

Before You Begin

How to start an honest conversation about mission, alignment, and change

A companion to The Jesus Organization and the Jesus Index. Read it individually, then use the conversation guide with your church, ministry, board, or leadership team.

Begin with curiosity. Make room for disagreement. Return to the mission.

How to Begin the Conversation

Change inside an organization is rarely resisted simply because people dislike improvement. More often, resistance begins because change threatens something that has become familiar, valuable, or personally significant. It may be a process someone created, a committee someone leads, a ministry someone has poured years into, a title that carries influence, or a tradition associated with good memories. A way of working can become so familiar that people no longer distinguish between the mission and the method.

This is especially true inside churches, ministries, nonprofits, boards, and other organizations that depend heavily on trust, shared values, and consensus. In those environments, opposition to change is often quieter than people expect. Few people announce that they oppose examining whether the organization is accomplishing its mission. Resistance may appear as a request for additional study, a concern that the timing is not right, a suggestion that the matter be referred elsewhere, a warning that the conversation could create division, or a preference to preserve unity.

None of those concerns should automatically be dismissed. Sometimes caution is wisdom. Traditions can preserve important lessons, long-serving leaders carry institutional knowledge, and a proposal that sounds innovative may simply be untested. Yet caution can also become an excuse to avoid examination. The first challenge is to begin a conversation that allows people to examine the mission without feeling that they, their history, or their contributions are under attack.

Begin with purpose, not criticism

Statements such as “We have lost our way,” “This ministry is no longer effective,” or “We need to restructure” may eventually prove accurate. They also divide the room immediately between those who agree and those who feel compelled to defend what exists. The conversation becomes positional before it becomes thoughtful.

A better starting point is purpose. Why do we exist? What were we originally trying to accomplish? What do we believe we have been called to do? What outcomes would tell us that we are fulfilling that calling? These questions move the discussion away from personalities and toward something everyone can examine together.

Jesus repeatedly brought people back to first principles. When disputes arose over Sabbath observance, He returned attention to its purpose: “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27). The question was not whether the Sabbath mattered; it did. The question was whether a practice surrounding it had become more important than the purpose it was meant to serve. That distinction matters to any organization. A method can become so familiar that questioning it feels like questioning the mission itself. Returning to purpose allows people to examine the method without first declaring it wrong.

Questions create space for discovery

Consider the difference between saying, “We spend too much time maintaining programs that no longer serve our mission,” and asking, “If we were creating this organization today, knowing what we know now, which activities would we definitely create again?” The second question may reveal the same concern, but those involved participate in discovering it.

Sustainable change is more likely when people see enough of the evidence to form a judgment together. This calls for genuine curiosity, not a series of questions designed to steer a group toward a conclusion already reached. Jesus often asked questions that required people to think. “Who do you say that I am?” asked the disciples to move beyond what others were saying and articulate their own understanding (Mark 8:29). His questions did not evade truth; they often brought people face to face with it.

Real curiosity asks something of the person initiating the conversation. We must be willing to discover that some things we assumed were problems are not problems at all, and that something we personally championed may need to change. That is where discernment becomes a discipline rather than a technique.

Separate the person from the structure

Imagine someone who created a ministry fifteen years ago. It solved a real need. Volunteers rallied around it, people were helped, and its founder became closely identified with the work. Years later, the need may have changed, participation may have declined, or resources may be needed elsewhere. To an outside observer, reconsidering the ministry looks like a straightforward decision. To its founder, it may sound like a question about whether the years of work mattered, whether others still value that contribution, and whether there will still be a place for them.

Those questions may never be spoken aloud, yet they can shape the discussion. Good leadership honors a contribution without requiring the structure to remain forever. Something can have been exactly right for one season and still need to change in another. Ending or redesigning a program does not erase the good it accomplished.

Jesus challenged religious practices and assumptions while continuing to engage people within those systems. He ate with Pharisees, spoke with teachers of the law, worshiped in synagogues, and participated in the religious life of His people. His challenge to a practice did not require Him to dismiss every person associated with it. People should not be made to feel disposable because a process is being reconsidered.

Understand the hidden cost of change

Change has visible consequences: budgets, responsibilities, programs, and reporting relationships may shift. It also has less visible consequences. Someone may lose influence, control over a decision, access to leadership, a familiar role, or the certainty of knowing how things work. These realities do not automatically make opposition selfish. They help explain why a decision that appears rational on paper can become deeply emotional in practice.

Formal authority can intensify that pressure. Leaders may sincerely welcome feedback while unknowingly signaling which conclusions are acceptable. People notice which questions receive thoughtful consideration, which create irritation, and whether those who raise concerns remain included. A room can become quiet long before anyone says, “Do not disagree.” Eventually silence can be mistaken for agreement.

