

Mississippi Baptist Convention Sexual Abuse Response Team Report, October 2023

1) Our Priority: A Vision for redemption and restoration

Our hope is that the churches of the Mississippi Baptist Convention would become one of the leading voices on the topic of sexual abuse in the SBC not only because we are called to do so by the Lord to speak and take action against this direct affront to God personally, but also because the heart of Christ in us won't allow us to be quiet and complacent.

We believe we accomplish this vision most faithfully when we...

RECOGNIZE where we have fallen short in understanding that sexual abuse prevention and response is a Gospel & Scriptural issue, **REPENT** of our failures, **RECEIVE** the wisdom of the Holy Spirit, the truth of The Word of God, and the counsel of others committed to the gospel and this important cause, **RESPOND** with diligence and urgency in implementing positive change, and **RESTORE** in our hearts and congregations a definition of God-honoring intimacy and a recognition of the image of God in others that makes sexual abuse easier to detect

2) Our Process:

The Sex Abuse Response Team was named July of 2022 by Convention President Dr. Lloyd Sweat, in response to the SBC Convention in Anaheim & recommendations made by the SATF & Guidestone Report. The Sex Abuse Response Team was tasked with providing an initial report to the 2022 State Convention with a final report due by 2023 State Convention. This team has met monthly since that time as well as numerous other meetings in between. The team also engaged with multiple advisors in various roles of prevention, training and response.

3) Our People Team Members *So thankful for this team!!!*

Melanie Benson, Brad Eubank, Don Gann, Laura Gee, Dr. Jim Phillips, Dr. Wade Phillips, Dr. Will Wall, Lydia Warren, Angie Boydston, Dr. Lloyd Sweat, Dr. Shawn Parker, & Maria Teel

4) Our Plan

The team took some initial first steps last year.

- (1) Gave our first report to the state convention last year and begin to raise awareness that every adult in MS is a mandatory reporter of suspected or known child sex abuse. It included giving out the S.T.O.P. plan of what to do when you know or suspect child abuse.
- (2) The launch of Ministry Safe Membership for all MBCB churches for free, for the 1st year. The convention will pay the \$250 fee. The executive committee set aside \$250,000 for this initiative.
- (3) An attempt to pass legislation criminalizing adult clergy sex abuse along with 2 other pieces that ultimately failed in the Senate Committee hearing.

The team has worked tirelessly since that time in several areas and from much research and discussion developed a clear plan going forward. This plan is designed to come alongside our churches to help and encourage them to make their churches the safest places on planet earth. This plan is entitled the **Pathway to Preventing and Responding to Sexual Abuse**. This pathway will continue to raise awareness and help pastors and churches to understand that sex abuse prevention & response is a gospel & Scriptural issue that must be addressed inside the church.

2 Resources that are being officially launched here today

- a) **The Pathway Brochure** – It gives the overview of The Pathway including a quick easy assessment every church can take to see where they are and where they need to make improvements or adjustments.
- b) **The Pathway Booklet** that will expand on The Pathway to give pastors and church leaders a clear pathway forward in implementing sex abuse prevention and response include helpful sample pieces of information. It is designed to be very accessible and easy to put into place in every church.

c) A resource is being developed by the ARITF in partnership with Lifeway and the ERLC that will be a 5 session resource designed for normative size churches in our convention. It will hopefully be released by the SBC convention in June of 2024.

WHY SHOULD WE CARE?

We have a clear compelling **Gospel** and **Scriptural call** to protect & care well for children, teenagers, and vulnerable adults. We must not turn a blind eye or deaf ear since it may be difficult or hard. We must respond!

“But whoever causes the downfall of one of these little ones who believe in Me—it would be better for him if a heavy millstone were hung around his neck and he were drowned in the depths of the sea!” **Matthew 18:6**

“He has told you, O man, what is good; And what does the Lord require of you? But to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.” **Micah 6:8**

“Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves; ensure justice for those being crushed. Yes, speak up for the poor & helpless, & see that they get justice.” **Proverbs 31:8-9**

MISCONCEPTIONS/MISUNDERSTANDINGS CHURCHES OFTEN HAVE

- ✓ This couldn't or wouldn't happen at their church because they know everyone.
- ✓ Criminal background checks alone are adequate.
- ✓ Sexual abuse isn't that prevalent or that much of a problem.
- ✓ Abuse is minimized as a “mistake” that should just be forgiven and forgotten.
- ✓ They don't know how to recognize grooming behavior/patterns in potential offenders.
- ✓ They fail to implement best practices regarding abuse prevention, response, and survivor care due to feelings of inadequacy or being overwhelmed as to where to start.

DID YOU KNOW?

- In 2021, 3 children were sexually abused every day in Mississippi. That translates into 1006 reported cases for the year. (CWLA)
- 93% of child abuse victims know their perpetrators, someone they know & trust. (DOJ)
- 1 in 4 girls & 1 in 6 boys are sexually abused before they turn 18. (D2L)
- Only 16% of child victims ever tell about their abuse. (NCAC)
- A male abuser who molests boys has an average of 150 victims. A male abuser who molests girls has an average of 52 victims. (Emory University)
- The devastation of sexual abuse doesn't stop when the abuse ends. The physical, emotional, mental, & spiritual effects last for a lifetime.
- In Mississippi, all adults, including clergy, are mandatory reporters of suspected or known child abuse.

