue with the ongoing responsibility of doing financial good, and a wish that the responsibility could be resolved rather than sustained. That weariness is human and understandable. It is not, however, a reliable signal of what the organization actually needs. An organization pressured to “graduate” from support before its local economic and relational context can sustain it is not being held to a standard of health — it is being asked to solve someone else's fatigue.

Galatians 6:9 speaks to this fatigue on both sides of the giving relationship, each in its own register. To the donor, it says: do not grow weary of giving. To the field worker, it says something related but not identical: do not grow weary of doing the good that the giving makes possible. Applied to the frontline worker, that exhortation has to be read alongside Command of Care — perseverance in doing good was never a mandate to erase boundaries or forgo rest. It is faithfulness to the work itself, sustained by the self-care that makes sustained faithfulness possible, not in spite of it. Read this way, the verse answers donor weariness with a call to keep giving rather than a green light to hasten an exit, and it answers field-worker exhaustion not with license to burn out in service of that giving, but with the deeper, boundaried endurance this practice has argued for from the start.

What “How Do We Scale This” Actually Asks

Underneath this question is often an unexamined equation: that size and faithfulness are the same thing, or that a ministry which stays the same size has stopped succeeding. This is a form of institutional ambition wearing the language of stewardship. It is worth naming plainly, without cynicism: bigger is not the same as more faithful, and an organization can multiply its budget and its footprint while quietly losing the very qualities — relational depth, local trust, spiritual authenticity — that made the work faithful in the first place, independent of its size.

Scripture offers a sharper version of this instinct than any modern illustration could. In Judges 7, Gideon assembles an army of thirty-two thousand men to face the Midianites — and God

tells him he has too many. Not too few. The army is cut down twice, first to ten thousand, then to three hundred, selected by a test that has nothing to do with strength or skill. The stated reason is explicit: “lest Israel boast over me, saying, ‘My own hand has saved me’” (Judges 7:2). God does not scale the force up to guarantee the outcome. He scales it down — on purpose, so that the victory cannot be credited to size. That is the exact inversion of a board eager to point to expansion as evidence of its own contribution. Faithfulness was never meant to be provable by numbers large enough to explain the outcome without reference to God. Sometimes the smallness of a work is the point — proof that what happened could not have happened by force of scale alone.

II | The Cost

The following patterns are composite — drawn from common features across many organizations rather than describing any single one. Each illustrates a different way that growth, pursued as the primary metric, degrades the thing it was meant to serve.

A note on these patterns

These are illustrative composites, not case studies of a specific organization, board, or donor. The value here is in recognizing the pattern, not in identifying the source.

Pattern A — The Bureaucratic Drift

An organization built on its founder's personal, relational model of care comes under pressure to scale rapidly — more sites, more staff, more programs. The pressure can come from any direction: a founder's own ambition, a board convinced that growth is itself the mark of success, or donors eager to fund expansion. Whatever the source, managing the scale means professionalizing: policies replace relationships, metrics replace conversations, and staff who once knew every family they served now manage caseloads they can name but no longer know. The organization grows. Burnout among staff rises in step. The mission has not changed on paper. In practice, the work has quietly become about moving people through programs rather than knowing them.

Pattern B — The Transactional Turn

A field ministry, pressured toward “self-sustainability,” adopts a fee-for-service or heavily transactional funding model to reduce donor dependency. The financial pressure eases. Something else erodes alongside it: the trust-based, gift-based relational fabric that made the ministry credible in the community it served. Slowly, the posture shifts from a ministry among neighbors to a vendor among clients — a shift no one voted for, and one that is rarely reversible once the local relationships have recalibrated around it.

Pattern C — The Founder Squeeze

An organization reaches a point at which its founding leadership style comes to be seen as a liability — sometimes by a board, which concludes it needs “professional” leadership instead, and sometimes between co-founders themselves, as one gradually consolidates authority the two once held jointly. Either version follows the same arc: the person whose relational, sacrificial character the culture was actually built around is eased out, often gradually, often framed as a natural transition rather than a removal. The organization retains its name and its programs. It loses the person — or one of the people — the trust was actually built on, along with the internal accountability that relationship provided.

