

# ARITF meets with state abuse reform leaders

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DALLAS (BP) – As the SBC's Abuse Reform Implementation Task Force prepares to give its report and recommendations to messengers at the 2024 SBC Annual Meeting in June, members met with state leaders to preview that report and to strengthen the partnership among Southern Baptists for preventing and dealing with sexual abuse in churches.

The group met in Dallas Tuesday (April 9) for a day that included presentations, roundtable discussions and Q&A times.

"I'm really grateful for the positive spirit of collaboration and mutual commitment to abuse reform in the room during our meeting today," ARITF Chairman Josh Wester said after the meeting. "It was encouraging to see leaders from across our convention come together, eager to share and learn from each other as we work to become an abuse-free family of churches. This gives me a lot of hope for the future."

ARITF member Kelley Lammers is a therapist and a layperson at a small church in northeast Arkansas. Lammers told BP her experience on the task force has been life changing.

"I guess I just always thought the church was immune to major secular issues ...," she said. "I've had to just do some research and see, oh my goodness, evil is everywhere. I had to do an about face, even within my own church and say, 'You know, we haven't done these things to protect our church and to care for members who may be around us and may have experienced these things.'

"... I'm a therapist and I don't take that into my church

setting like that – the idea that individuals can be revictimized simply by coming into a church setting that isn't sensitive. ...

"As a therapist, I'm deeply invested in making real change for abuse reform in our Convention," she said. "Witnessing leaders from different corners of the SBC engage in open dialogue, eager to pool our collective wisdom on building a safer environment for our churches, fills me with immense optimism. I think we're laying the groundwork for a future where churches are proactive in preventing abuse and serious about caring well for survivors."

Lammers said roughly half of the Baptist state conventions were represented at the meeting, adding that involvement at the state level and ultimately the church level is key.

"Everything important happens at the church level," she said. "So we wanted to talk to them and invite them in and open the floor for questions. And we wanted to just be transparent and share where we are."

Task force members shared with state leaders three specific goals they have worked toward in the past year:

- An online database of convicted abusers
- A sexual abuse prevention and care curriculum for churches
- A permanent home for abuse reform within the SBC

The first goal is getting closer to the finish line, Lammers said, adding that the task force has worked hard to solve the logistical challenges of a database of convicted abusers.

The second goal was realized in the form of the Essentials Sexual Abuse Prevention and Response Training curriculum, unveiled at the SBC Executive Committee's meeting in February and ready to be launched for all Southern Baptists

at the annual meeting.

Lammers said state leaders gave very positive feedback about the curriculum at the Dallas meeting.

The curriculum is based on five major pillars for churches regarding sexual abuse – train, protect, screen, respond and care.

Lammers said the curriculum was written with churches like hers – small churches with few full-time staff people – in mind. It leads churches through the five pillars in a very practical way.

“And it’s not only like ‘this is what you should do,’ but literal examples of phone calls you can make [and] a flow chart a pastor can take...,” she said.

“If an allegation occurs, if someone in your church calls the pastor, here’s the first thing you do. Here’s the second thing you do. Here’s the conversation. ... Let’s say someone comes into your church who is on a sex offender registry, what do you do?”

The third goal – finding a permanent home for abuse reform – has been the biggest challenge, Lammers said and remains unfinished, though the task force hopes to have “definitive answers” before the annual meeting in June.

Greg Teel, president of the Colorado Baptist Convention and chair of that convention’s Sexual Abuse Prevention and Response Task Force, was at the Dallas meeting. He said he is “grateful to God for the fine work of the ARITF.”

“I felt we all came away encouraged and equipped to serve our SBC churches and God’s kingdom better,” said Teel, pastor of Calvary Baptist Church in Delta, Colo. “Specifically, I believe the ARITF is doing a remarkable job addressing the issues they have been tasked with. In addition, I personally

feel certain that I am better equipped to serve Colorado Baptists. ... I know that I have more colleagues in ministry to network and consult with to address Colorado Baptists' needs."

The day before the meeting, ARITF members met on their own as a total solar eclipse made its way over the Dallas area. The group took a break to go up on the roof of a parking garage to witness it.

Lammers said the moment was a reminder of who is ultimately in control.

"Down to the second, the NASA scientists knew when we would see it," she said. "[God] is in control, but He gives us brains and brilliant people around that can solve problems.

"We can do this," she said of sexual abuse reform. "We can do this. And not just us, but the SBC, we can do this. ... I left the eclipse feeling really optimistic."