

Encouragements to Associations, State Conventions, and Churches Regarding Abuse of Minors

The Southern Baptist Conference of Associational Leaders (SBCAL) and the Officers of the SBC Fellowship of State Executive Directors join together to make a statement in support of the prevention of sexual abuse and for the protection of minors. As organizations, we recognize our respective entities have no authority over any Baptist body. However, our intention is to offer encouragement to associations, state conventions, and churches to diligently guard those whom God has given to us for the purpose of ministry.

PREVENTION/PROTECTION

1. We encourage associations and state conventions to practice the regular reviewing, updating, or creating worker policies and guidelines for all staff, association/convention/church leaders, and youth/children volunteer workers.
2. We encourage associations and state conventions to take the initiative and advocate for comprehensive screening processes for all staff, association/convention/church leaders, and youth/children volunteer workers to address such things as:
 - Understanding the need for a written application.
 - Discovering when and how to check references.
 - Researching prior church membership and volunteer work, especially with minors.
 - Conducting internet research for potential news stories containing allegations of sexual misconduct for any potential staff member or volunteer.
 - Calling for background checks.
 - Linking to and utilizing the U. S. Department of Justice National Sex Offender Public Website posted on the Sexual Abuse Prevention page on SBC.net and to viable public databases of sexual offenders in a church or ministry setting as they may be developed.
 - Conducting personal interviews with applicants.
 - Implementing at least a six-month rule of association/membership before service and participation begins in a ministry position.
3. We encourage associations and state conventions to conduct local and national criminal background checks, and where appropriate, child abuse background clearance for all staff, leaders, and youth/children volunteer workers. This practice should be encouraged as part of a plan to protect children.

4. We encourage associations and state conventions to promote to churches a two-person rule of supervision. This practice, designed to protect minors from abuse and workers from accusation, calls for at least two, non-related adults who have successfully completed the screening process to supervise minors at all times, whether on or off the premises, in rooms, vehicles, or other enclosed spaces. In situations where the two-person rule is impossible or impractical, alternatives (such as a floating observer) should be considered.
5. We encourage associations, state conventions and churches to develop policies regarding digital and electronic communication. Communicating with minors, especially with youth in the digital age (text message, email, communication apps, and social media) is common among youth pastors and other staff that work with children and youth. Such policies will help set boundaries for both the adults and minors involved.
6. We encourage associations, state conventions and churches to develop policies or statements of affirmation which could include the following:
 - Affirming the 2000 *Baptist Faith and Message* with a specific reference to Article XV, or a clear statement denouncing all forms of abuse.
 - Requesting an endorsement of the local church for any church member asked to participate in any leadership or volunteer role in the association, and disclosure by the church of any negative criminal/child abuse background checks about that person.
 - Reporting criminal sexual misconduct to the proper legal authorities as required by law.
 - Relieving temporarily persons accused of sexual misconduct from leadership and service positions pending a thorough investigation and review of the circumstances.
 - Communicating honestly and transparently with any church or association attempting to conduct a background check, and disclosing information about any person accused of abuse who left before a resolution of the charge occurred.
 - Creating a discipline or separation process for churches that demonstrate wanton disregard for or indifference toward sexual predators remaining in leadership roles or having contact with minors, or persons failing to follow the child abuse laws of the state.

AWARENESS/EDUCATION

7. We encourage associations, state conventions and churches to proactively educate association, convention and church workers/volunteers about the seriousness of abuse and provide resources to enable a church to protect minors and vulnerable adults.
8. We encourage associations, state conventions and churches to provide or facilitate localized and ongoing training for all staff, association/church leaders and youth/children volunteer workers in preventing, recognizing, reporting, and dealing with abuse.

MINISTRY CARE/HEALING

9. We encourage associations and state conventions to have an association and/or state convention team work with ministry partners equipped to aid churches who experience abuse situations in handling these incidents with integrity, compassion, transparency, and in accordance with the law. These teams or external ministry partners may also seek to facilitate opportunities for on-site Christian counselors to minister to the church on a case-by-case basis.
10. We encourage associations and/or state conventions to assist churches in developing a plan for ministering to sex offenders in the church by observing such things as the following:
 - Understanding what the spectrum of the term “sex offender” means.
 - Developing procedures which provide accountability to the offender/abuser and safeguards for all members, especially children and vulnerable adults.
 - Creating a covenant between the offender and church leadership that defines the boundaries of participation, allowing church leaders to apprise others in the congregation as necessary, permitting church leaders to contact probation officers and others assigned to work with the offender and state consequences if the covenant is violated, such as being prohibited from attending church or accessing church property.
 - Designating one or more accountability partners to assist the offender in not yielding to temptation.
 - Restricting any contact with minors.

*The following sources were used in preparation of these encouragements: Brotherhood Mutual, *Child Protection in a Ministry Environment*, 2019; *Church Law and Tax*, “Sex Offenders in the Church.” 2019; Richard Hammar, *Church Law and Tax*, “Prevent Child Sexual Abuse in the Church,” 2019; Richard Hammar, *Negligent Selection of Church Workers*, 2019.