

Alabama Baptist State Convention

Sexual Abuse Task Force Report

Respectfully submitted November 15, 2022

INTRODUCTION

Last year, at the 2021 annual meeting of the Alabama Baptist State Convention in Huntsville, Alabama, a motion was made and unanimously approved by the convention that a Sexual Abuse Task Force be appointed by the newly elected convention president for the purpose of:

“Review(ing) the policies and practices of our Cooperative Program-funded state Convention entities and auxiliaries, including the State Board of Missions, related to sex abuse, and report back to the 2022 Alabama Baptist State Convention.”

In January 2022, convention president Buddy Champion appointed an eight-member Sexual Abuse Task Force to carry out this assignment. The Sexual Abuse Task Force members are:

Dr. Craig Carlisle, Director of Missions, Etowah Baptist Association, Chair

Melissa Bowen, Attorney, Vice Chair

Kaye Farrow, Licensed Marriage & Family Therapist, Retired

Abigail Jackson, Public Relations Specialist

Dr. D’Linell Finley, Senior Pastor, Southlawn Baptist Church, Montgomery, Alabama

Dr. Blake Kersey, Senior Pastor, FBC, Decatur, Alabama

Dr. Daven Watkins, Senior Pastor, FBC, Pelham, Alabama

Dr. Daniel Atkins, Senior Pastor, Taylor Road Baptist Church, Montgomery, Alabama

Every member of this Task Force has brought valuable contributions to our discussion. Some of our team were, themselves, victims of abuse and harassment in their churches and workplaces. We worked as a team with like-minded unity and passion for the assignment we were given. As the chair, I am personally grateful to each one for their commitment to our task and their insights to the report we are presenting today.

Let us be clear, the issue of sexual abuse is something that is morally repugnant in the eyes of God. When we talk about abuse we are talking about sin. Let’s be reminded of what the Bible says:

First of all, it is a clear sin for anyone to use their power to mistreat people made in God’s image. **“The Lord tests the righteous and the wicked, and the one who loves violence His soul hates” (Psalm 11:5).** It is at odds with the character of God to harm weak people. That means that any Christian, especially any Christian leader, who engages in any act of sexual abuse misrepresents the character of God they claim to serve.

Secondly, violence against the weak and needy is abhorrent to God, and so Christians have a much higher calling than merely not abusing people. We are also called to protect those who are potential victims of abuse, ***“Rescue the weak and needy; deliver them out of the hand of the wicked” (Psalm 82:4)***. The call to protect the weak is a mandate for all of us in church leadership to employ the highest standards in protecting the children and the vulnerable in our ministries.

Thirdly, as Christians, we are called not only to avoid abuse and to protect people from abuse but to refuse to conceal abuse when we know it is happening or has happened. ***“Blessings are on the head of the righteous, but the mouth of the wicked conceals violence” (Proverbs 10:6)***. These words of God make it a sin to encounter abuse and look the other way, blame the victim, help the abuser exit quietly or else feel more compassion for guilty predators than the innocents they abused.

Fourthly, we live in a sinful world where abuse is happening. There is a high likelihood that someone who has been abused is already a part of your congregation, no matter the size of your church. As leaders, we must be doggedly determined to care for these people who are struggling. ***“He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds” (Psalm 147:3)***. Alabama Baptists desire to be Christlike. One of the ways we can demonstrate our conviction is to establish safeguards and systems in our churches to assist abuse victims in finding community, a place to express their grief, to help them understand their shame, and discover the hope and healing that is found in Jesus Christ. Perhaps we are never less like God than when we turn our backs on victims of abuse and expect them to work out their own problems.

Over the last several months we have met with all 10 of the leaders of our Alabama Baptist State Convention entities and auxiliaries. We met with the following:

Alabama Baptist Historical Commission (Lonette Berg)

ALCAP (Joe Godfrey and Greg Davis)

Shocco Springs (Russell Klinner)

Alabama Baptist Children’s Homes & Family Ministries (Rod Marshall)

The Baptist Foundation of Alabama (John Ashworth)

Alabama Baptist Retirement Centers (Dwain Kinard)

Alabama Woman’s Missionary Union (Candace McIntosh)

University of Mobile (Lonnie Burnett)

The Alabama Baptist (Jennifer Rash)

Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions (Rick Lance)

At times, the process of meeting with our entities was very challenging and emotional. We were reminded of the personal nature of this issue as some leaders shared their own stories from the past. Their experiences moved us to tears and touched our hearts in very real ways, making us realize the importance and necessity of what we are doing.

