

# Bylaws workgroup calls for further inquiry into three churches

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NASHVILLE, Tenn.—“Further inquiry is warranted” into three churches Southern Baptist Convention President J.D. Greear singled out for their alleged failure to protect victims of sexual abuse, an SBC Executive Committee workgroup reported.

However, the group insisted seven other churches deserved no additional inquiry.



Southern Baptist Convention President J.D. Greear reported recommendations from a sexual abuse advisory committee to the SBC Executive Committee. (BP Photo / Morris Abernathy)

“Churches that have a wanton disregard for sexual abuse and for caring for the survivors are not in good fellowship with this convention,” [Greear told the SBC Executive Committee](#) at its Feb. 18-19 meeting.

On that basis, he asked the Executive Committee’s bylaws workgroup to “perform due diligence” to determine if 10 churches—six of them in Texas—meet the standards to be considered cooperating churches.

## **Constitutional amendment proposed**

At that same meeting, the SBC Executive Committee approved a [proposed SBC constitutional amendment](#) for consideration by messengers to the 2019 SBC annual meeting in Birmingham, Ala.

The proposed amendment on sexual abuse would add a section to Article III of the SBC Constitution defining a “cooperating church” as one that “has not been determined by the Executive Committee to have evidenced indifference in addressing sexual abuse that targets minors and other vulnerable persons and in caring for persons who have suffered because of sexual abuse.”

“Indifference,” according to the amendment, “can be evidenced by, among other things, (a) employing a convicted sex offender, (b) allowing a convicted sex offender to work as a volunteer in contact with minors, (c) continuing to employ a person who unlawfully concealed from law enforcement information regarding the sexual abuse of any person by an employee or volunteer of the church, or (d) willfully disregarding compliance with mandatory child abuse reporting laws.”

## **Group applied four-point criteria**

The bylaws workgroup released [a statement](#) Feb. 23 addressing charges against the churches Greear named, which had been among the subjects of a three-part investigative report by the *Houston Chronicle* and *San Antonio Express-News*.

The workgroup concluded three churches—Bolivar Baptist in Sanger, Cathedral of Faith in Houston and Sovereign Grace Church in Louisville, Ky.—warranted further inquiry.

However, the group determined four Texas churches—Arapaho Road Baptist in Garland, Brentwood Baptist in Houston, First Baptist in Bedford and Second Baptist in Houston—and two Georgia churches—Eastside Baptist in Marietta and Trinity Baptist in Ashburn—did not merit additional inquiry.

The tenth church Greear named—Turner Street Baptist Church in Springdale, Ark.—is not a Southern Baptist congregation, according to the SBC Executive Committee.

In evaluating the 10 churches, the bylaws workgroup applied the four-point criteria for cooperation the Executive Committee presented in the proposed constitutional amendment.

“It is our collective opinion that in crafting the proposed amendment, the Executive Committee intended to use the test of ‘evidencing indifference’ to the threat or fact of sexual abuse as the standard to determine that a church is not in cooperation with the convention,” the workgroup concluded.

“Therefore, the receipt of credible information that would demonstrate such indifference should be the trigger for any sort of inquiry into a church’s conduct. It is also our opinion that the Executive Committee did not intend for every allegation that a church has demonstrated indifference to establish guilt which would then have to be disproved—in effect, a presumption of guilt which the Executive Committee should view as untenable and unscriptural.”

# **‘Avoid publicly calling the names of churches’**

In evaluating the 10 churches Greear identified, the workgroup also noted it considered “such factors as the passage of time, changes in the church’s administration and membership, and the church’s adoption of policies to prevent abuse and properly respond to charges of abuse would make launching an inquiry of no value in addressing sexual abuse but only further harm a congregation recovering from the effects of crimes committed in its midst.”

While not specifically chiding Greear, the workgroup also urged “all members of the Executive Committee and messengers to the Southern Baptist Convention to avoid publicly calling the names of churches without having documentation of criminal convictions and giving prior notice to the church.”

“No individual possesses the authority to declare a church to be under a convention inquiry of any kind,” the workgroup stated.

While saying Southern Baptists “utterly and completely condemn the abominable horror of child sexual abuse,” the workgroup insisted, “We must also be careful that our righteous anger does not prevent a deliberate and thoughtful response.”

“Although the overwhelming majority of sexual abuse cases remains tragically unreported, in virtually all reported cases, the abuse and cover-up of abuse were criminal acts undertaken by a few individuals within a church. The church body rarely knew about these actions and even more rarely took any action to endorse or affirm the wrongful acts or the actors themselves,” the workgroup asserted.

“The convention, through its Executive Committee, should not disrupt the

ministries of its churches by launching an inquiry until it has received credible information that the church has knowingly acted wrongfully in one of the four ways described in the proposed amendment.”

In fact, the workgroup commended First Baptist Church in Bedford as “an example of a church, affected by the actions of a few individuals, that has taken decisive steps as a congregation.”

“We understand it is difficult, if not impossible, to issue a report on sexual abuse that will be met with satisfaction by everyone,” Ken Alford, chairman of the bylaws workgroup, said in his message to the Executive Committee, as reported by Baptist Press.

“That is the reality of addressing an issue which has brought such pain, tragedy, and hurt. But we remain committed to act on behalf of all individuals and churches who have been impacted by the horrific sin of sexual abuse.”

*EDITOR’S NOTE: Read responses from the churches [here](#).*