



Receiving the VCM Diagnostic and Our Next Steps as The River Church

Dear River Family,

We have labored to write with a pastoral aim and we apologize for the delay in sending this letter. We know many of you are carrying real questions, real weariness, and real pain. We do not want to respond defensively to the VCM report. We want to speak plainly and with humility, so that our words match not only the moment we are in, but the work we hope God is doing among us.

You have already seen the [one-page overview and recommendations](#) from VitalChurch Ministries (VCM). That outside diagnostic is now part of our shared record. Some of its wording may feel unfamiliar, overly broad, or like it comes from “somewhere else.” That can be true *and* it can still be useful. A mirror rarely matches the image we have of ourselves in our mind’s eye. But it can still show us what we are reluctant to see.

For the sake of interpretation, clarity, and alignment as we move forward together, we have also worked with the staff and with VCM to make a few clarifying adjustments to the wording of the one-page summary (not the full report). You will find that revised one-page summary at the end of this letter.

How We Are Receiving the VCM Report

We are grateful for the many hours VCM spent gathering data through survey responses and interviews. We are also grateful to each of you who participated because your honesty, your hopes, and your disappointments matter.

We do not believe it is wise (or appropriate) to rewrite or edit VCM’s final report. We also do not want to cherry-pick the parts that feel affirming and quietly dismiss the parts that confront us. We believe the right posture is to receive the report as a meaningful mirror and acknowledge that we, as the local shepherding leaders, must discern how to apply it faithfully to our life together.

At the same time, we believe it is helpful to provide a revised one-page overview, developed in collaboration with VCM, to move forward with shared understanding, clarity, and alignment. It is the Board’s attempt to say: this is what we believe God is calling us to receive; this is what we are confessing; and this is what we are committing to pursue together.

What We Confess About Our Season

We believe the report correctly identifies something many of us have felt: “we have been engulfed in a cloud of trauma and grief, with multiple losses and unresolved difficult



circumstances.” That is not a slogan. It has names and faces. It has long shadows. It has exhausted many among us: congregants, staff, and leaders alike.

And we also confess something harder: trauma and grief can become a context in which our posture drifts. Not because suffering automatically makes us faithless, but because under pressure we can reach for what feels safer than obedience. We can settle for surface peace instead of pursuing real reconciliation. We can move toward avoidance, silence, and self-protection. We can become “careful” in ways that are not Christlike.

So our primary stance, what we want to say plainly, is this:

The River appears to be engulfed in a cloud of trauma and grief, with multiple losses and unresolved difficult circumstances. A primary contributing factor is a drift from Christ-centeredness, caused by the imbalance of peacekeeping over peacemaking.

In VCM’s full diagnostic, this tension is also described using other language (including a “hospitality vs. holiness” framing). In our one-page summary, we have chosen to elevate and consistently use the peacekeeping and peacemaking language because it is biblically direct for us (Matthew 5:9), and because VCM agrees this wording faithfully reflects the substance of their findings.

This language matters because it keeps us from turning the story into something merely operational (“we lacked clarity” or “we need a better plan”). Plans matter, clarity matters, and mission matters. But, without repentance and a Christ-centered posture, plans become an unworthy substitute for transformation.

What We Mean by “Drift”

We want to clarify this word because it can be misunderstood. When we say “drift,” we do not mean a 180-degree turn away from the Lord, or that The River has abandoned the gospel. Drift can be subtle, just a few degrees over time. And a few degrees can be quickly corrected when noticed.

But if left unattended, drift takes you farther and farther off course. That is why we must respond now with humility and honesty. The point is not condemnation; the point is correction. We want to return to the simplicity and challenge of being centered on Jesus.

Peacekeeping Versus Peacemaking

We want to name the particular application we believe is most important for us.



Peacekeeping says: *“Let’s keep things calm. Let’s not inflame. Let’s not make it worse.”*
Peacemaking says: *“Let’s tell the truth. Let’s pursue reconciliation. Let’s do the hard work love requires.”*

Peacekeeping is often motivated by fear: fear of conflict, fear of making mistakes, fear of reopening wounds, fear of losing people. Peacemaking is often motivated by faith: faith that Jesus is Lord, faith that truth and love belong together, faith that repentance is not humiliation but freedom.

Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew gives us such a simple, bright aim: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.” (Matthew 5:9) This is our guiding north star.

