

# THE FUTURE OF ABUSE REFORM IN THE SBC:

## THE ARITF'S 2024 REPORT & RECOMMENDATIONS

For nearly two years, the Abuse Reform Implementation Task Force (“task force”) has worked aggressively toward the implementation of meaningful and lasting abuse reform within the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) in response to the expressed will of messengers at the 2022 and 2023 annual meetings.<sup>1</sup>

Since being reauthorized by the messengers and reappointed by Dr. Barber following last year’s annual meeting in New Orleans, the task force has vigorously pursued **three key priorities**:

1. Expansion of the Ministry Toolkit
2. Establishment of the Ministry Check website
3. Creation of a permanent home for abuse prevention and response.

In the last 10 months, the task force has made substantial progress toward each of these priorities. This report details our progress and includes our unanimous recommendation concerning the future of the SBC’s abuse reform efforts.

## REPORT

Messengers have sought to advance sexual abuse reform at every SBC annual meeting since we gathered in Dallas in 2018. During this time, both the Houston Chronicle’s “Abuse of Faith” series (2019) as well as the Guidepost Solutions report (2022) have brought the issue of sexual abuse to the foreground for Southern Baptists.

Over the last two years, the task force has worked to serve the churches of the SBC by implementing abuse reform measures as directed by the messengers. This has been a tremendous and daunting undertaking. Before providing an update on the status of the three key priorities noted above, we share the following information on our work and progress.

The task force has always believed that sexual abuse reform is about helping churches. Some have disputed whether the SBC ever faced an abuse crisis at all. Regardless of the appropriate description, the primary issue we’ve confronted is the fact that up until very recently, the largest

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<sup>1</sup> Messengers have recognized the biblical warrant for abuse reform from the outset of these efforts. Scripture is replete with instruction to care for and protect the vulnerable: Mt. 18:6; Prov. 31:8-9; 3:13-14; 2:11; Ps. 147:3; 9:9; Mic. 6:8.

Protestant body in the United States had no meaningful plan to help its churches prevent or respond to sexual abuse.

The churches we've engaged with were not seeking to avoid the responsibility of caring for and protecting the vulnerable. In almost every case they were simply looking for help. They needed expert guidance to take the right steps in responding to abuse. They needed assurance that someone was there to walk alongside them. And they were relieved to know they no longer had to confront the greatest crisis in their ministries alone.<sup>2</sup>

The church should be the last place abuse occurs and the first place people turn to for safety and care. We pray and long for SBC churches to be the safest places possible for the vulnerable and those who have experienced abuse. Turning this vision into a reality, however, requires intentional prayer and deliberate action.

For two years our task force has sought to listen and learn from pastors, lay people, ministry leaders, survivors, denominational leaders, counselors, attorneys, and countless other experts to shape our understanding of the needs of our convention and the possibilities for abuse reform within the SBC. All of this has left us with a much clearer perspective about the way forward.

This way forward can best be summed up through an insight shared with the task force by an Associational Missions Strategist, "Our churches don't want to hear what you are going to do to them; they want to hear what you are prepared to do with them and for them." We believe the future of abuse reform depends upon providing this kind of help for churches seeking to prevent and respond to sexual abuse and to offer care for those who are hurting.

Thankfully, we've been experiencing a culture change in the SBC when it comes to abuse. For too long, abuse was overlooked. In some cases, it was simply ignored. But our convention, through its messengers, has repeatedly demonstrated a resolve to write a new story when it comes to abuse. We believe Southern Baptists are resolved to see the kind of change where every church in our convention can be equipped to protect and care well for every person.

The needs of the SBC are vast when it comes to abuse reform. Our task force offers this report as a marker of our convention's progress and a roadmap for the future of these efforts. We could have certainly channeled our energy in many different directions to do this work, but we intentionally chose the three key priorities below because we believe they are critical building blocks for abuse reform.

