

# Conservative Congregational Christian Conference

May 1, 2024



## VICINAGE COUNCIL REPORT



**Park Street Church**  
**Boston, Massachusetts**

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### **Historical precedent for the calling of a vicinage council**

The Cambridge Platform, an historical document related to congregational church government, advocates for the calling of a council in situations like this.

*Though all their churches were “distinct . . . and therefore have no dominion one over another,” they were to be a community of independent churches. They were to take thought for one another’s welfare. “When any church wants light or peace amongst themselves, it is a way of communion . . . to meet together . . . to consider and argue the points in doubt or difference and, having found out the way of truth and peace, to commend the same . . . to the churches whom the same may concern.” Thus, when members of a local church were unable to resolve some difference, they asked for a council meeting. On an appointed day, neighboring parishes each sent leaders, lay, and ordained, to meet with the troubled church and hear all sides of the dispute. The council then offered non-binding advice, which was usually accepted.*

### **The situation at Park Street Church**

Park Street Church in Boston has been embroiled in conflict since 2023, following a season of significant change including the call of a new Senior Minister, pandemic upheaval, and significant staff changes. The situation developed as a conflict between the Senior Minister, Mark Booker, and the Associate Pastor, Michael Balboni. It spilled over into a congregational conflict when the Board of Elders voted to end the 4 PM Sunday Worship Service. Michael was the lead pastor for this service. (The Board ultimately rescinded this decision). Michael made specific charges to the Board against Mark, stating that his actions made him biblically disqualified to serve in pastoral ministry. He also accused Mark of spiritual abuse. The Board reviewed these charges and determined that they were unsubstantiated. Michael rejected this response and continued to challenge Mark and the Board. The Board voted to terminate Michael. Some members of the congregation were unhappy with this action and petitioned the Elders for a special congregational meeting. The Board denied three such petitions but

did hold an informational meeting. The petitioners remain unsatisfied and are still calling for a congregational meeting to address the accusation that Mark is biblically disqualified for pastoral ministry.

Things overflowed into a huge controversy at the annual business meeting of the congregation held in February 2024. The petitioners proposed a slate of officers and several by-law revisions. Mark called for a vote of confidence. The petitioners' slate of officers and proposed by-law revisions were defeated by a two-thirds majority. Mark received a vote of confidence by a two-thirds majority. The six-hour meeting was highly contentious and publicly raised high level concerns from members of the congregation, the Board, and the staff.

### **The call for the vicinage council**

The CCCC received an invitation from the Board of Elders to conduct a vicinage council to review the situation and provide advice on the conflict. The purpose of the Vicinage Council was established to be:

*To independently assess charges brought against Mark Booker that he is biblically disqualified to serve as Senior Pastor at Park Street Church. The church Board reviewed these charges and determined that there was not evidence of disqualifying sins, as described in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, of such severity that they called for the Senior minister to be disqualified from pastoral ministry. The council will consider the evidence submitted by the former Associate Minister, Michael Balboni, and any other evidence deemed relevant that is gleaned in interviews of other ministers and church leaders. The Council will provide its determination as to whether the Board's determination was correct, and that the Board's process of determination was appropriate in light of the severity of these charges. The Council will also provide its determination as to whether the conduct of the Senior Minister, Associate Minister, and other ordained ministers*

*during this process has been appropriate and aligned with biblical standards for their calling to pastoral ministry.*

The members of the council were determined with the approval of the CCCC Credentials Committee. Ronald Hamilton, Conference Minister, was asked to chair the council. The council met at Park Street Church on April 2 – 4, 2024 with the following members:

Ronald Hamilton, CCCC Conference Minister

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

Jon Paul, Pastor at Free Christian Church in Andover, MA

Tom Petter, Pastor at Trinitarian Congregational Church in Wayland, MA

Terry Shanahan, CCCC Past Northeast Regional Pastor

### **Vicinage Council process**

The council held in-person meetings at Park Street Church on Tuesday – Thursday, April 2 – 4, 2024. The council organized by electing Ronald Hamilton to serve as Moderator and Paul McPheeters to serve as Secretary.

These initial meetings were designed to follow 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.”*

It was determined that the council would meet with the people with the most direct involvement in the conflict, including the church leaders and the staff members. 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 offered no counsel to anyone and ended each session in prayer for the person being interviewed.

