

Conservative Congregational Christian Conference

July 11, 2024



VICINAGE COUNCIL FINAL REPORT



**Park Street Church
Boston, Massachusetts**

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The call to reconvene the vicinage council

A Vicinage Council was called by the Board of Elders in March 2024 to independently assess charges brought against Mark Booker that he is biblically disqualified to serve as Senior Minister at Park Street Church.

The members of the council were determined with the approval of the CCCC Credentials Committee. The council met at Park Street Church on April 2 – 4, 2024 with the following members:

- Ronald Hamilton, CCCC Conference Minister (Council Chair)
- Peter Balentine, CCCC Vice-President and pastor of Washington Street Baptist Church in Lynn, MA
- Nick Granitsas, CCCC Past President and interim pastor at Forestdale Community Church in Malden, MA
- Paul McPheeters, CCCC Northeast Regional Pastor (Council Clerk)
- Jon Paul, Pastor at Free Christian Church in Andover, MA
- Tom Petter, Pastor at Trinitarian Congregational Church in Wayland, MA
- Terry Shanahan, Former CCCC Northeast Regional Pastor

A report of the Vicinage Council was presented to the Board of Elders on May 1, 2024, and was subsequently shared with all members of the congregation.

A Special Meeting of the members of the congregation at Park Street Church was held on June 2, 2024, in response to a petition from a group of members of the church. The purpose of this meeting was, as follows:

The sole purpose of this Special Meeting shall be to review and possibly modify the July 30, 2023, decision of the Board of Elders that “there is no evidence of disqualifying sins, as described in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, of such severity that they call for the Senior Minister to be disqualified from pastoral ministry.”

Prior to the meeting, testimony was distributed to church members that expressed concern about the Senior Minister and the Board. This happened outside the knowledge and approval of the Board. The distributed testimony was, as follows:

- The resignation of Yannick Assogba from the Board of Elders
- The resignation of Leslie Liu from the Board of Elders
- The resignation of Raymond Kam as the Minister to Internationals

- The resignation of Julian Linnell as the Minister of Missions
- The resignation of Damian Long as the Minister of Community
- A detailed statement from former Minister for City Engagement, Kimberly Morrison
- A detailed statement from former Associate Minister, Kris Perkins

At the special meeting, a motion was made and seconded to affirm the July 30, 2023, decision of the Board of Elders that “there was no evidence of disqualifying sins, as described in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, of such severity that they call for the Senior Minister to be disqualified from pastoral ministry.” Following discussion, a ballot vote was conducted. The motion was defeated by a vote of 242-186, with 6 abstentions.

The Board met following the meeting and agreed that they had lost the confidence of some of the church members to resolve the matter of the Senior Minister’s biblical fitness. They also agreed that the vote made it clear that a further assessment of the matters that were made public at the special meeting was necessary. Recognizing these matters the Board approved the following motion.

To ask the Vicinage Council to reconvene and consider additional information and testimony that has been provided to the membership since the issuance of the council May 2024 report, and any additional information or testimony it believes is relevant to the question of the Senior Minister’s biblical qualification that has not previously been considered and make a determination as to whether such additional information changes their prior determination.”

The members of the Vicinage Council met and unanimously agreed to reconvene to review the additional testimony and make the appropriate determination.

Vicinage Council process

The council met at Park Street Church on Thursday, June 20, 2024.

The first matter for consideration by the Council was an email received from Raymond and Karolyn Park representing “a concerned constituency of numerous members of the Park Street Church.” The email demanded that the Vicinage Council “cease and desist from taking any further action with respect to the church”. The email ended with this statement, “If, despite the pending petition for a Special Meeting and this communication, the Vicinage Council intends to proceed on any additional work on behalf of the Church or Board of Elders, please respond to this email in writing by no

later than June 21, 2024, so that the Members can further consider their legal rights and remedies with respect to such an unauthorized and imprudent action.”

The Council discussed this matter and consulted with an attorney representing the CCCC. The council members decided to continue with the meeting because we were acting at the request of the duly elected Board of Elders. The Council did not respond to the email.

The Council discussed the fact that the first report was not accepted by those who disagreed with the findings. In addition, some church members believe that the vote of the Special Congregational meeting was a rejection of the Vicinage Council’s initial report. We believe that it is important to restate the historical role of Vicinage Councils, as prescribed in the Cambridge Platform. We also need to detail the history of the use of Vicinage Councils involving the CCCC in similar situations. For example,

- Vicinage Councils for ordinations which clearly evaluated the character and call of a pastor and his/her suitability for Christian ministry.
- A Vicinage Council was called by a multi-staff church in Massachusetts to review a decision by the Board of Elders to dismiss a pastor who had been charged of unethical behavior by a parishioner. The Council met, considered the evidence, and affirmed the decision of the Board of Elders.
- Two Vicinage Councils have been called in New England to seek the advice of local pastors in times of intense conflict. These churches found value in hearing from the counsel of experienced clergy who brought an objective perspective to the situation.
- A Vicinage Council was held to assist a pastoral search committee in discerning if their final candidate was a good fit for the church. Upon the advice of the Council, the committee determined to move on from this candidate.
- A Vicinage Council was held to help the church leadership discern if the settled pastor should leave. The council advised the church in this matter and provided helpful information on ways to create a healthy departure for this pastor.