## (1) Expanding the Ministry Toolkit

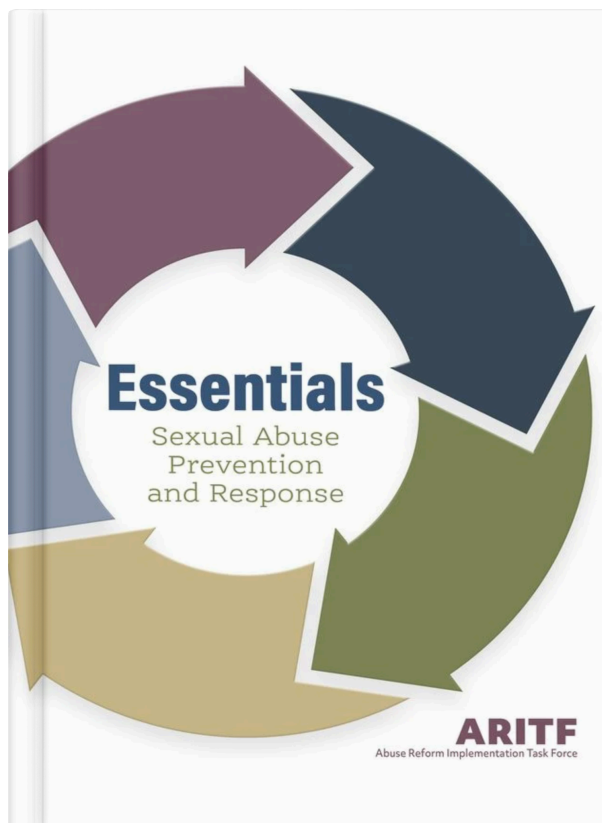
In the SBC, abuse reform begins with the local church. No church is intentionally unprepared to prevent or respond to sexual abuse. However, a significant number of SBC churches lack the

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<sup>2</sup> The task force has been deeply fortunate to develop a network of professionals to consult, guide, and assist our efforts to help churches navigate various instances of sexual abuse.

tools and resources to ensure that sufficient policies, procedures, and training are in place to protect and care for the vulnerable.<sup>3</sup>

From the hundreds of pastors and ministry leaders we've engaged on this topic, we've repeatedly heard one consistent message: **Local churches need resources for abuse prevention and response that are simple, accessible, and easy to implement.**



To address this critical need, the task force is incredibly excited to release **a new curriculum** at this year's annual meeting.<sup>4</sup> The *Essentials: Sexual Abuse Prevention and Response Training* curriculum is designed to assist local churches of all sizes (with particular benefit for small and medium-sized churches which represent the overwhelming majority of the SBC) to walk step-by-step through five sessions that will help them establish or evaluate their abuse prevention and response plan.

For more than 14 months, the task force has worked alongside an amazing team of experts and creative professionals to produce the *Essentials* curriculum. Its contents have already been tested and implemented in multiple SBC churches. We are confident it will be an invaluable resource for thousands of local churches by providing simple, practical, and effective steps for abuse prevention and response.

Through the *Essentials* curriculum, churches will learn to Train, Screen, Protect, Report, & Care. We recommend local churches gather at least **5 key leaders** to complete each of the **5 sessions** over **5 months** (e.g. pastor, deacon, children's leader, youth leader, parent, etc.).

The *Essentials* curriculum will be available in multiple formats at the annual meeting (print and USB drive) from the ARITF booth in the exhibit hall. It will also be accessible online as a free resource via the [Ministry Toolkit](#).

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<sup>3</sup> 2023 ACP Data: Of the churches that responded to the additional questions, 58% perform background checks, only 36% are trained in reporting abuse, and only 16% are trained in caring for sexual abuse survivors.

<sup>4</sup> The *Essentials* curriculum serves as a precursor to the *Becoming a Church that Cares Well for the Abused*. Churches in need of further assistance in caring for survivors of sexual abuse may visit [churchcares.com](http://churchcares.com).

## (2) Establishing Ministry Check

The Ministry Check website represents 50% of the mandate given to the task force by the messengers to the 2022 and 2023 annual meetings. In truth, no part of our work has been more difficult for myriad reasons. For more than 12 months, the task force has worked to clear legal, logistical, technological, and insurance hurdles related to Ministry Check.

Over the last two decades, the SBC has faced repeated calls to establish an online database of known sexual offenders connected to Southern Baptist churches and entities. In 2022, the Sexual Abuse Task Force (SATF) brought a recommendation that was overwhelmingly adopted by the messengers calling for the establishment of Ministry Check to address this concern.