The schedule was significantly altered when Michael Balboni declined the invitation to meet with the council. We expressed our disappointment to Michael and believe that he missed an opportunity to defend his convictions and restate his opinion on the matters at hand. His absence also showed his lack of confidence in this process led by members of the CCCC, of which he is a member.

The council debriefed at the end of the three-day meetings. We determined that further interviews were not necessary. However, we agreed that we would receive written statements from staff, leaders, and members of the congregation. We received written statements from people who we interviewed. We also received statements of evidence of various communication related to the conflict. We received numerous emails from members of the congregation who are opposed to the leadership of Mark Booker. We gave serious consideration of these statements and prayerfully discerned if they provided information that we did not gather in our interviews.

### **Findings: part 1**

The primary work of the council was to carefully consider the charges brought against Senior Pastor, Mark Booker.

*To independently assess charges brought against Mark Booker that he is biblically disqualified to serve as Senior Pastor at Park Street Church. The church Board reviewed these charges and determined that there was not evidence of disqualifying sins, as described in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, of such severity that they called for the Senior minister to be disqualified from pastoral ministry.*

The council reviewed the Confidential Memorandum prepared by a subcommittee appointed by the Board to investigate the allegations brought by former Associate Pastor, Michael Balboni. We considered these serious charges as they relate to specific biblical qualifications for an elder, as stated in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus. We then compared the testimony of Michael Balboni to the testimony that we received in our interviews.

Michael cited the teaching of 1 Timothy and Titus in his allegations against Mark.

*Here is a trustworthy saying: Whoever aspires to be an overseer desires a noble task. Now the overseer is to be above reproach, faithful to his wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to drunkenness, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him, and he must do so in a manner worthy of full respect. (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?) He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil. He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap. In the same way, deacons are to be worthy of respect, sincere, not indulging in much wine, and not pursuing dishonest gain. (1 Timothy 3:1-8)*

*An elder must be blameless, faithful to his wife, a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient. Since an overseer manages God's household, he must be blameless—not overbearing, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain. Rather, he must be hospitable, one who loves what is good, who is self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined. He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it. (Titus 1:6-9)*

Michael's allegations cited four qualifications where he believed that Mark has disqualified himself from leadership.

1. "Not violent"
2. "Gentle, not quarrelsome"
3. "Double-tongued"
4. "Not arrogant"

The council reviewed the statement presented by Michael to the Board in which he laid out his allegations of biblical disqualification in each of these four areas. We also reviewed the Confidential Report of the subcommittee that investigated these allegations. We believe that the Confidential Memorandum of the subcommittee was correct in identifying these allegations as management issues rather than issues of moral character.

The council then compared the allegations presented by Michael Balboni with other testimony received by the council. We noted that Michael's justification for all of the allegations cannot be substantiated and is in conflict with the testimony of other people in leadership and members of the church staff. The council received testimony that conflicted with the accusations of Michael Balboni in these areas.

1. Mark did not demand to receive confidential information that related to statements made in confidential counseling sessions.
2. Mark was not responsible for the "toxic culture" that existed among staff members. There is much evidence that this existed prior to his tenure as Senior Pastor and that he encountered this as he assumed leadership.
3. Many testified that they have not witnessed or experienced aggressive behavior by Mark.
4. Staff involved in the issues with the music staff at the 4 PM service do not believe that Michael provided a correct account of interactions with the music leader, Shannon Jacob.
5. We received testimony that staff members were surprised by the reaction of Michael and other staff members to the development of the Ministry Leadership Team because they did not raise objections as the idea was proposed.

6. We received similar testimony as it related to early discussion among the staff about the elimination of the 4 PM service.
7. We received testimony it was not appropriate to accuse Mark of making decisions that “made him the center” of the church. Some of these decisions were made by the communication team and other staff members responsible for public church communication.

These are examples of many significantly different perspectives of the specific allegations brought against Mark. These differences diminish the viability of a broad charge that Mark has acted in a way that disqualifies him from spiritual leadership as the Senior Pastor of Park Street Church. We agreed that the report of the subcommittee correctly assessed that these allegations did not justify biblical disqualification from ministry.

The council’s review of the accusations against Mark Booker noted his credentials were questioned. The council cited the fact that Mark Booker was fully vetted by the Credentials Committee as a part of his application for ministerial standing in the CCCC. This included reference checks, review of his academic credentials, review of his ordination to ministry, as well as examination of his theological beliefs. He was approved for membership in the CCCC.

