

ARITF to unveil sexual abuse prevention, response curriculum in June

NASHVILLE (BP) – In an update to members of the Southern Baptist Convention’s Executive Committee Feb. 19, the SBC’s Abuse Reform Implementation Task Force (ARTIF) introduced a new curriculum designed to help churches navigate steps for the prevention of sexual abuse as well as the response when it happens.

“Our churches need help but don’t know where to turn,” said ARITF chairman Josh Wester. “It’s not that helpful resources aren’t available. It’s just that they come piecemeal – a church would turn to one place to do background checks and another place to train their volunteers.”

And then, he added, when there is a case of abuse, a church can turn to the wrong person for advice.

“And oftentimes, they get very bad information that compounds the trauma and makes the situation so much worse,” he said.

Wester used his experience at his own church, Cornerstone Baptist Church in Greensboro, N.C., as an example. When he became pastor about a year ago, he sat down with leaders at the church to discuss safety procedures and protocols. He wanted to make sure the church had checked all the boxes for keeping people safe.

“But you know what the problem was with that checklist?” he asked. “I made it up myself. ... Where is the checklist that we can consult to ensure that we have done everything we need to do to keep our church safe? ... I couldn’t find it. I’m not telling you it’s not out there somewhere, but I am telling you it is not readily available.”

Coming in June

The curriculum – called the Essentials Sexual Abuse Prevention and Response Training – is part of expanding the SBC’s Ministry ToolKit, which is one of the three tasks the team believed could be accomplished this year. To learn more about the ARITF’s efforts regarding the other two tasks (launching the Ministry Check website and finding a long-term home for abuse reform), see this related BP story.

ARITF member Kris Buckman said the materials will be made available for the first time to messengers at the 2024 SBC Annual Meeting in June in Indianapolis.

Brad Eubank, ARITF member and pastor of First Church, Petal, told EC members that Baptist associational leaders have estimated only 25-30 percent of churches are doing anything in the area of sexual abuse prevention and response.

“So we knew,” he said, “that we needed a simple, clear step-by-step plan to help churches set up and implement solid prevention and response plans that were aimed at the normative size churches in our convention.”

Those churches often have 100 or fewer in attendance and are led by a bivocational pastor, he said. There are resources available, but they are often scattered and hard to access.

Five-Five-Five

The curriculum is based on five essentials – train, screen, protect, report and care. Training consists of a series of online videos and follow-up questions and action items for each essential.

Eubank said the material is designed for church leaders to go over it in a small-group setting.

“We want them to gather, watch one video, and then commit to completing the next steps for that essential before moving on

to the next one,” he said. “Everything that a church needs to complete, the next steps will be there – sample documents, links to pertinent information and recommendations for outside providers.”

Completion of each step may take some time, he said, adding that the team has often called it the “Five Five Five” – five leaders gathered over five months to complete the five essentials.

“Reform and prevention response plans take time, and it doesn’t happen overnight,” he said.

The training will be available at the task force’s website, sbcabuseprevention.com, as well as in a physical guidebook and digitally on a thumb drive.

“We truly believe that this resource will help churches no matter their size, their budget, or their location,” Eubank said. “We really believe this could be a watershed moment for the SBC for its churches to potentially prevent the sexual abuse of countless numbers of children and students and to respond well when sexual abuse does happen, whether inside or outside of their church.”