

## **Update from the Task Force of the SBC**

This will be the first of a number of updates from the Task Force members regarding the independent investigation into the Executive Committee of the Southern Baptist Convention. Below you will find a brief review of the terms of the motion passed by the Messengers, an explanation of the framework approach the Task Force will have in carrying out this mandate, a notation on our current status, and the challenge that is on all our hearts as we approach this process.

### **Background**

At the Southern Baptist Convention in June of 2019, SBC Messengers approved a motion to create a credentialing committee to consider questions concerning whether a member church is in “friendly cooperation” with the Convention as described in the SBC Constitution, Article III. This was done in accordance with SBC polity related to church autonomy and provides that the Committee may not exercise authority over any church in the assessment process. There are, and have historically been, a number of areas where a church may be deemed no longer in cooperation with the Convention, resulting in an ending of that church’s relationship with the Convention and Cooperative Program. Messengers additionally approved language to provide explicitly that churches will not be considered in fellowship with the SBC if they “act in a manner inconsistent with the Convention’s beliefs regarding sexual abuse.” For more information regarding the Credentialing Committee’s mandate and process, please see here:

[https://www.sbc.net/about/what-we-do/sbc-governance/credentials-committee/#gf\\_4](https://www.sbc.net/about/what-we-do/sbc-governance/credentials-committee/#gf_4)

Since the creation of the Committee in 2019, numerous questions about the practices, policies, and methods of the Committee have arisen regarding the Committee's handling of concerns related to sexual abuse. Allegations have arisen regarding the actions of Executive and Credentialing Committee members, including, but not limited to, defamation of a survivor, intimidation, bullying, harassment, dishonesty, and alleged efforts to resist reforms related to sexual abuse.

These allegations have given rise to the investigative process which the Task Force is overseeing.

### **The Mandate**

At the Southern Baptist Convention in June 2021, an overwhelming majority of the 15,000 SBC Messengers passed a motion commissioning an investigation into the Executive Committee of the SBC. According to the will of the Messengers, this Task Force is required to oversee this investigation and ensure it thoroughly investigates the following:

- Allegations of abuse by Executive Committee members.

- Mishandling of abuse allegations by Executive Committee members between January 1, 2000 to June 14, 2021.
- Allegations of mistreatment of sexual abuse victims by Executive Committee members from January 1, 2000 to June 14, 2021.
- Patterns of intimidation of sexual abuse victims or advocates from January 1, 2000 to June 14, 2021.
- Resistance to sexual abuse reform initiatives from January 1, 2000 to June 14, 2021.
- An audit of the procedures and actions of the Credentials Committee as related to sexual abuse.

Under SBC polity, we recognize that it is the will of the Messengers which guides and directs the Convention. We, therefore, believe it is of utmost importance that the clear mandate given at the Convention in June of 2021 be followed and adhered to by everyone involved, and to this end we are committed.

### **The Structure**

According to the mandate given by the Messengers, this investigation will follow best-standards practices. It is our belief that the Resolution as passed requires, but is not limited to, the following:

- 1 – Retaining a firm that is hired as assessors and investigators, without any creation of attorney-client privilege.
- 2 – Waiver of the Executive Committee’s attorney-client privilege and attorney-client privilege for all witnesses or relevant individuals pertinent to this investigation, excluding survivors of sexual abuse who choose to participate in this investigation regarding their experiences with the SBC. This step is critical to ensure full access to relevant information, complete accountability and transparency, and properly assess steps for reform. It is important to note that privilege is held not with the attorney but with the individual and entity, and is fully within the respective parties’ rights to waive.
- 3 – A full, written, public report that details the methodology and process of the investigation, its factual findings, and recommendations based on those findings.
- 4 – This report shall include notations of where information was not available, not provided, or where privilege was claimed or attempted to be claimed.
- 5 – A protection of all survivor identities from any individual or entity outside of the investigative agency, including this Task Force. A channel for confidential and anonymous communication will also be opened by the investigative agency, and information obtained anonymously will be pursued to the extent possible.

## **The Process**

We are receiving proposals from agencies and will review these proposals to assess each organization's ability to meet the goals and objectives of this investigation. From that group we will select firms to interview to further assess skills and qualifications. Once a firm is retained, this will be announced publicly with a brief statement regarding the reasons for selection. At that time, we will also release the letter of engagement and contract for full public transparency.

Agencies interested in submitting a proposal for our review may contact at [contact@sataskforce.net](mailto:contact@sataskforce.net). In view of the timeline given by the Messengers, we will accept written proposals through Thursday, August 12<sup>th</sup>, 2021.

## **Current Status**

In light of the resolution's mandate to waive privilege for materials relevant to this investigation, we have reached out to the Executive Committee to request that at their annual business meeting on September 20-21, 2021, they vote to approve a motion to waive privilege on behalf of the Executive Committee and urge waiver of any individual privileges claimed by current or past Executive Committee Members in accordance with the overwhelming mandate given by SBC Messengers.

Task Force members have made themselves available to discuss this step, answer any questions that may arise, and assist in drafting or reviewing said motion, to ensure full communication and assistance to allow the Executive Committee to take this vote at their meeting. An update on that vote will be provided by the Task Force in a public communication shortly after the meeting. In light of the Executive Committee's commitment to cooperate in full and the directive given by the Messengers, we anticipate swift passage of this motion.

The Task Force has also formally requested that the Executive Committee and its staff preserve all written and electronic communications, records, information, and data, including data that may be residing on servers and personal communication devices, for the duration of this investigation and until August of 2022, to allow time for receiving any recommendations that may come from this process.

## **The Goals**

As a Convention which strives to adhere faithfully to the gospel, we believe this process is one which should be welcomed by all in the SBC. Indeed, it is the gospel which compels that these steps be taken, for it is the gospel that demonstrates to us all both the holiness of God and weightiness of sin. If we are to preach God as holy, and in Christ's grace follow the command to be "holy as your Father in heaven is holy," then we must never be a people who minimizes wrongdoing, but rather stands clearly opposed to it.

If we are to love as Christ loved, laying down our lives, caring for His sheep, and considering others above ourselves, we must therefore care deeply about the impact of our actions upon others and grieve at any suffering that our choices or actions cause. It is of utmost importance, therefore, that a fair, honest assessment of our actions and policies be conducted, and that it is undertaken with a heart ready to hear, receive, and repent where errors are found, never minimizing the wrong or the suffering it has created, but grieving over it.

As a Convention, we preach the beauty of God's grace and the hope it brings not only to those who have suffered, but to those who have done wrong. If we believe the truths we preach, therefore, we should be the first to pursue repentance and model the very grace we teach every week in our churches. We must also recognize that true repentance requires accurately identifying and uncovering any wrongs done. Bringing light and truth forward, therefore, should never be feared by any in our Convention, but rather should be pursued out of love for God and love for others.

SBC polity additionally holds to a model of autonomy that is intended to create both freedom of conviction as well as accountability. It is critical to note that this review in no way violates these convictions, but rather follows and upholds them by submitting to the will of the Messengers and ensuring accountability and transparency in SBC Leadership and processes.

We look forward, therefore, to this process, and ask that you pray with us that it glorifies God in its pursuit of the truth.

Sincerely,

### **Members of the Task Force**

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P.S. Documents will be posted and updated on [sataskforce.net](http://sataskforce.net).