WHAT CAN MY CHURCH DO?

Every Pastor & church can learn the **PATHWAY** to **TRAIN, SCREEN, PROTECT, REPORT, & CARE.**

THE PATHWAY TO PREVENTION & RESPONSE



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TRAIN

Provide initial and ongoing **TRAINING** for staff, volunteers, and church members that raises awareness and shares effective actions to help prevent incidents of abuse in the church.

SCREEN

Adopt a careful vetting process for all those working with children, youth, and vulnerable adults. **SCREENING** should include an application, interview, references, social media review, and background checks.

PROTECT

Create and implement policies that **PROTECT** children, youth, and vulnerable adults from grooming and abuse.

REPORT

Have written plan in place to **REPORT** abuse to appropriate government authorities and communicate with the church in the event of an abuse allegation.

CARE

Identify and offer resources that will provide victims, survivors, and their families with options for on-going **CARE**.

A plan is in the works to go to every association in 2024 with training targeting specifically our normative size churches and pastors and bi-vocational pastors on The Pathway.

5) Our Prayer

- **Remorse** before The Lord for the pain and suffering of survivors in our state and the damage done to our witness as a body of churches

- **Repent** before the Lord of any role we have played or may have played in the lack of emphasis on this tragedy within our churches
- **Respond** with a sense of urgency to do everything in our power to help our churches and ministry better prevent sexual abuse and protect and care well for survivors of sexual abuse.

6) Our Pursuit

We ask that a resolution be approved to support the development of the following Mississippi laws:

- a. Criminalize adult clergy sex abuse between pastors and those adults under their counseling care.
- b. Empower churches by shielding them from civil liabilities when they share information in good faith about credibly accused person of abuse with other organizations or institutions.
- c. Making Pastors and other professionals mandatory reporters when an adult discloses they were abused as a child and there is a good faith that the disclosure of the information is necessary to protect the health & safety of another child or vulnerable adult.

CHALLENGES:

1. Pastors

- a) We challenge pastors to know and understand Mississippi's laws regarding abuse and mandated reporting, as well as reporting to the SBC Ministry Check Website.
- b) We challenge pastors to take the initiative to be informed themselves, and train other leaders within their churches, regarding forms of abuse, prevention, and the care for survivors of abuse.
- c) We challenge pastors to take advantage of the Ministry Safe Training in our state and to sign up their churches for free thanks to the financial help from our state convention.
- d) We challenge pastors to familiarize themselves with local authorities and have contact information for reporting abuse readily available.

- e) We challenge pastors, as mandated reporters, to immediately contact the proper authorities whenever abuse is disclosed or suspected and instruct their ministry leaders to do the same.
- f) We challenge pastors to inform other leaders, churches, or ministries about individuals who have been prosecuted, confessed or *credibly accused of sexual abuse.
- g) We challenge pastors to create and champion a culture of “survivors first” when it comes to sexual abuse.

2. Churches

- a) We challenge churches to begin implement The Pathway.
- b) We challenge churches to develop and adopt appropriate policies for abuse education, prevention, and handling of abuse claims and occurrences including but not limited to background checks, waiting periods, classroom ratios, reporting procedures, bathroom policies, physical contact, information sharing, as well as other important matters.
- c) We challenge churches to put a plan in place to provide appropriate and ongoing care for survivors of sexual abuse.
- d) We challenge churches to report individuals who are prosecuted or credibly accused to the SBC Ministry Check Website whenever it is appropriate.
- e) We challenge churches to employ some form of limited access & accountability agreement in the following situations:
 - A member or attendee is on the sex abuse registry
 - A member or attendee has a history of violating the church’s policies
 - A member or attendee has been credibly accused of abuse
 - A member or attendee is the subject of an investigation by the authorities or an independent third party

3. Associations

- a) We challenge associations to work with the state convention to provide regular training regarding sex abuse education, prevention, and survivor care for their member churches. (Host

an association training targeting every association in MS in 2024)

- b) We challenge associations to actively encourage all member churches to adopt appropriate policies necessary for survivor care and abuse prevention.
- c) We challenge associations to gather and distribute information to churches concerning local law enforcement and victim advocates, child protective services, counseling providers, and other appropriate authorities.

4. Mississippi Baptist Convention Board

- a) We encourage the MBCB to maintain a list of trauma informed counselors that are licensed in the state of Mississippi
- b) We encourage the MBCB to continue to provide regular training for associations, churches, and pastors.
- c) We encourage the 100 Member Board members to be background checked & go through Ministry Safe Training (All MBCB employees are already background checked & go through Ministry Safe Training)
- d) We encourage the Nominating Team to include background checks as a part of their vetting process & a person's stance on sexual abuse
- e) We encourage the MBCB to require each church to do background checks for all leaders (paid church staff and volunteers) and also strongly recommend sex abuse prevention training for churches coming to use our convention camp facilities starting with a phase in plan beginning in the summer of 2024 into 2025.
- f) We encourage the MBCB form a new and ongoing Sex Abuse Response Team. This team could include possibly 2 teams: An Advisory Council (volunteers) to continue the work of sex abuse prevention and response as well as a Crisis Response Team (paid MBCB staff).