In the meetings with each entity leader, our Task Force committee was presented with detailed policies and procedures for the training and accountability of entity employees and volunteers. Our conversations were productive, and the members of the Task Force were all encouraged by the lengths to which our entities are going to ensure the protection of those to whom they minister. While some entities work more directly with minors than others, we found, again, that all entity leaders take the issue of sexual abuse seriously. We were encouraged by the reports from each entity that they either had been implementing in-depth sexual abuse training for their employees or were taking steps to do so. Members of the Task Force shared thoughts and suggestions for further training and development with each entity leader, and these leaders received our suggestions humbly and proactively.

In summary, after meeting with our Alabama Baptist entities, the Sexual Abuse Task Force is unanimous in our encouragement and endorsement of the measures they are taking in training in and prevention of sexual abuse. Our Task Force is comprised of pastors and ministry leaders serving Alabama Baptist churches, and we pray that our fellow Alabama Baptists share our confidence in the competency of our Alabama Baptist entities in the area of sexual abuse prevention.

While our task was to audit the policies of our entities and auxiliaries, we feel the need to appeal to our churches to take this issue seriously. We encourage each church to have effective policies in place. We further encourage our Directors of Missions to do all they can in assisting their churches to develop the policies necessary to accomplish our goal of our churches being as safe as they can possibly be. During these last several months we have been made aware through the media of multiple stories of abuse taking place in churches, church daycares, and workplaces.

While serving as the chair, I have personally been called by pastors seeking advice concerning situations in their churches. Ultimately, our church leaders will be on the frontlines of seeking to prevent sexual abuse in our churches and families. With that in mind, we want to make you aware of important information that you need to know as you address this issue in your church.

REPORTING

Child Abuse

Reporting suspected abuse is a necessary part of protecting children in our churches. Only through consistent policies of reporting any suspected abuse, whether it occurs at church or in the home of a child who attends one of our churches, can we hope to help prevent the cycles of abuse and despair that plague too many of the children in our care. Many institutions already have these policies. Schools, camps, children's organizations, and others have already come to the realization that this is a necessary part of protecting children. Investigations are carried out

confidentially and professionally. The process can simply become part of the plan for keeping children safe.

Alabama is a mandatory reporting state for all forms of child abuse and neglect. This includes physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, and child neglect. Mandatory reporters include ministers, childcare workers, whether paid or volunteers, and any other person called upon to render aid or medical assistance to any child. If you work with or are in contact with a child or children at your church, you are a mandatory reporter.

The law requires that any person who knows or has reasonable cause to believe or suspect that a child has been abused or neglected or who observes any child being subjected to conditions or circumstances that would reasonably result in abuse is required to report either by telephone or in person immediately to the Alabama Department of Human Resources (DHR), law enforcement, or the District Attorney, followed by a written report. DHR in every county has a telephone number for reporting child abuse and neglect that is answered 24 hours a day. A list of numbers for every county can be found at dhr.alabama.gov/county-office-contact.

A MANDATORY REPORTER MUST NOT INTERVIEW THE CHILD OR INVESTIGATE THE ABUSE.

These matters are difficult to investigate and special training is necessary in order that accurate information may be obtained from the child. In our state, there is a network of more than 40 child advocacy centers where children can be properly interviewed and supported when child abuse or neglect is suspected. Every county in Alabama has access to one of these centers. The centers work closely with DHR and law enforcement to find the truth about suspected child abuse and neglect.

In order to protect the children of your church, it is important to take care of them by reporting any abuse or neglect. It is also permissible to call DHR to ask if certain behaviors or signs are indicative of abuse or neglect. The employees of DHR have the expertise in recognizing child abuse and neglect and can often ease your mind about situations that you encounter. Not every report results in a finding of child abuse or neglect. A report is a way to determine if there is a problem. The identities of the people who report abuse are confidential and cannot be discovered even by a subpoena issued by a judge. There are brochures containing this information about reporting available from DHR and online if you would like to provide them to your church.