Since that time, some have questioned the purpose of Ministry Check. Simply put, **the goal of establishing an online database of known sexual offenders is to help keep dangerous people away from vulnerable people in our churches.**

The rationale for Ministry Check dates back at least to 2006, when the SBC's former legal counsel notified SBC Executive Committee (EC) leaders that an online offender database was:

*"... something the EC could consider. Having a national 'bad list' would eliminate the opportunity for ministers to 'hide' in states that did not keep lists. It would also keep churches from having to check lists in many different states."<sup>5</sup>*

Every member of the task force is a dedicated member of a Southern Baptist church. Each of us loves and respects our unique polity as Southern Baptists. Each of us also believes that an online offender database like Ministry Check will inhibit sexual predators from taking advantage of the SBC's unique polity of autonomy to prey upon the vulnerable by moving from church to church.

Because of concerns raised by the EC, the task force determined (in consultation with the SBC Executive Committee's interim president, chairman of the board, legal counsel, and the president of the SBC) to initially launch the Ministry Check website through the newly established Abuse Response Commission (ARC) to allow for insurance and liability coverage that is fully independent of the convention.<sup>6</sup> The initial version of the Ministry Check website will include two categories of sexual offenders associated with Southern Baptist churches or entities, individuals:

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<sup>5</sup> See page 185 of the [Guidepost Report](#). This remains a relevant concern as certain states have sunset provisions for individuals on their sex offender registry, while registration requirements vary in significant ways from state to state.

<sup>6</sup> See below for information regarding ARC. Internal objections to the database included concerns about the availability and cost of insurance as well as the legal viability of operating such an online resource. In response to those concerns ARC identified and consulted with similar public databases currently in operation and secured multiple bids for cost-effective fully independent insurance to cover Ministry Check.

- Convicted of sexual abuse in criminal court
- Found liable for sexual abuse in civil court.<sup>7</sup>

At present, ARC has secured multiple affordable insurance bids and successfully completed the vetting and legal review of nearly 100 names for inclusion on Ministry Check at our own expense with additional names to be vetted pending the successful launch of the website.<sup>8</sup> However, ARC is working with the EC to address any remaining concerns regarding legal liability and insurance coverage prior to its publication.

In the last year, the task force has repeatedly gone to painstaking lengths to accommodate requests from SBC leaders and legal counsel concerning the Ministry Check website. We have worked tirelessly to address a multitude of concerns and objections while remaining in steadfast pursuit of this directive from the messengers. We are confident that the concerns surrounding Ministry Check can ultimately be satisfied.

ARC is prepared to launch Ministry Check pending the resolution of the concerns noted above.

### (3) Creating a Permanent Home for Abuse Prevention and Response

The SBC is made up of almost 50,000 churches. For the last two years, the task force has sought to serve as many churches as possible by providing information and assistance in responding to instances of sexual abuse. As a group of volunteers, we've provided assistance to multiple dozens of SBC churches, which have either made direct contact with us or been referred by local associations, state conventions, or entities.

The task force was tasked by the messengers to the 2022 and 2023 annual meetings to consider recommending the creation of a "permanent committee or entity" to lead the convention's abuse prevention and response efforts. After nearly two years of working alongside Baptist state conventions, associations, networks, and local churches, the task force has reached the clear and unanimous conclusion that their significant needs require a permanent means of addressing abuse prevention and response at the national level of the SBC.

Though these needs are complex and multifaceted, the items below represent five of the SBC's most significant needs related to abuse prevention and response:

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<sup>7</sup> These categories are based on public records as they pertain to cases previously adjudicated through the legal system. As such, they severely curtail any subjectivity concerning entries to the database and also significantly diminish potential liability associated with such an online database.

<sup>8</sup> ARC has obtained these bids by working with the insurance professionals representing the ministry division of a highly reputable insurance brokerage whose clients include many of the largest Christian organizations in the United States. To date, the SBC has contributed zero funding toward the vetting of names for Ministry Check.

- **Local churches need expert and cost-free assistance in times of crisis.**

As mentioned, the task force has engaged directly with several dozen churches from numerous states facing a range of issues related to sexual abuse. Some of these churches had questions that were simple or fairly straightforward. Others were in the midst of significant crises requiring the termination of personnel, reporting to Child Protective Services or law enforcement, interfacing with media, and providing critical care for victims of abuse. **These interactions represent the single most important reason the SBC requires a permanent means of addressing abuse prevention and response.**

Allegations of abuse surface in multiple Southern Baptist churches each month.<sup>9</sup> In almost every case, an instance of abuse in a local church sets off a crisis for the victim, the church, and its leadership.<sup>10</sup> The task force has repeatedly found that when a local church is in the midst of a crisis, its leaders will either quickly gain access to good information and qualified expertise or they will often unintentionally begin making mistakes that compound the trauma and difficulty of the situation.