III | A Different Framework: Five Marks of Faithful Growth

These five marks are offered as an alternative diagnostic — harder to answer in a single board meeting than a balance sheet, and considerably more predictive of whether an organization remains what it was called to be. None of them argue against growth. They argue for growth that does not cost the organization its authenticity to purchase its scale.

MARK 1

Does Dissent Survive Contact with Leadership?

Ask the board: *Can a staff member disagree with a decision — openly, on the record — and still have a future here?*

GREEN FLAG	RED FLAG
Disagreement is visible in meeting minutes. People who raised hard questions last year are still on staff, and still willing to raise the next one.	Consensus is suspiciously smooth. Departures cluster after periods of internal conflict, and the reasons given are always “personal” or “a good fit elsewhere.”

MARK 2

Is Impact Defined by Lives or by Numbers?

Ask the board: *If we could not report a single statistic this year, could we still describe, in specific human terms, who was served and how?*

GREEN FLAG	RED FLAG
Annual reports lead with named stories and only then cite figures. Staff can describe individual outcomes without checking a dashboard.	Annual reports lead with figures — people served, dollars raised, sites opened — and struggle to name specific outcomes without them.

MARK 3

Does the Organization Survive Leadership Transition with Values Intact?

Ask the board: *If our founder or lead pastor left tomorrow, would our culture and priorities hold, or would they need to be rebuilt from the person rather than from a shared conviction?*

GREEN FLAG	RED FLAG
Values are documented, practiced by multiple leaders independently of the founder, and have already survived at least one real transition.	The culture is inseparable from one personality. No one can describe “how we do things here” without describing that person specifically.

MARK 4

Is Staff Health a Tracked Metric — Not Just Donor Retention?

Ask the board: *Do we track staff retention, burnout indicators, and exit-interview themes with the same rigor we track donor retention?*

GREEN FLAG	RED FLAG
Staff wellbeing data exists, is reviewed by the board, and has driven at least one real policy change.	Donor retention is a standing board agenda item. Staff turnover is discussed only anecdotally, if at all.

MARK 5

Can Leadership Name the Theological Purpose Without Financial Language?

Ask the board: *Can our leadership articulate why this work matters in a single answer that contains no reference to budget, growth, or sustainability?*

GREEN FLAG	RED FLAG
Leadership can and does answer this in theological and relational terms, easily and often.	The answer defaults quickly to numbers, capacity, or funding — even when the question was about purpose.

IV | Recommendations

For Boards

- **Separate mission health from financial health as agenda items.** Put at least one of the Five Marks on the agenda every quarter, as its own line item — not folded into the financial report, where it will always lose.
- **Track what you actually want to protect.** If dissent, staff wellbeing, and leadership-transition resilience are not currently tracked, name that gap explicitly rather than assuming it will surface informally.
- **Pressure-test growth decisions against the marks.** Before approving a scale initiative, ask which of the Five Marks it is most likely to put under pressure — and decide in advance what you are willing to protect if the two come into conflict.

For Donor Communication

Donors ask “When will you be self-sustaining?” because the traditional funding relationship assumes an end point — help now, independence later. That assumption quietly pressures an organization toward hitting a financial deadline instead of building genuine health, and it recasts an ongoing partnership as a problem to be resolved.

- **Offer a replacement question for donors to ask.** “What does health look like for this ministry right now, and how can our support help you get there?” This keeps the donor as an ongoing partner in the organization's wellbeing, rather than a funder waiting to exit.
- **Report on health, not only on scale.** A donor update that includes one of the Five Marks alongside financial reporting invites a donor base into a more accurate definition of success, rather than reinforcing the one they arrived with.

V | Conclusion

None of this is an argument against growth, against financial responsibility, or against wanting a ministry's impact to reach more people. It is an argument against measuring faithfulness by proxies that were never built to measure it — and against the quiet, well-intentioned pressure that turns “when will you be self-sustaining” and “how do we scale this” into the only questions a board or donor knows how to ask.

An organization can be small and faithful, or large and faithful — size was never the variable that mattered. What matters is whether the qualities that made the work spiritually authentic

in the first place are still present after the growth, or whether they were the price quietly paid for it. The Five Marks will not fit on a single line of a financial report. That is precisely the point.