The council determined that the primary evidence to be examined would be:

- The resignation of two Board members, Yannick Assogba and Leslie Liu.
- The resignation of three staff members, Raymond Kam, Julian Linnell, and Damian Long.

- The statement of former Minister for City Engagement, Kimberly Morrison
- The statement of former Associate Minister, Kris Perkins

It was determined that the council would review the written statements made by these people. We would also invite former Board members and former staff members to participate in an in-person interview. In addition, the council agreed to meet with church members who could provide insight into relationships with these people and actions related to these statements. Finally, the council agreed to meet with Senior Minister, Mark Booker, to learn his perspective on the evidence presented.

The council followed the same manner of investigation that was instituted in the previous meetings. This followed the Scriptural injunction of James 1:19,

“My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry.”

We developed a format in which every person was given time to share their story and perspective on the issue. We wanted everyone that we interviewed to leave with the understanding that they had been heard and appreciated. We ended each session in prayer for the person being interviewed.

Findings: part 1 (Resignation of Elders)

The Council invited Yannick Assogba and Leslie Liu to meet when the group gathered on Thursday, June 20. Yannick responded to the invitation with questions about the purpose and reason for the meeting. He also questioned the validity of the reconvening of the Vicinage Council. The Council determined that we would consider the written resignation submitted by Yannick and, if necessary, ask further questions of him following the council.

Leslie agreed to meet with the Council. Leslie shared the rationale for the submission of her resignation, citing a different view of the purpose of the Board of Elders and how the Board should function. She shared how her perspective on Senior Minister, Mark Booker, had changed in recent months. She encouraged the council to be diligent and fair in our work as people will consider our recommendations.

Upon review of the written statements of resignation submitted by Yannick and Leslie, and the meeting with Leslie, the Council found that there was no direct reference to the conduct of Senior Minister, Mark Booker, that would biblically disqualify him from

ministry. The Council also concluded that it is appropriate for Board members to resign if they cannot in good conscience function as productive members of the Board and support the decisions of the Board.

Findings: part 2 (Resignation of staff members)

The next work of the committee was to review the evidence related to the three pastoral staff members, Raymond Kam (Minister to Internationals), Julian Linnell (Minister of Missions), and Damian Long (Minister of Community). These people submitted their resignations the week before the special congregational meeting. Raymond and Damian and spoke publicly regarding their situation at the meeting and Julian's wife spoke as well.

The council reviewed the written resignations submitted to Senior Minister, Mark Booker, members of the Board of Elders, Deacons, and staff. We requested written testimony from each of these former staff members. Julian and Raymond responded that they did not believe it would be beneficial to submit additional testimony. Damian presented further testimony that included a detailed timeline of his engagement in the process of reconciliation. The council reviewed the testimony that we had received from these staff members when we met in April, comparing it to their letters of resignation and written response to the Council in June.

We discovered no new evidence that would change the opinion that we offered in the report submitted on May 1, 2024.

While the staff did experience "distress" and some were "deeply hurt", the cumulative evidence did not point to Mark Booker being "spiritually abusive" of anyone in particular and we did not see a "pattern of abusive behavior".

The May 1st report recommended that the Board follow the proposals of the VOCA Center to move forward with the process of seeking reconciliation between Mark Booker and staff members. We investigated the steps by Mark, the Elders, members of the Personnel Committee, and the staff members to pursue reconciliation. We were disappointed that these good faith efforts did not result in reconciliation between Mark and the three members who resigned. We did not find that Mark is solely responsible for the breakdown of the process of reconciliation. The breakdown resulted from different expectations about how the reconciliation process would move forward.

The council determined that the three staff members took the appropriate step to resign when they concluded that they could no longer serve as staff members under the leadership of Senior Minister, Mark Booker. However, there is evidence that former staff members remained engaged in the conflict through collaboration with the opposition group and making open statements in an effort to discredit the current leadership of the church and influence the outcome of the special meeting. It is the opinion of the council that ministers who resign from their positions should not continue to involve themselves in the conflict. That is, continuing in active opposition to the current leadership of the church is an inappropriate use of the spiritual and pastoral authority of a resigned minister.