As one expert in this field shared with the task force, **the single most important step the SBC can take toward reform is establishing one source any pastor or church leader can reach out to for help** should the unthinkable happen in their church. It is our fervent belief that the vast majority of churches in the SBC *desire to do the right thing* when it comes to abuse, but they are often unsure where to turn to receive such assistance.

Based on the volume and frequency of our interactions with churches seeking assistance, we believe the SBC should immediately establish one source with experts and professionals capable of providing cost-free assistance to churches as they seek to navigate various and divergent instances of abuse.<sup>11</sup> Any SBC church facing a crisis involving sexual abuse should have direct access to trauma-informed experts capable of providing cost-free assistance to respond appropriately.

- **Local churches need accessible and effective resources to prevent abuse.**

There are numerous [companies and organizations](#) dedicated to assisting churches with abuse prevention. However, there are at least two compelling reasons the SBC cannot merely recommend the “outsourcing” of this issue.

First, while many larger and midsize SBC churches utilize the services of external vendors for assistance with abuse prevention, doing so can be cost-prohibitive for the overwhelming

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<sup>9</sup> Confirmation is available through public media reports, direct contact between the task force and local churches and/or survivors and their advocates, as well as (confidential) submission data from the SBC crisis hotline.

<sup>10</sup> Pastors we’ve engaged with navigating instances of sexual abuse have reported feeling underprepared and overwhelmed by the challenge of leading their churches through such crises.

<sup>11</sup> See “Supplement 1.” After two years of research, coupled with mission and vision planning with Auxano, the task force has drafted a detailed and extensive blueprint to meet this need.

majority of small and medium-sized SBC churches.<sup>12</sup> The SBC should identify a means of continually providing the vital tools and resources for cooperating churches to be proactive in abuse prevention at little or no cost.

Secondly, the task force has repeatedly observed that even among churches taking specific preventative measures (e.g. written policies & procedures, background checks, abuse awareness training, etc.), a significant number of these churches are only utilizing a limited portion of their recommended resources for abuse prevention while others are employing a patchwork of services from multiple vendors. This is often driven by efforts to control costs or accommodate the limitations of specific vendors but leaves obvious and sometimes critical gaps in their readiness to prevent abuse.

**It is essential for the SBC to maintain a source for local churches to access the tools and services needed for abuse prevention at low or no cost.** Such offerings would potentially include the *Essentials: Sexual Abuse Prevention and Response Training* curriculum developed by the task force, online abuse awareness training, consultations and audits of specific prevention policies and procedures, and the updating, development and distribution of such resources.

- **The Credentials Committee requires assistance in addressing sexual abuse claims.**

Approximately 80% of the cases before the Credentials Committee relate to sexual abuse. Though the Credentials Committee was designed to help churches, it is not equipped to advise churches addressing instances of sexual abuse. This often leaves the Credentials Committee in a difficult position when local churches are requesting guidance or assistance in sexual abuse cases before their committee. Both the Credentials Committee and the churches of the SBC would benefit immeasurably from having professionals with deep knowledge of Baptist polity and robust expertise in addressing sexual abuse available to call upon or refer churches to for cost-free assistance.

It is important to underscore that the SBC deliberately has no mechanism for coercing local churches. Every local church is autonomous. A local church's connection to the SBC is solely based on voluntary cooperation. Providing cost-free, professional assistance to churches as well as counsel to the Credentials Committee would significantly strengthen the SBC's ability to address the complex nature of abuse, while doing nothing to strongarm or compel local churches to take or refrain from taking specific actions.

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<sup>12</sup> A critical aspect of the task force's work has included engagement with numerous AMS leaders via SBCAL as well as direct engagement with multiple Associational Mission Strategists around the country. These leaders estimate that among the small and medium size churches they represent only 20-30% are presently taking *any meaningful steps* toward abuse prevention.

- **The SBC needs to provide compassionate care for survivors.**

Send Relief recognized the need to provide compassionate and trauma-informed care for survivors of sexual abuse in 2022 when it [designated \\$1,000,000](#) for “a survivor care fund, providing trauma counseling for survivors of sexual abuse in the SBC, as well as for trauma-informed training for SBC pastors, churches, local associations and state conventions.”