John records that some leaders believed in Jesus but would not acknowledge it openly because they feared being put out of the synagogue (John 12:42). Whatever one makes of their motives, the passage illustrates how people can privately believe one thing while publicly conforming to another when the cost of dissent feels high. Healthy organizations should want to know when that is happening.

Consensus is not the absence of disagreement

Organizations built around shared faith and purpose rightly value unity. Healthy consensus, however, requires enough trust for people to disagree without becoming enemies. An organization that cannot tolerate disagreement will struggle to discern. Questions such as “What evidence tells us this is working?” or “Is this still serving its original purpose?” may be signs of commitment to the mission, not disloyalty.

The disciples misunderstood Jesus, challenged assumptions, and argued about who was greatest. Jesus corrected them and returned them to the mission. When James and John sought places of prominence, He redefined greatness around service (Mark 10:35-45). That reframing matters because struggles that appear to be about structure can also concern identity, authority, recognition, or control. Leadership creates the conditions in which those concerns can be examined honestly and respectfully.

Return to the standard

Policies accumulate, committees form, traditions become established, budgets repeat, and calendars fill. Eventually people may begin asking whether something fits the organization rather than whether the organization fits its mission. For a Christian organization, a powerful corrective is to return to the source. What did Jesus teach and model? How did He form people around a mission? Where did He direct attention, resources, and authority?

This does not make the first-century ministry of Jesus a literal organizational chart for every modern church. His priorities offer a reference point. This was the question that gave rise to *The Jesus Organization*: what happens when we read the Gospels devotionally and also pay attention to how Jesus selected people, delegated responsibility, handled crowds, communicated, managed resources, confronted distraction, and developed leaders?

The point is to distinguish what is essential from what is merely familiar. Some practices will be affirmed. Others may need adjustment, and a few may need to end. “We are doing this well,” “This still matters, but our approach needs to change,” and “This once served us well but no longer advances the mission” are all legitimate results of honest discernment.

The leader must be willing to be examined too

The conversation becomes credible only when the person initiating it is also willing to be examined. It is easy to identify traditions created by others and harder to question the program we created. We may readily discuss someone else’s influence while overlooking our own attachment to a role, title, idea, or accomplishment.

Jesus challenged this instinct among His disciples. When they focused on status, He redirected them toward service. When Peter objected to the path Jesus described, Jesus corrected him sharply (Mark 8:31-33). Proximity to the mission did not exempt anyone from correction. Humility becomes an organizational discipline when our own work is

open to the same careful examination we ask of others.

A better way to open the discussion

An alignment conversation is more productive when participants know the outcome has not already been decided. The invitation can be candid and simple:

“I am asking whether we would be willing to examine together what we believe our mission is, what Jesus modeled, and whether the way we currently operate remains aligned with those things. Some of what we discover may affirm what we are doing. Some may challenge us. The objective is faithfulness.”

No one enters as the accused or the prosecutor. Everyone enters as a participant in discernment. The question becomes, “What can we see more clearly together?”

The hardest question

Perhaps the most difficult organizational question is not “What needs to change?” but “What are we unwilling to examine?” A topic may be protected by wisdom or history; it may also be protected by fear, loyalty, pride, or power. Discernment requires enough humility to learn which is at work.

Organizations rarely resist reflection because they openly oppose their mission. More often, honest reflection may require reconsidering a program, tradition, structure, leader, or habit that people have come to associate with that mission. The Gospels repeatedly show Jesus distinguishing purpose from practice and position from service. Beginning the conversation well allows a group to honor what has worked, question what may no longer work, and test both against a standard larger than personal preference.

Before asking an organization to change, invite it to see clearly. Clarity cannot guarantee agreement, but genuine alignment is difficult without it.

A first gathering

Use these questions to make room for observation before proposals. Invite each person to speak; record areas of agreement, uncertainty, and disagreement without forcing a verdict in the first meeting.

- 01** What do we believe we have been called to accomplish? How would we recognize faithfulness to that mission?
 - 02** Which current practices most clearly express that mission? What evidence or stories support our answer?
 - 03** Which practices would we create again if we were starting today? Which deserve a fresh look, and why?
 - 04** Whose perspective might be missing from this conversation, especially someone who may hesitate to speak?
 - 05** What concerns about change deserve to be protected? What concerns deserve further examination?
 - 06** What do Jesus' words and actions suggest about the question before us? Where might we be reading our preference into the text?
 - 07** What is one small, reversible step that would help us learn more before making a lasting decision?
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Before you take the Jesus Index

Approach the assessment with curiosity and humility. Consider your own assumptions alongside the organization's practices. Treat the results as a starting point for reflection, then return to this guide before discussing them as a group.

Suggested sequence: read together • assess individually • compare observations • decide what to examine next

Scripture references: Mark 2:27; 8:29, 31-33; 10:35-45; John 12:42. Quotations from the Gospels are brief excerpts; consult your preferred translation for fuller context.