It is also noted that members of the staff and church questioned Mark’s commitment to congregational polity. Evidence was presented to the Credentials Committee that Mark actively pursued an understanding of congregationalism before he applied. He studied historic documents of congregationalism and agreed to submit to congregational polity when he applied. The council found no evidence that he has disqualified himself from leadership by rejecting the polity of Park Street Church or the CCCC.

Upon review of all of this information, the council unanimously agrees that there is no evidence present that Senior Pastor, Mark Booker, has disqualified himself to serve as a spiritual leader at Park Street Church or any other pastoral ministry in the future.

We also note that Michael neglected to address all qualifications addressed in these passages. We believe that the testimony received demonstrates that Mark fulfils a majority of the spiritual qualifications for leadership.

1. He understands the responsibility of spiritual leadership and takes it seriously.
2. He is faithful to his wife and manages his household well.
3. He leads a temperate lifestyle.
4. He is hospitable.
5. He is able to teach and holds firmly to the truth of Scripture.
6. He promotes sound doctrine.
7. He is not an alcoholic and does not suffer from other addictions.
8. He is not a lover of money and has not been accused of dishonest gain.
9. He is not a recent convert and has a sincere testimony of faith.
10. He is highly respected by his peers and has a good reputation in the community.

As spiritual leaders, the members of the council are aware that no one is without weakness. We recommend that the church leadership and the church membership focus on these positive attributes as well as the concerns expressed in the accusations. It is not appropriate to point out areas where he could be disqualified without acknowledging the areas where he is clearly qualified to serve as a spiritual leader.

Mark has publicly admitted his failures as a leader. He has acknowledged his sinful nature and brokenness. He has apologized and sought reconciliation. He has submitted to engage in further training to learn and grow as a pastor and leader. This is a testimony to his character.

The council had significant discussion about the allegation of “spiritual abuse”. We determined that we were qualified to identify spiritual abuse. The council is composed of pastors with long tenure in pastoral ministry. The members are trained clergy and counselors with broad experience in dealing with family systems and organizational systems where abuse is present. The council also reviewed studies on abuse in the church and discussed definitions of spiritual abuse.

The council did see evidence of distress that was experienced in varying measures by members of the Park Street staff. But the cumulative evidence did not point to Mark Booker being “spiritually abusive” of anyone in particular, nor did we see a “pattern of abusive behavior.” Rather, the evidence pointed to a combination of:

- A dysfunctional work environment that existed prior to Mark Booker’s arrival.
- Anxiety created by a series of staff terminations, changes in individual and team roles, and other changes to ministries and worship. How these changes were handled and communicated at times contributed to these anxieties.
- A perceived lack of respect and support from the Board of Elders, resulting in a lack of trust and respect for the Board of Elders, and a fear of retaliation and/or termination.
- A lack of reconciliation and biblical peacemaking including failed attempts at peacemaking which exacerbated the conflict.

All of this contributed to a distressing environment of conflict and distrust experienced at Park Street Church. While evidence of specific “spiritual abuse,” was not observed, we did observe that a number of staff members are deeply hurt from their experience in this environment over the past year. These people are in need of pastoral care and healing. We highly recommend that this be addressed as soon as possible.

### **Findings: part 2**

The second work of the council was to evaluate if the Board’s process of determination was appropriate considering the seriousness of the allegations brought against Senior Pastor, Mark Booker.

*The Council will provide its determination as to whether the Board's determination was correct, and that the Board's process of determination was appropriate in light of the severity of these charges.*

We find the teaching of Ephesians 4 helpful as a guide for how to evaluate the process of the Board and ensuing efforts of the Board to deal with the conflict.

*So, Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows, and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work. (Ephesians 4:11-16)*

*...That, however, is not the way of life you learned when you heard about Christ and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. Therefore, each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor, for we are all members of one body. "In your anger do not sin": Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold. (Ephesians 4:20-27)*

This great teaching by the Apostle Paul describes a healthy, growing Body of believers fulfilling God's call to complete the ministry of Christ. It speaks about the role of spiritual leaders to lead and equip the church for the work of the ministry. It points out that unity is essential, and that each member of the Body has a role to play in the ministry. "Speaking the truth" is also an important part of this teaching. The exercise of "speaking the truth in love" has the explicit purpose of maintaining the unity of the church promoting healthy ministry. It is also important to note that the devil gets a foothold when things are not dealt with correctly.