Once abuse reports have been made, DHR makes a finding concerning each report. The possible findings are “indicated,” “not indicated,” and “reason to suspect.” Indicated reports against a particular individual can be discovered by making an application to DHR on form **DHR-FCS-1598**. This form can be found online at: dhr.alabama.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/form1598.pdf, but must be filled out as a paper form and presented to DHR at least 90 days in advance of when the information is needed. Instructions for filling out the form can be found at: dhr.alabama.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Form-1598-B-Instructions.pdf.

These reports will provide information about individuals who may not have been criminally charged with sexual abuse or child abuse, but who have been reported to DHR for suspected abuse and an investigation has shown that there is reason to believe that abuse has occurred. This is another layer of protection for children. Both Shocco Springs and the Alabama Baptist Children's Homes & Family Ministries screen employees and volunteers using this tool.

The Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions can assist churches in learning about and setting up a plan for training staff and volunteers about reporting suspected child abuse and neglect. Your local DHR office can also help with this process. There may be teachers and DHR employees familiar with the reporting process who are part of our churches and who can assist church leaders in this matter. Protection requires that we all are observant and tireless in our care of the children entrusted to us. Reporting cases of suspected abuse is part of protecting our children.

Abuse of Impaired Adults

Any person under the age of 19 is legally considered a minor in the State of Alabama. Mandatory reporting applies only to individuals who are under the age of 19. If abuse is suspected concerning someone 19 or older, the victim of abuse should make a report to law enforcement on his or her own behalf. This does not mean that an adult victim does not need ministry or support. It means that the victim makes his or her own decision about reporting. The exception to this is an adult who is not able to care for himself or herself due to mental or physical infirmity.

The Alabama Adult Protective Services Act protects such individuals from exploitation, neglect, abuse, and degrading treatment. It establishes protective services and assures availability of these services to all persons who need them. An adult in need of protective services is:

- A person 18 years of age or older
- Behavior indicates that he or she is mentally incapable of adequately caring for himself or herself and his or her interests, or who
- Because of physical or mental impairment, is unable to protect himself or herself from abuse, neglect, exploitation, sexual abuse, or emotional abuse by others, and
- Who has no guardian, relative, or other appropriate person, able, willing, and available to provide the kind and degree of protection and supervision required under the circumstances.

ABUSE OF POWER

While child sexual abuse is often more heart wrenching, sexual abuse of adults is also a tragedy and must be addressed within a church. Adult survivors of sexual abuse are sometimes

alienated from their churches, disgraced or even asked to leave their churches, or worst of all, hindered in their walk with their Lord and Savior because of the damage to their understanding of God's love and care for them due to the abuse.

Relationships between ministers and church members cannot be fully consensual. This is due to the imbalance of authority between the two people in the relationship. Ministers are traditionally viewed as having more expertise and knowledge about the Scripture and spiritual matters. For many people of faith, ministers serve as God's representatives on earth. This clouds the less-powerful person's view of the relationship, making them unable to truly enter into a consensual relationship. Even if the person with less power suggests or pursues a sexual relationship with the more powerful person, it is always the person with more power who has the responsibility of setting the boundaries in the relationship. Relationships between ministers and church members should be seen as an abuse of power. Oftentimes, these relationships are characterized as "affairs." An affair implies mutual consent, abuse of power does not.

Although clergy are capable of any kind of abuse, including children, teens, men or women, it is estimated that 98% of victims of sexual exploitation by ministers are adult women. *(Dr. Gary Schoener, Executive Director, Walk-In Counseling Center. Consulted on over 2,000 cases of clergy sexual abuse.)*

How do we respond?

