

# Task force begins vetting for Ministry Check website

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NASHVILLE (BP)—Names and background information are being processed for potential inclusion in an online database of individuals related to Southern Baptist churches who have been convicted of a sex crime or found liable for sex abuse in a civil case.

The Southern Baptist Convention's Abuse Reform Implementation Task Force held an in-person meeting Aug. 28 in Dallas. It marked the group's first gathering since SBC President Bart Barber announced [changes in the task force](#) and named Joshua Wester as its chair.

"This team of godly and faithful Southern Baptists is committed to doing everything it possibly can to ensure meaningful and lasting abuse reform is implemented across our convention," said Wester, pastor of Cornerstone Baptist Church in Greensboro, N.C.

"The goal of Ministry Check is to establish a system where churches can help churches prevent abuse by keeping potentially dangerous individuals away from the vulnerable."

According to a statement released Aug. 31, the task force devoted its recent meeting bringing new members up to speed, reviewing ongoing initiatives and identifying priorities for the upcoming year.

## Vetting names based on crimes, civil

# actions

Chief among them is the vetting of names and background information to be included in a database [here](#).

Names are received primarily through the sexual abuse hotline for survivors. A portal to submit names directly is being developed.

That vetting process is “presently limited,” the statement said, “to determining eligibility ... on the basis of prior criminal convictions or civil judgements rendered against accused individuals for sex-based offenses.”

According to the motion SBC messengers adopted in Anaheim last year, the database will be made up of “pastors, denominational workers, ministry employees and volunteers who have at any time been credibly accused of sexual abuse and who have been or are associated with a cooperating Southern Baptist church or entity.”

The first names to appear on the website, the task force anticipated, will be those convicted of sexual abuse in court or who have had a civil judgement rendered against them.

## **Still working on confessions and ‘credibly accused’ criteria**

The other two criteria are those who have confessed the abuse in a nonprivileged setting and those defined as “credibly accused” according to a preponderance of evidence that has been examined by an independent third party.

“Further work is currently underway to develop standards for inclusion on the basis of the remaining two categories,” the statement read.

The category of “credibly accused” is “by far the most difficult category to administer, but a crucial one,” said task force member and attorney Melissa Bowen.

“Only about 3 percent of instances of sexual abuse result in criminal convictions,” said Bowen, a member of First Baptist Church in Prattville, Ala. “Without this category, Ministry Check would not be complete.

The task force “is working to set up a network of legal and investigative professionals who have the expertise necessary to evaluate reports of suspected sexual abuse in Southern Baptist churches and entities. These evaluations will determine if the inclusion of these reports on Ministry Check would be legally defensible,” Bowen said.

## **Developing ministry toolkit**

In addition to the database of names, the website also will serve as a hub for its [ministry toolkit](#) for churches.

“Though our focus thus far has mainly been on the database, we are also working to enhance the toolbox which will be a resource to every church within our convention, will help us stamp out this egregious sin [of abuse] and provide a safe place for the vulnerable among us,” said Jon Nelson, task force member and lead pastor of Soma Community Church in Jefferson City, Mo.

Kris Buckman serves as youth and children’s missionary with the Baptist Convention of Maryland/Delaware and before that was director of children’s ministries at Tri-County Baptist Church in Damascus, Md.

As a task force member, she said the ministry toolkit can be an essential resource “to enhance prevention efforts and respond well to victims and survivors.”

“We’re looking at several ways to assist churches with implementation, beyond creating a page of resources. The positive partnership we’ve been building with state conventions and associational mission strategists will help facilitate those implementation efforts,” Buckman said.

Future task force updates will come through [sbcabuseprevention.com](http://sbcabuseprevention.com), the statement said, with previous updates to be moved there as well.

The task force expressed its gratefulness to Barber “for his unwavering support for this cause” as well as the financial support and partnerships with Send Relief, the North American Mission Board and International Mission Board.

Since the final gavel of June’s annual meeting, task force members have consulted with leaders from Lifeway, the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, the SBC Executive Committee, associational mission strategists, state convention leaders and numerous pastors in “a spirit of unity and firm resolve ... to see abuse reform advanced at every level of our Southern Baptist family.”

“We will continue working with leaders at every level of the SBC to promote and implement needed reform measures to help make every church safe for the vulnerable and safe from abuse,” Wester said.

Close engagement also continues with the SBC Credentials Committee in addition to entity heads, state conventions and associational leaders and pastors, the statement said.

The task force “is committed to continuing to listen and learn from survivors of sexual abuse,” the statement read. “With our broader convention, we are grieved by the immense pain many have suffered in ministry contexts that should have represented safety and refuge.

“As we enter into a new season of this work, it is our fervent desire to walk

in humility and to honor Jesus whose heart was always for the vulnerable and those who are hurting.”