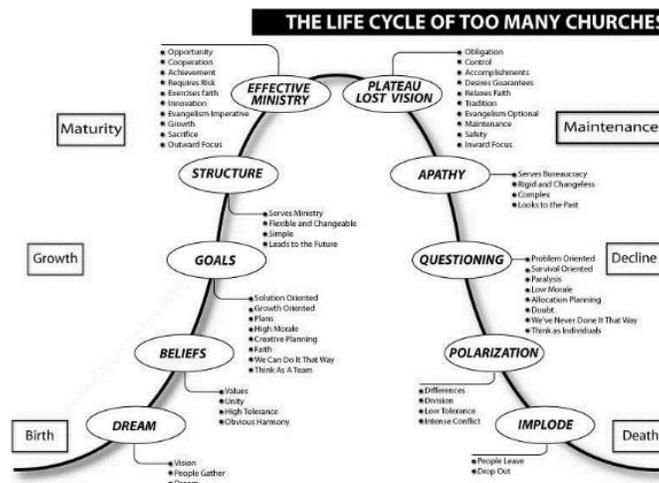
We reviewed the report of the initial investigation commissioned by the Board to review the allegations presented by Michael Balboni that Mark Booker was biblically disqualified for ministry. The report was comprehensive and fair. We believe that it correctly identified the conflict as a damaged relationship between the Senior Pastor and Associate Pastor arising from different philosophies of church leadership. It concluded that Mark Booker was not biblically disqualified for ministry on the basis of the allegations. This was a careful and thorough attempt to deal with a significant crisis in the church and "speak the truth in love". We were disappointed to learn how Michael responded to the Board's determination. He refused to accept the Board's conclusion that Mark Booker was not biblically disqualified. He then put himself in an untenable situation when he sought to resume his role on staff, while maintaining his conviction that Mark was biblically disqualified. This posture led to his eventual termination.

The Board engaged the VOCA Center to consult the church in the matters which arose out of the initial Subcommittee investigation. This demonstrated that they understood that there were serious staff issues that needed to be addressed. The Council reviewed this report presented by the VOCA Center and believe that it clearly identified the issues at hand and proposed a way forward for the church.

We support the process that the Board followed to deal with the serious issue stemming from the allegations made against the Senior Pastor, Mark Booker, by former Associate Minister, Michael Balboni. We also believe that the Board has taken appropriate steps in dealing with current staff issues with the engagement of the VOCA Center.

However, it is important to understand the long-term systemic issues that are obstacles in the way of developing a path forward toward reconciliation and health. The investigation of the Vicinage Council uncovered facts that prove that the current issues facing the church arose out of systemic issues in the church that preceded the hiring of Mark Booker. We acknowledge that much of this happened under the leadership of a previous Board and that the current Board inherited these issues.

- Park Street Church was at a critical point in her life and ministry when Mark Booker was called to be the Senior Pastor. We reviewed the statistics that showed that the church’s average Sunday attendance (in all services) decreased by 52 percent, from 1,889 persons in 2004 to 904 persons in 2019. This would place the church in a period of “decline” on the church life cycle diagram below. It should be noted that churches in this portion of the life cycle are characterized by apathy, questioning, and polarization. In summary, significant decline leads to the development of a negative culture in a church.



- There was minimal management of staff in the past. The staff members were not held accountable for their role in supporting the overall ministry of the church. There were reports of a dysfunctional work environment in which staff members were not cooperating with others and were critical of others on staff.
- The pastoral transition exposed these issues and staff members worked to stake their role in the future ministry of the church. Church members aligned themselves behind individual staff members with the hope that they would be future leaders in the church.
- Walter Kim's departure was a significant turning point in this story. Walter was appointed as Lead Pastor during the pastoral transition. He was well respected, and many assumed he would be the next pastor. The decision to hire an interim pastor and conduct an external search for a pastor was unsettling to some. It appeared to be a signal that things were going to change at the church.
- These lingering concerns of some in the church were validated when Mark Booker was identified as the candidate for Senior Pastor. Mark did not have the academic pedigree of previous pastors. He came from a faith tradition outside of the historical Congregationalism. He was not experienced in leading a large church.
- This led former and current pastors, including Michael Balboni, to publicly question the work of the Search Committee in calling Mark. We believe that these people acted in an unethical manner in working to undermine the congregational process in the search. While the process led to the call of Mark Booker to be the Senior Pastor, the concern remained and has been expressed in the testimony of the five staff members who have publicly stated that they cannot support Mark. While they have varied positions and levels of influence on the staff, they are united in saying, "We are concerned about the direction of Park Street Church."
- Mark Booker arrived at Park Street and began to provide leadership in the church. He exercised his leadership role in line with the by-laws, which state,