We are not aiming for superficial calm or the mere absence of conflict. We are aiming for a church that belongs to Jesus—where truth is not avoided, reconciliation is not postponed forever, and love is not reduced to niceness.

Trauma and Grief as Context

We want to speak carefully here. Trauma and grief are real. They explain some of why this season has been so hard. They can also explain why the church’s capacity has felt limited.

But we do not want to hide behind them. Suffering can never be an excuse for drifting from Christ-centeredness. If anything, suffering is where Christ-centeredness is tested and refined.

In the book of Nehemiah, there is a biblical pattern we cannot ignore: God can rebuild outward structures quickly, and still need to do a longer work in the heart. We do not want to be satisfied with visible progress while remaining unchanged inwardly. We want God to do both.

What We Are Committing to Pursue

We broadly affirm the VCM recommendations as a starting roadmap. We may debate about phrasing, and we may clarify what certain recommendations mean for our local context, but we do not want to get stuck debating our way out of obedience. The point is not to win an argument about analysis. The point is to become more faithful.

With that spirit, here are the commitments we are making as a Board:

1) We will lead with prayer, worship, and repentance.

Not as a preface to “real work,” but as the work. We want to seek God together, not simply manage change.



2) We will pursue peacemaking, not peacekeeping.

That includes learning and practicing biblical conflict resolution, and doing the relational work of reconciliation as needed. We want to become a community where hard conversations can happen with humility, clarity, and love.

3) We will acknowledge and address our organizational trauma and grief.

We want to recognize the weight of this season and pursue healing with wise pastoral care, prayerful listening, and healthy choices.

4) We will strengthen the church's focus and shared direction.

We want clarity about mission and vision, not as mere branding, but as a community centered on Jesus and His way.

5) We will rebuild staff culture with health and cohesion.

We want our staff encouraged, supported, aligned, and able to work together with trust and clarity.

An Invitation to the Whole Church

We do not want this to be "a Board plan" or "a VCM plan" that happens *to* the congregation. We want this to become a shared spiritual posture. In April 2026, we plan to bring a Partnership vote to approve moving forward with the recommendations as a church family.

We invite you to pray for a deeper work than any of us can manufacture, and to pursue peacemaking in your own relationships, especially within the church. As we move forward, please extend patience and courage, and bring questions and concerns in ways that are truthful and loving.

If you are tired, wounded, or skeptical, we are sympathetic. If you are angry, we understand. If you are hopeful, we thank God. Wherever you are, we want to walk forward together, under the leadership of Jesus, with the humility of repentance, and with the courage of peacemaking.

With love and sincerity,
The Board of The River Church



As mentioned above, the following one-page summary reflects a few clarifying wording adjustments that we developed in collaboration with VCM to help with interpretation, clarity, and alignment. The full VCM report itself remains unchanged.

Primary Hindering Issue:

The River appears to be engulfed in a cloud of trauma and grief, with multiple losses and unresolved difficult circumstances. A primary contributing factor is a drift from Christ-centeredness, caused by the imbalance of ‘peace-keeping’ over ‘peace-making.’

Hindering Factors:

Six key areas that indicate a drift from Christ-centeredness caused by the imbalance of ‘peace-keeping’ over ‘peace-making’ are:

1. Weak Conversion Vitality
2. Weak in Conflict Resolution
3. Weak Discipleship Vitality
4. (Moderately) Weak Sunday Worship Vitality
5. Weak Vision Vitality
6. Weak in Some (Historic Orthodox) Doctrinal Areas

Recommendations: The Roadmap

We broadly affirm the VCM recommendations as our starting roadmap, and we intend to pursue them together:

1. Initiate an extended season of corporate prayer, worship, and repentance, culminating in a time of Sacred Assembly.
2. Retool and clarify Third Way guidelines.
3. Acknowledge and address our organizational trauma and grief.
4. Engage a church-wide Focusing the Church process to clarify The River’s mission, vision, and goals.
5. Rebuild staff culture into a cohesive, focused, and organized movement that works together towards The River’s mission and goals.
6. Review and practice biblical conflict resolution and pursue relational reconciliation as needed.
7. Determine how the church will corporately practice the Great Commission—intentionally going out to make disciples and forming people to do the same.
8. Keep the Intentional Interim Pastor focused on developing sermon series, training, leadership, staff development, and overseeing the recommendations in this report.