- The church should have a clear cut and well-known process for making church leadership aware of incidents of sexual abuse in the church. This process should include a provision for reporting the abuse to someone other than the pastor, in the case the abuser is the pastor.
- In cases where abuse has taken place and a crime has been committed, the incident should be reported to law enforcement immediately, without question. The goal is to protect the victim from further harm.
- If there is no crime, the church must still act quickly.
- Remain open-minded. The natural human instinct is to recoil from alleged horror and to immediately assume the allegations are false. The overwhelming majority of abuse disclosures prove to be true. In every case, the proper and Christian response is to remain open minded.
- Pray for all parties involved. Every person involved deserves and needs prayerful support.
- Once a determination has been made, appropriate action should be taken.

RESPONSIBILITIES

As Alabama Baptists, among our core tenets are a commitment to the Great Commission and our strong belief in the sanctity of human life. The issue of sexual abuse is, at its core, an issue

of the sanctity of human life. The Bible clearly defines human personhood as being created in the image of God. Since every human bears the image of God, abuse in every form is an assault on the image of God. The way in which we, as the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ, address sexual abuse, advocate for victims, and protect the vulnerable, is a testimony to the world of the gospel. Our desire is to represent the name and heart of God in such a way that all will see our good works and glorify our Father in heaven (Matthew 5:16).

While we, as a Task Force, understand and affirm the uniqueness of Baptist polity, in that each of our Southern Baptist churches, including Alabama Baptists, practices autonomy, we do believe that, together, we can take steps to create and maintain safe environments for all in our care. We desire our testimony and the reputation of our churches to be above reproach. Therefore, in light of all we know, we make the following suggestions to our Alabama Baptist family of churches:

1. Let us reinforce the seriousness of all sexual abuse by utilizing and implementing resources, such as MinistrySafe, for equipping church staff and volunteers to prevent sexual abuse in our ministries.
2. Let us reinforce the seriousness of all sexual abuse by creating and implementing policies and guidelines for ministering to minors. Let us commit to communicate and train church staff and volunteers in sexual abuse training and awareness.
3. Let us reinforce the seriousness of all reported sexual abuse by taking appropriate action. Sexual abuse is always immoral — it is often criminal. In the event that pastors and/or church staff are made aware of sexual abuse accusations, we reemphasize that you are considered “mandatory reporters.” Therefore, internal investigations are ill-advised and should, under no circumstances, be conducted. Local law enforcement or DHR should be contacted immediately and the investigations be conducted by third-party agencies.

As people of the Bible our goal is healing and restoration. Therefore, passages such as Matthew 18:15–20 should not be utilized as a rationalization for the use of internal investigations or as a replacement for reporting.

4. Let us reinforce the seriousness of all sexual abuse by having a ministry plan to address the needs of the victim. Our responsibility goes beyond reporting to law enforcement. It must include caring for the one who has been violated and abused. An excellent resource for caring for victims is the Caring Well curriculum provided by the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention. These resources can be found at caringwell.com.

In summary, throughout this process, our Task Force has become increasingly aware that the best way to protect those we serve is to prepare those who minister and serve. Our desire is that all Alabama Baptists will be proactive in the education and training of each member of your church staff and every volunteer, both in preventative and process measures.

We encourage policies and procedures that are active and verifiable. We encourage the intentional appointment of safe and trustworthy individuals to ensure that these policies and procedures are carried out to the fullest extent. We desire that every victim or potential victim has a sense of safety and protection, from reporting to final action.

Together, we as Alabama Baptists, can be a part of the healing process by creating opportunities for growth and change in our churches. Let us not be naïve in thinking that this issue is not real and can be ignored.

As your Task Force, we thank you for allowing us to serve in this capacity. We appeal to you to take the issue of sexual abuse seriously by taking every precaution to protect your people, but especially your children, from sexual abuse. We would also ask that you include, on your church calendar, the newly created "Caring Well Sunday." The purpose of this day will be to highlight sexual abuse awareness. This day will be added to the Southern Baptist Convention calendar beginning on September 24, 2023, and will be observed on the last Sunday of September in the future. All of us on this Task Force consider this assignment one of the most important ministries we have offered in service of our Alabama Baptist family.

We believe in you, Alabama Baptists. We believe that you are going to respond to this report and take the necessary steps to ensure your churches are safe places, and because of that, we have hope for a better future.