*“The Senior Minister’s primary responsibilities are to serve as pastor, preacher, and teacher. The Senior Minister shall be a member of the Board of Elders and shall supervise the other members of the ministerial and the non-ministerial staff.”*

*“With the approval of the Board of Elders, the Senior Minister may appoint, or discharge one or more ministers as required to assist him in the work of the church.”*

Much of the staff welcomed Mark’s leadership. Others, who were used to functioning without accountability, resisted his leadership. Our evidence shows that this resistance ranged from questioning, to concern, to insubordination.

- The church situation was ripe for conflict when Mark became Senior Pastor. The identification of this environment provides context for the accusation presented by Associate Pastor, Michael Balboni, that Mark Booker was not biblically qualified to serve as Senior Pastor. Michael’s actions reflected the dysfunctional staff culture that existed at this time. There was mistrust of the Senior Pastor and the Board and a dissatisfaction with the direction of the church. While this does not justify Michael’s actions, it helps understand how such a radical accusation could be made by a subordinate.
- We believe that the Board did not adequately prepare the church or the staff for new leadership. The video shared by the Board before the annual meeting included these words.

*“We also need to grow in supporting and holding accountable our Senior Minister. We failed to ensure that he had enough help in transitioning from a smaller church to Park Street, with all our idiosyncrasies and baggage.”*

The CCC has developed a manual to assist churches in pastoral transition, ***Navigating A Pastoral Transition***. The manual makes this statement about preparing staff in a time of transition.

*The church leadership team should address the issue of the tenure of staff members when a pastor resigns. It is recommended that an incoming pastor has discretion about staff hiring and staff organization. A newly called pastor should not be bound to work with staff that was hired by the previous pastor. It is helpful to the incoming pastor and remaining staff if the staff agrees to stay for six months to one year to help with the transition. Their continued work with the church will be the prayerful choice of the new pastor in consultation with the church leadership team. The church leadership team should be prepared for the fact that some staff members may be uncomfortable with this uncertainty and thus choose to look for other employment during the transition.*

We raise these issues because we want to “speak the truth in love”. It is evident to us that the devil has a “foothold” in the church. The systemic dysfunction in the staff has spilled over to members of the congregation. The membership is deeply divided, and critical issues remain among the staff. This requires humble but courageous leadership by the Board to work to restore the health of Park Street Church.

It should also be noted that Michael Balboni and the dissenting group are calling for an outside investigation by an agency skilled in identifying spiritual abuse. We note that members of the congregation questioned the capabilities of the VOCA Center to be objective in the process of discovery. We have also been questioned in this manner and know that our report may not be trusted by some in the church. We have prayerfully worked to be objective in our process. The similar findings in the VOCA Center report and our report indicate that the truth has been discovered and that an additional investigation is not necessary.

### **Findings: part 3**

The third work of the council was to review the conduct of the staff in the midst of the conflict and in the process of our discovery.

*The Council will also provide its determination as to whether the conduct of the Senior Minister, Associate Minister, and other ordained ministers during this process has been appropriate and aligned with biblical standards for their calling to pastoral ministry.*

The Vicinage Council had various levels of interaction with the ministerial staff of Park Street Church during the period of our investigation. Each current staff member who we invited to meet with the Council agreed to be interviewed and provided helpful insight into the matters facing Park Street Church.

### **Recommendations**

We recommend that the Board of Elders follow the proposals of the VOCA Center to move forward with the staff members, Board of Elders, and congregation. The group has provided wise guidance and clear steps toward health and reconciliation. These recommendations align with our discovery about what is necessary to restore health in the church.

We also recommend that the church hold a “solemn assembly” as an appropriate next step for the members of the church. The CCCC is willing and available to guide a gathering where members gather for repentance, confession of sin, and fasting. The CCCC also offers to assist in the process of peacemaking and reconciliation.