

Litton names task force to oversee sex abuse review

July 9, 2021

SARALAND, Ala. (BP)—Southern Baptist Convention President Ed Litton has appointed a seven-member task force to oversee a third-party review into the handling of sexual abuse claims by the SBC Executive Committee.

Calling formation of the task force his “first priority,” Litton said the seven members of the task force “represent pastors, as well as professionals in law, counseling, and abuse advocacy.”

The task force will be chaired by Bruce Frank, lead pastor of Biltmore Baptist Church of Arden, N.C. The vice chairman is Marshall Blalock, pastor of First Baptist Church of Charleston, S.C.

Others on the task force are: John Damon, chief executive officer of Canopy Children’s Solutions, Jackson, Miss., and member of Broadmoor Baptist Church, Madison, Miss.; Liz Evan, judicial law clerk at Tennessee Court of Criminal Appeals, Nashville, and member of Hilldale Baptist Church, Clarksville, Tenn.; Heather Evans, director of Evans Counseling Services, Coopersburg, Pa.; Andrew Hébert, lead pastor of Paramount Baptist Church in Amarillo; and Bucas Sterling III, senior pastor of Kettering Baptist Church, Upper Marlboro, Md.

“I believe the members of this team are men and women who genuinely pursue God and seek the truth and desire for survivor voices to be heard,” Litton said. “I am grateful for their willingness to serve our Convention in this important role.”

Additionally, Litton announced two advisers to the task force with “expertise in handling sexual abuse dynamics”: Rachael Denhollander, an

attorney and survivors' advocate; and Chris Moles, a pastor, counselor and author. Denhollander and Moles previously served the SBC as members of a sexual abuse advisory group formed in 2018 by former SBC President J.D. Greear.



The Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee building in Nashville, Tenn. (Baptist Press Photo)

In response to the announcement of the task force, the Executive Committee issued a statement saying it “looks forward to cooperating with the presidential task force in order to bring resolution to the matter and restore confidence with Southern Baptists.”

Messengers to the 2021 SBC Annual Meeting approved a motion calling on the new SBC president to appoint a task force composed of members of Southern Baptist churches and “experts in sexual abuse and the handling of sexual abuse-related dynamics.”

Under the terms of the motion, the task force’s purpose is to “ensure that the third-party review includes an investigation into any allegations of abuse, mishandling of abuse, mistreatment of victims, a pattern of intimidation of victims or advocates, and resistance to sexual abuse reform initiatives.”

The motion required Litton, who was elected SBC president June 15, to

appoint the task force within 30 days. The task force will have the discretion to begin its own review or to oversee an independent review already initiated by the Executive Committee. It is required to make the findings public and present them to messengers to the 2022 SBC annual meeting with recommendations for action.

“The messengers of the 2021 SBC annual meeting spoke clearly and overwhelmingly regarding this important task,” said Frank, the task force’s chairman. “I appreciate the team Dr. Litton has assembled, and we will be getting to work immediately. Your prayers are greatly appreciated.”

Sought counsel from trusted advisers

Litton said in formation of the task force he “sought counsel and recommendations from experts in the field and from trusted advisers.” He said the task force includes “respected pastors” in the SBC “who are independent of the Executive Committee and who do not have a conflict of interest related to the review,” as well as laypersons “with professional expertise for this assignment.”

The motion was approved amid controversy over allegations made by former Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission President Russell Moore. Moore, who resigned from his post in May, charged in two letters leaked to news media that calls to address sexual abuse in the SBC had been “stonewall[ed]” by leaders. Audio clips from two meetings Moore described later were posted online by a former ERLC staff member.

Ronnie Floyd, president and CEO of the SBC Executive Committee, announced June 11 Guidepost Solutions had been hired to conduct an independent review of the Executive Committee’s handling of those issues.

The motion was offered by Grant Gaines, pastor of Belle Aire Baptist Church in Murfreesboro, Tenn., who said it was “the least we can do for

abuse survivors.” Gaines told messengers the appointment of a task force was necessary “in order for this investigation to be truly external, independent and unbiased,” and that the Executive Committee “can’t be the ones to hold themselves accountable.”

Under terms of the motion, the independent review could span January 2000-June 2021 and could include any Executive Committee members and staff serving during that time. Executive Committee members and staff are asked to waive attorney-client privilege “in order to ensure full access to information and accuracy in the review.”

The task force is to receive a written report 30 days before the 2022 SBC Annual Meeting. The report is to be made public within a week, along with suggested actions for messengers.

“Southern Baptists, I urgently call you to pray for this process and to bear the burden alongside this task force as they pursue truth, identify issues, and move forward toward greater health in the area of response to abuse,” Litton said.