Findings: part 3 (Testimony of former staff members)

The council expressed deep concern after reviewing the testimony of former staff members, Kimberly Morrison, and Kris Perkins. We agreed that it was inappropriate for them to engage in the business of the church at this time when they were not invited to present testimony by the leadership of the church. Also, they had not taken steps toward biblical reconciliation by addressing these matters directly with Mark Booker before submitting the statements. We believe that these actions violate the spirit of the CCCC Code of Ethics for Ministers. Chairman, Ronald Hamilton, shared that he stated this to Kris Perkins in a telephone call held previous to the meeting of the council.

The council invited Kris Perkins to meet via a web meeting to discuss the allegations against Mark Booker stated in his written testimony. Kris declined to meet but said that he would answer any questions submitted by the council under certain conditions. The council determined that it was sufficient to review Kris' written testimony and investigate the allegations raised by Kris. The council also reviewed the statements that Kris submitted to the Board of Elders and to the congregation when he left the church and found these statements to sharply conflict with his most recent statements. We investigated the process of Kris' departure by discussing these matters with persons who were involved in that process and had direct knowledge of the events.

The council determined that it was appropriate for Mark to approach Kris Perkins to discuss his future as a staff member. We also concluded that Mark should have been more direct in his reasoning with Kris from the beginning. This would explain the "lack

of empathy”, perceived “deception”, and “lack of fairness”. We did not find evidence of a “misuse of authority” as alleged by Kris Perkins.

The council will not comment on the testimony of Kimberly Morrison due to the complexities of her departure from Park Street Church, including prior investigations and ensuing legal matters.

Findings: part 4 (Is Mark Booker biblically disqualified for ministry?)

The Council believes that the charges of biblical disqualification are not to be taken lightly. Mark Booker must be examined on his moral character and the totality of his ministry. There are allegations related to issues of his management style. We believe that Mark has confessed his weakness in this area and is currently taking steps in personal leadership development.

These allegations do not equate to spiritual abuse or moral failure. The matter of spiritual abuse is very complex. Many confess that it is difficult to define, and thus detect. Many have requested that the organization GRACE be engaged as an investigative agency to resolve the issue of whether Mark Booker is guilty of spiritual abuse. On their website, GRACE defines spiritual abuse, as follows:

Spiritual abuse is when God and the Bible are used to cause shame and harm, leading to a breakdown in the relationship between God, self, and others.

We believe that the members of the council are qualified to uncover and expose such abuse. As experienced pastors and denominational leaders, we understand the public use of Scripture in preaching, teaching, and counseling. We can detect when the Scripture is taught or quoted for personal promotion or domination over others. We have experience as pastors leading from a position of trust. We understand that the cause of Christ is hindered, and the message of the Gospel is damaged when a pastor or church leader violates that trust. The council members have years of pastoral experience that includes counseling people who have experienced hurt or trauma.

We have reviewed volumes of written testimony and have personally interviewed people who question Mark’s leadership and alleged him of misconduct unworthy of a Minister of the Gospel. This second investigation has not changed the opinion that we shared in our first report. The council unanimously agrees that there is no evidence present that Senior Minister, Mark Booker, has disqualified himself to serve as a spiritual leader at Park Street Church or any other pastoral ministry in the future.

We remind the leadership of the church that we are not working individualistically nor without accountability. The members of the council were determined with the approval of the CCCC Credentials Committee. The Credentials Committee reviewed the initial report submitted on May 1, 2024. Rev. Dan Peterson, chair of the Credentials Committee, submitted a letter to Jason Abraham, Moderator of Park Street Church, on May 30, 2024, that stated, “On behalf of the Credentials Committee, we inform you that we have unanimously accepted and approved the report shared with us, both orally and in written form.” This report will also be submitted to CCCC Credentials Committee.

Recommendations

We understand that the way forward for the church is very difficult. We implore everyone at Park Street Church to devote themselves to the hard work of biblical peacemaking and reconciliation. Make every effort towards peace and reconciliation rather than words and actions that bring further accusation and division. “Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. (Colossians 3:13)”

We believe that significant issues can be resolved with the implementation of the proposals of the VOCA Center. The group has provided wise guidance and clear steps toward health and reconciliation. We recommend that Mark Booker submits regular reports to the Board and Personnel Committee of the work he is doing to learn and grow as a leader. These groups must hold him to a high standard of accountability in these areas of personal and professional growth.

We recommend that we continue our work with the Board of Elders in planning for a “solemn assembly” as an appropriate next step for the members of the church. Much has been made about the results of recent votes at the annual business meeting and the special congregational meeting. Biblical Congregationalism is not equated with a democracy. We have literally seen churches vote themselves to death. Rather, biblical Congregationalism is members of a church seeking God’s will together under the Lordship of Christ.

A solemn assembly will bring people together in the spirit of James 4:6-10

But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: “God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble.” Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Grieve, mourn, and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.

We have resources and people who can assist in the planning of this assembly.