Survivors of sexual abuse regularly reach out to SBC leaders and entities for information and assistance. A dedicated survivor advocate could ensure survivors have access to counseling and helpful information about the SBC and its processes for addressing sexual abuse. A survivor advocate could also provide resources and guidance to survivors and churches to promote survivors’ healing and well-being.<sup>13</sup>

- **State conventions and local associations need expert assistance to help their churches navigate sexual abuse.**

Many state conventions have acted aggressively to advance abuse reform in their states. The task force recently surveyed 23 of our state conventions about their sexual abuse response efforts. Of the conventions surveyed, 84% have a designated staff member responsible for dealing with abuse-related issues. However, only two of these conventions have a full-time, trained professional leading their efforts in this area.

**The majority of respondents indicated a significant need and desire for further assistance with abuse prevention and response at the national level.** The specific needs identified include resources for abuse prevention, crisis response assistance, ongoing prevention and awareness training, as well as legal and professional expertise.<sup>14</sup>

The SBC should identify a means of providing such resources and expert assistance to state conventions and local associations. It should work toward establishing a voluntary network of trained individuals from various states capable of assisting local churches in crisis response.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> To our knowledge, the entire balance of these funds remain available. It was the task force’s intention to preserve these funds for allocation for survivor care by the leadership of the SBC’s permanent home for abuse reform.

<sup>14</sup> The task force has met multiple times with state convention executive director-treasurers (EDTs), facilitated two in-person gatherings with leaders for abuse reform from our state conventions, and participated in numerous Zoom meetings with AMS leaders across the nation. The desire for significant assistance with abuse-related issues at the national level has been expressed by the overwhelming majority of these leaders, often on multiple occasions or forums.

<sup>15</sup> A significant number of states have individuals, whether staff or volunteer, responsible for abuse prevention and response who eagerly desire to partner and network through a coordinated effort at the national level.



## Conclusion

It has been our honor to serve the churches of our convention by seeking to advance the cause of abuse reform within the SBC. The process has been more difficult than we could have imagined. And in truth, we made less progress than we desired due to the myriad obstacles and challenges we encountered in the course of our work. Nevertheless, we remain thankful for the progress reflected in this report and hopeful that the messengers will remain steadfast in demanding that the SBC provide the help our churches have requested and deserve.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

The SBC has made meaningful progress toward abuse reform over the last six years. However, if the collective efforts of Southern Baptists toward these goals are to bring about the lasting change we have sought, they require more permanence than the temporary efforts of a volunteer task force. In light of this, the task force recommends the following action for approval by the messengers:

## Recommendation One

- **That the messengers of the 2024 Southern Baptist Convention affirm the objectives outlined in the 2024 Report of the Abuse Reform Implementation Task Force, in particular, 1) the expansion of the Ministry Toolkit, 2) the establishment of the Ministry Check website, and 3) the creation of a permanent home for abuse prevention and response.**

## Recommendation Two

- **That the messengers of the 2024 Southern Baptist Convention urge the Executive Committee to work earnestly to complete the implementation of these objectives by recommending a structure adequate to support these objectives, by recommending the allocation of funds sufficient for the effective accomplishment of them, and to report back to the messengers to the 2025 SBC Annual Meeting on actions taken in response.<sup>16</sup>**

## Rationale

As a task force of the convention, we have done our best to advance the work of abuse reform as far as possible. **We believe the SBC is ready to see the work of abuse reform result in lasting change.** With the task force's work coming to an end, we believe our churches need help urgently. Since the day he was elected President of the Executive Committee, Dr. Jeff Iorg has called for meaningful and robust abuse reform within the SBC. Given Dr. Iorg's strong support for abuse reform and the EC's unique role of assisting the convention by coordinating the work of the SBC's various entities, the task force believes the EC under Dr. Iorg's leadership should review and implement the findings of this report—consulting with members of the task force as necessary—and report back to the messengers on the actions taken to ensure meaningful and lasting abuse reform.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> We would suggest considering the options of an office, division, subsidiary, or entity dedicated to abuse prevention and response.

<sup>17</sup> To be clear, this recommendation would not task the Executive Committee with the responsibilities noted above. Instead, these recommendations request that the Executive Committee perform its intended function of coordinating the ministry assignments of the Southern Baptist Convention's various entities and ensure these duties are appropriately assigned and fulfilled.

