

Iorg says abuser database delayed by legal hurdles

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A Ministry Check database of Southern Baptist ministers convicted or credibly accused of sexual abuse is “not so much on the back burner” as it is derailed by legal hurdles, said Jeff Iorg, president of the Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee.

Instead, the SBC will focus on educating churches about best practices and resources that already exist to prevent sexual abuse in churches, Iorg said in a 15-minute Zoom interview with the *Baptist Standard* on March 10.

At a news conference held during the most recent SBC Executive Board meeting, Iorg said about the Ministry Check database, “At this point, it’s not a focus for us.”

When asked what factors prompted Executive Committee leaders to place the Ministry Check database on the back burner, he said the question seemed to make assumptions he didn’t share.

“I would say, it’s not so much on the back burner as it is we want to teach churches how to access databases that already exist [and] how to do thorough background checks of people that they’re considering employing or using in volunteer positions with minors,” he said.

Additionally, he said SBC leaders will “continue to consider are there other ways that we can make information available to them that would help them to make the kinds of evaluations they need to make.”

“For us, it’s not a matter of not acknowledging databases or wanting to work with them. It’s a matter of how do we do this most effectively that

gets the right information to the right churches in the right places at the right time. And that's what we're working on," Iorg said.

"So, it's not that we're ignoring the issue. It's that we're trying to think how do we solve this issue the best way, and that's what we're working on now."

Iorg explained the concerns about an SBC-generated database were related to "its legality and our capacity to insure it and to insure our convention in light of doing it. And those are hurdles we haven't found a way over yet."

So, going forward, the SBC Executive Committee's plan is to magnify and emphasize databases already available and accessible, he said.

"Rather than one thing we're not sure we can do, why not focus on the many things we know we can do?" he asked.

Control of the SBC Abuseprevention.com website, created by the Abuse Reform Implementation Task Force, has been in the process of being transferred to the Executive Committee for ongoing oversight.

Now that the transfer is complete, the Executive Committee has updates to the site underway and hopes to roll out the new resource, with state-by-state information on existing (criminal) databases, at the annual meeting in Dallas this June, Iorg said.

"We need it published, and we know that. We've got to get it out there," he said.

Iorg clarified that while he might see differently what was mandated regarding an abuse database, "It's a big issue. ... We're trying to figure out a way to do it the best way we can."

Additional background on databases

In a follow-up interview with Jeff Dalrymple, director of abuse prevention and response within the SBC Executive Committee, he said the background screening industry is fairly complex and nuanced, and is “based on our judicial system, which is really at the county level.”

But all of those criminal databases are available to churches now and will be emphasized on the new online resource.

However, Dalrymple noted, it matters which resources are utilized. Some background checking services are more reliable than others, but even the best criminal reporting will have holes. So, relying on a “one-and-done” background check is not adequate to prevent abuse.

Dalrymple said the [Professional Background Screening Association](#) is a good place to begin in better understanding what goes into background screening.

Research indicates many churches still are underinformed about sex abuse prevention and so are underutilizing proven methods of preventing child sexual abuse, he explained.

Dalrymple said he wants to encourage ministries to do so much more “in screening, training and operations, and if we put so much emphasis on a database, there’s just so many holes and weaknesses with that as a solution.”

Having the right ratios of youth to workers, “to have a response plan, to understand mandatory reporter laws, and so forth,” all are proven methods of minimizing abuse risk, he emphasized.

Dalrymple said he thought when Southern Baptists decided to call for a database of “credibly accused” ministers, they didn’t understand the legal

ramifications of what they were calling for.

Keeping a database of names that haven't been adjudicated opens the denomination up to "massive financial liability" and more of the defamation lawsuits they've been dealing with the last few years, without a guarantee that having the nonadjudicated database actually would help keep kids safe, he said.

On the Law Amendment's return

The *Standard* also asked Iorg about [reports](#) indicating Texas pastor Juan Sanchez intends to reintroduce the Law Amendment—which goes beyond the Baptist Faith & Message 2000 to exclude churches that accept women as pastors—at the annual meeting this summer in Dallas.

Last year, Iorg provided commentary supporting his position that the amendment should be rejected.

Iorg clarified the [position paper published](#) last year was his personal position on the Law Amendment, for which he took full responsibility, not a position the Executive Committee voted on or directed him to take.

"My main concern is that we take action that will bring more clarity to how to respond on this issue and not more confusion. And, I am still concerned that the wording that is currently proposed still doesn't answer all of the questions that need to be clarified for the credentials committee to know how to respond," he said.

"So, I hope to work over these next few months to try to help make sure that whatever is considered is the clearest possible solution to this issue. As I wrote in my position paper, I agree that the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture.

"I've never wavered on that, nor have I ever taught differently or led

differently, but where it begins to be complicated is how that is actually applied, when you have so many different churches with so many different models of ministry, of leadership structure in the congregations. And that's where it begins to be challenging.

"And I would hope that we could adopt something that would give guidance but also recognize this difficulty of applying it in all of these different situations."

On the Cooperative Program's future

As the Cooperative Program marks its centennial anniversary and celebrates its past, Iorg said the main thing that gives him hope is his belief in "a rising generation of leaders who want to work together."

He believes they'll "facilitate the Cooperative Program being strong for another generation or two because they really will see it as the best way to work together to get so much done."

Additionally, he noted, "anyone who takes an honest look at what the Cooperative Program has accomplished has to just stand back and awe at what God has done through it.

"And when you see that," he said, "instead of focusing on some aspect of the negative that is a part of it, but instead focusing on as I said in my speech about 'Southern Baptists are a force for good,'" individuals will be motivated to continue giving to the Cooperative Program, he believes.

However, Iorg noted "a rising tide of independence and sectarianism in American culture, not just in denominational life." He is concerned "we're letting the culture impact us more than we're impacting the culture on this issue of how to work together."

But, he believes Christians, finding strong motivation for working together

in Scripture, “can look at the practicality of the Cooperative Program, [and see] how well it interfaces with our polity as Baptists and is a useful tool for us.”

Iorg also said Southern Baptists can look at what the Cooperative Program has accomplished and say: “Well, there’s not anything that’s done anything in American Christianity even close to this in the last hundred years. Why would we want to move away from this strategy?”

Iorg has insisted on several occasions Southern Baptists are “a force for good.”

When asked how the SBC could become an even greater force for good in the world, he responded, “We can minimize some of the problems that we’re currently having by resolving them and then increasing the focus we have on our core mission, which is getting the gospel to the world.”

Iorg acknowledged: “There’s no question that we’re in a season here where we have to work on some legal and financial and strategic issues. But I believe those need to be worked through in the next two or three years, and then we move on, not ‘this is going to be our perpetual new reality.’ That’s at least my goal that I’m committed to.”