

Abuse reform now in the hands of Executive Committee

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INDIANAPOLIS (RNS)—Leaders of a volunteer task force charged with implementing abuse reforms in the nation's largest Protestant denomination say they were given an impossible task.

In the end, the task proved too much.

"We took this work as far as we were allowed to take it," North Carolina Baptist pastor Josh Wester, chair of the Abuse Reform Implementation Task Force, told the more than 10,800 messengers gathered June 11 for the Southern Baptist Convention's annual meeting.

Instead, the SBC's Nashville-based Executive Committee will now have the task of implementing those reforms.

Resources created, but database still not online

The task force was charged two years ago with creating resources to help churches deal with abuse, publishing a database of abusive pastors and finding permanent funding and long-term plans for abuse reforms. While the task force unveiled a new "Essentials" training resource for churches, the other two tasks remain incomplete.

Wester said the task force has vetted more than 100 names of abusers but has not been able to publish them on an online "Ministry Check" database of abusers, largely due to concerns about insurance and finances.

“I wish that standing before you today, I could say that the Ministry Check website is now online,” Wester told the messengers. “But I cannot do that.”

In his report to the messengers, Wester detailed some of the challenges the task force faced over the past year.

In January, he said, he was called to an “emergency meeting” with other SBC leaders, where he learned insurance concerns made the database impossible. He also said the task force has not been able to access the funds it needed to do its work.

“It was made clear to us there was no future for robust abuse reform inside the SBC,” Wester said.

In response, he said, the task force set up an independent nonprofit, known as the Abuse Reform Commission, to run the database. But the SBC’s two mission boards, which had pledged millions to support abuse reform, said they would not fund the new group.

However, Wester said Jeff Iorg, new president of the SBC’s Executive Committee, is committed to moving the reforms forward. He said the task force hopes the reforms will remain inside the SBC.

Messengers approved the task force’s recommendation that the reforms, including the database, would go forward and that responsibility for the future of reforms be given to the Executive Committee.

Though they would not fund the Abuse Reform Commission, leaders of Send Relief—the SBC’s humanitarian arm, which is funded by the International Mission Board and North American Mission Board—said they are willing to work with the Executive Committee on reforms.

Send Relief’s leaders pledged \$4 million for abuse reforms two years ago.

“In the two years these funds have been available, Send Relief has not

rejected any requests for funding that fall within the original intent of its commitment,” a spokesman for the North American Mission Board said in an email.

The spokesman said those funds still are available.

‘Essentials’ curriculum rolled out

Members of the task force did not come to the annual meeting empty-handed. The new “Essentials” curriculum went live online this week, at the sbcabuseprevention.com website, as part of the ministry toolkit authorized by messengers in 2022.

“To help make our churches safe from abuse, we must be proactive,” reads the website for the new curriculum, which outlines a five-step process for addressing the issue of abuse.

Messengers received a flyer when they registered for the annual meeting, telling them where they could pick up a copy of the curriculum. Copies also will be shipped to each state convention. The curriculum is available as a printed booklet or on a thumb drive.

“The task force looks forward to getting the Essentials curriculum into the hands of as many messengers as possible,” the task force told RNS in an email. The task force also will maintain the website that hosts the curriculum, even though its term has expired.

Wester said the delay in implementing reforms shows the limits of volunteer task forces to deal with issues like abuse.

“Task forces have some power,” he said. “They apparently have very limited power when it comes to doing things in the SBC.”

Southern Baptists have been calling for a database to track abusive pastors

since at least 2007. In 2008, during a previous meeting in Indianapolis, SBC leaders said such a database was impossible.

Fourteen years later, messengers at the 2022 SBC meeting overwhelmingly approved the database and other reforms during their meeting in Anaheim, Calif. The delay in implementing those reforms has left abuse survivors discouraged.

“It’s such a long road to get where we need to be,” said Jules Woodson, one of a group of survivors who have advocated for reforms in recent years.

During their meeting Tuesday, messengers voted for the reforms to go forward and to task the Executive Committee with working on them.