# ADDENDUM

## The Abuse Response Commission

The Abuse Response Commission (ARC) was created by current and past members of the ARITF (in consultation with the SBC Executive Committee's interim president, chairman of the board, legal counsel, and the president of the SBC) in response to challenges to abuse reform within the SBC and concerns about liability and insurance surrounding Ministry Check.<sup>18</sup> At that time, the leadership of the task force was informed that there was *no viable pathway* for robust abuse reform within the SBC due to pressing insurance concerns. *As a last resort*, the task force determined to establish an independent nonprofit rather than halting our efforts to serve Southern Baptists by seeking to fulfill the will of the messengers.

In February of 2024, the task force announced plans for ARC to lead the SBC's efforts in abuse reform. However, as mentioned in the task force's report, Dr. Jeff Iorg has strongly supported the goal of robust abuse reform since the day he was elected as president of the Executive Committee in March of 2024. And since assuming his role, Dr. Iorg has worked aggressively to re-open multiple avenues to advance meaningful and robust abuse reform *within the SBC*—a goal the task force has always shared.

**The task force has always been convinced that the churches of our convention would be best served if a substantial portion of the SBC's abuse prevention and response efforts reside within the SBC.** ARC remains prepared to launch and maintain the Ministry Check website and assist churches as necessary.<sup>19</sup> However, it is our hope and belief that the SBC should establish a robust means of abuse prevention and response within the convention to assist churches.

The task force believes Ministry Check represents a vital tool in the SBC's efforts to combat sexual abuse, as it provides a critical means of preventing known predators moving from church to church seeking to prey upon additional victims. The leadership of ARC is prepared to work collaboratively with the Executive Committee regarding long term plans for Ministry Check and any other abuse reform efforts.

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<sup>18</sup> ARC is a nonprofit organization incorporated in the state of South Carolina.

<sup>19</sup> Pending the resolution of outstanding challenges. See "(2) Establishing Ministry Check" above for more information.

# Supplement 1

For five months, the task force has engaged in a strategic planning process to identify and define the essential roles and functions of a permanent home for abuse reform.<sup>20</sup> To this end, we offer the following suggestions for consideration concerning the structure of a permanent home:

## **Key Positions:**

- (1) Director or VP for Abuse Prevention and Response
- (1+) Church Response Experts
- (1) Victim Advocate
- (1+) Communications and Administrative Support
- (3-5) Board of Advisors

## **Brief Description of Roles:**

- Vice President for Abuse Prevention and Response

The Vice President will lead the SBC's abuse prevention and response efforts, coordinate with state conventions and the Credentials Committee, and report annually to the Messengers of the SBC Annual Meeting.

- Church Response Experts

These experts will assist churches, local associations, and state conventions by conducting trainings, answering questions, and providing guidance in navigating instances of sexual abuse. They will also assist the Vice President in the creation and production of needed resources for abuse prevention and response.

- Victim Advocate

The victim advocate will be an employee or contract worker responsible for assisting survivors with securing trauma counseling as well as accurate information about the SBC and its processes for addressing sexual abuse.

- Communications and Administrative Support

These support roles will ensure the work of abuse prevention and response remains visible and accessible to Southern Baptists across our Convention.

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<sup>20</sup> "Supplement 1" represents only a summary view of the work done through this strategic planning process. The ARITF is eager to share both our detailed work-product and additional insights with the Executive Committee.

- Board of Advisors

Given the complex and sensitive nature of this work, the task force recommends utilizing a voluntary Board of Advisors to assist and advise these leaders in their work. The board would not have governing authority but would provide insight, support, and wisdom to the Director/VP and staff in carrying out their assigned duties.

### **Essential Functions:**

Ideally, this team will serve as the SBC's central hub for abuse prevention and response. Accordingly, it should primarily exist to assist local churches with abuse prevention and response. It should effectively communicate, promote and cultivate resources, and provide expert assistance to the churches of the SBC concerning sexual abuse.

The team should also provide needed assistance to state conventions and local associations including the development of a network of trained individuals from various states working together to address issues related to sexual abuse. Further, it should provide compassionate care for survivors through a trained survivor advocate. It should also provide needed assistance to the Credentials Committee regarding allegations of sexual abuse.

Finally, this team can also assist SBC churches by providing directions for churches to utilize the Ministry Check website as a part of their screening and reporting process for staff members and volunteers.

### **Conclusion**

The SBC has endeavored to see lasting and meaningful abuse reform become a reality for the last half-decade. Establishing a permanent home for abuse prevention and response represents the realization of that long-sought goal. The task force stands in strong support of a robust and effective permanent home within the SBC dedicated to abuse prevention and response.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> The task force would also welcome the opportunity to provide further insight or counsel in this process.