

# **Editorial: Enact sexual abuse prevention measures**

September 25, 2024

The Baptist General Convention of Texas Executive Board approved recommendations of the Sexual Abuse Task Force by voting for the board's chair and vice chair to appoint members of an implementation task force.

I applaud the work of the Sexual Abuse Task Force and the recommendations they made.

Following their report to the September 2024 meeting of the Executive Board, the board voted to create an implementation task force to ensure the recommendations are enacted.

I applaud the creation of an implementation task force.

And I call all Texas Baptists to facilitate the implementation of the Sexual Abuse Task Force's 11 recommendations.

## **Task force composition**

The [task force was formed](#) during the May 2023 Executive Board meeting.

Board Chair Bobby Contreras and Texas Baptists Associate Executive Director Craig Christina appointed the members of the task force, three of whom were to be current board members, three of whom were to be pastors not currently serving on the board and three of whom were to be counselors not currently serving on the board.

The task force deserves our thanks. Members of the task force are:

## **Executive Board members**

- Janice Bloom, task force chair and attorney in Dallas.
- Suzie Liner, licensed physician in Lubbock.
- Chad Edgington, pastor of First Baptist Church in Olney and a licensed and practicing attorney.

## **Pastors not on the board:**

- Elmo Johnson, pastor of Rose of Sharon Missionary Baptist Church in Houston.
- Dwight McKissic, senior pastor of Cornerstone Baptist Church in Arlington.
- Ariel Martinez, senior pastor of Del Sol Church in El Paso.

## **Licensed professional counselors:**

- Olga Harris, LPC, who was at the time of appointment with Olga Harris Counseling but is now the director of counseling services for Texas Baptists.
- Cynthia Jones, LPC and supervisor for Embrace Counseling Service.
- Todd Linder, LPC and executive director of Creekbend Center for Counseling in Midlothian.

Thank you to each of these nine individuals for the extra time they gave to developing recommendations, for considering a very unpleasant topic, and for bringing their experience and expertise to bear.

Let's honor their work by implementing their recommendations.

A first step was accomplished right after the task force gave its report to the Executive Board on Sept. 24.

Steve Bezner, pastor of Houston Northwest Church, made a motion to create an implementation task force, and the board approved the motion.

New Board Chair Heath Kirkwood and new Vice Chair Suzie Liner will appoint its members. I celebrate Bezner's motion and the board's vote.

Texas Baptists should be lining up already to implement the recommendations.

## The recommendations

The following is the exact wording of the 11 recommendations, provided by Janice Bloom, chair of the Sexual Abuse Task Force. I am including the text of the recommendations as presented, so you can see and consider what the Executive Board was presented and what the implementation task force will shepherd to enactment.

### Recommendations for programs and resources

We recommend that Texas Baptists Administration create an awareness program that includes:

- Developing or directing the development of resources to help churches implement a comprehensive church safety team.
- Encouraging churches to engage in **annual** training about sexual abuse and related issues.
- Dedicating a Sunday in conjunction with National Child Abuse Awareness Month (April) to include availability of materials and sermon outlines to help pastors highlight this issue.
- Developing or directing the development of a list of attorneys and counselors with knowledge of this issue who are willing to be referrals in each Texas Baptists sector.

### Recommendations for the convention

- Develop a model policy for dealing with sex offenders who desire to attend church.

- Include a speaker at [the BGCT] 2025 annual meeting to address the importance of this topic and what the church needs to know.
- Amend the bylaws to provide a disciplinary measure for members of the Executive Board, including removal from office by the board with rights of due process and appeal to any disciplined member [in the event of misconduct by an officer or director].

## **Recommendations for the Executive Board**

Because the following recommendations have to do with policies, once developed and drafted in detail, they will be presented to the appropriate committee for discussion and approval, and [if] approved, for [Executive Board] vote. These are as follows:

- A [written] code of conduct for [Texas Baptists] staff, Executive Board members, volunteers, affiliates and vendors.
- Review Texas Baptists' policy manual and recommend additional abuse prevention and response policies.
- Evaluate whether additional policies/guidance are necessary for the Emergency Response Council to add consistency of response.
- Assess the need for additional job responsibilities to formalize the year-round proactive approach.

## **How not to implement**

Many of the recommendations call for preliminary or next-step kind of work: developing, encouraging, dedicating, amending, writing, reviewing, evaluating and assessing. This language may tempt some to think the task force didn't accomplish anything, but that is to make a category error.

The category error is this: It's not the task force's job to fix the problem of sexual abuse. That's *our* job—all of us. The task force's job was to create a framework of actionable items. Now, we need to get to it.

Some will assert the recommendations are too little too late. It's OK to agree such things needed to be done years ago and to grieve they weren't done sooner. But the recommendations have been made now. Let's not let regret paralyze progress. Rather, let's facilitate their success.

Some will think they've done all they need to do when the preliminary work is done. They would be wrong. To think we've done all that's required by writing policy pages for a notebook is to think we've been baptized simply by wearing the white robe. No, we've got to get all wet.

Thus, the need for an implementation task force to ensure the recommendations are enacted.

And if you're paying attention, you know the implementation task force is just another step on the way. The needed work won't be done until we regularly and consistently are screening staff and volunteers, training them and enforcing good policy.

So, let's get to it. Let's implement the 11 recommendations above.

## **Implementation underway**

Many churches and ministries already are conducting background checks on all staff and all volunteers working with vulnerable populations. All churches need to do this initial step.

Many churches and ministries already have policies in place governing who can work with vulnerable populations, when and under what circumstances. All churches need to have such policies. [MinistrySafe offers help](#) writing good policy.

Every church and ministry must enforce their policies—consistently.

Many churches and ministries offer abuse prevention training. Training is a

critical component to abuse prevention—and not just sexual abuse, but also physical, verbal, emotional, mental and spiritual abuse.

No abuse should be tolerated within the body of Christ. No one—minor or adult—should be abused in any way within the body of Christ.

Training helps us recognize abuse as early as possible. Think of it this way: If you don't want a preacher in the pulpit who hasn't had at least a little theological training, then you don't want people working with your kids who don't know danger when they see it.

I applaud what so many are doing already to prevent abuse and to respond well when it happens. It's time for *all* of us to do our part. Let's implement all the Sexual Abuse Task Force's recommendations.

## Resources

Our 2018 [series on child sexual abuse and the church](#), written by Licensed Professional Counselor Scott Floyd, offers some guidance.

A new English and Spanish version of Texas Baptists' [Sexual Abuse Response webpage](#) is scheduled to launch Sept. 30. A Chinese-language version is expected to be available at a later date.

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*CORRECTION: The seventh paragraph was corrected (Sept. 27, 2024) to add Craig Christina, who also appointed Sexual Abuse Task Force members.*