

Iorg presents plans to address sexual abuse, financial challenges

The Baptist Paper

Reflecting on how Southern Baptists are a “force for good,” Jeff Iorg – president/CEO of the Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee – acknowledged the fierce challenges that the SBC faces. During the EC’s Feb. 17–18 meeting in Nashville, he presented a plan to make positive steps forward.

During his message to the EC, Iorg addressed how the SBC has moved forward in addressing and preventing sexual abuse. Since last year’s annual meeting, where Southern Baptist messengers assigned the Executive Committee with the task of finishing the establishment of a permanent home for sexual abuse prevention. The EC responded by launching the Sexual Abuse Prevention and Response department, and recently appointed Jeff Dalrymple as its leader.

Six initiatives

Dalrymple, Iorg noted, is currently working on implementing six initiatives that are expected to be finalized before the SBC annual meeting in June. He noted that during the meeting, the EC will announce additional plans for the next year as they continue to “build out the framework of abuse prevention and response.” The six initiatives include the following:

1. Enhancing the Essentials curriculum, updating it and making it free and available to all churches.
2. Appointing a committee on sexual abuse prevention and response strategies. Iorg noted the committee will be led by a cross-section of people with a proven record of leading on all

issues concerning prevention and response.

3. The EC has officially assumed operation of the SBC's abuse prevention website. Iorg noted the site is being enhanced and the EC is expanding what will be offered through that site.

4. Pursuing ways to improve the sexual abuse hotline, both its administration and services.

5. Formalizing the network of state convention abuse prevention and response leaders and working directly with churches and church leaders.

6. Hosting a sexual abuse training event during the annual meeting in Dallas. "We'll be hosting a training event safeguarding the next generation at the annual meeting in Dallas, along with raising the profile of abuse prevention and response with dedicated exhibit space in our booth area," Iorg noted.

"In all of these things, the Executive Committee is taking measured, intentional, proactive steps," he noted.

Closer look at the problem

Iorg shared recent data provided by the sexual abuse hotline. While he noted the hotline is not the only data source for his report, he said it is a "primary source of independently verified information."

Since the hotline was launched in May 2022, Iorg noted, it has received 1,008 contacts by phone and email. Of those contacts, 334 (33%), were requests for information or opinions or spam. The other 674 (67%) reported an alleged abuse. Of 674 reported allegations, 458 (68%) were among Southern Baptists. The remaining 216 (32%) were not among Southern Baptists. Of the 458 reported allegations among Southern Baptists, 187 (41%) involved adult-related incidents and 271 (59%) were adult and minor incidents. He noted that 513 (51%) of the hotline

contacts came during the first four months the hotline was open. Iorg noted this initial response was expected and accounted for “a backlog of concerns.”

“When you look past the surge at the beginning and isolate the data for the last 24 months, it provides a better picture of the ongoing reporting we are receiving,” Iorg noted. Over the past 24 months – from Jan. 23 through Dec. 24 – the hotline received 315 contacts, an average of 13 contacts per month, he noted.

“With the percentages above applied to these 13 monthly contacts, it means about four people requested information and nine reported alleged abuse,” he said “Of those nine, two were likely not Southern Baptist. And of the remaining seven contacts, two to three cases would involve adult on adult incidents. And four to five cases would involve adult and minor incidents. Of these 315 total contacts over the previous 24 months, the hotline referred 128 cases – just over five per month to the Credentials Committee for consideration of whether a church is in friendly cooperation with the Convention.”

The Credentials Committee, Iorg noted, has processed or is processing those referrals. Seven churches, he added, have been declared not in friendly cooperation and removed from the SBC based on their responses to the Credentials Committee on these issues.

What's next?

In response to the hotline data, Iorg noted “two broad conclusions.”

“First, sexual abuse is a serious and real problem. And when it happens it is devastating for the survivors, the church, the community and every person who is involved,” he said. “Survivor stories are particularly gut-wrenching and heartbreaking. Every church must make every reasonable effort

to prevent sexual abuse and respond proactively when it happens. We are committed to these standards at the Executive Committee. No tolerance for abuse, and every church a safe place for the vulnerable.”

He also acknowledged the hotline data does not cover the “full scope of the problem.”

“The explosion of child pornography, rising licentiousness across our culture and predatory nature of offenders, means we must be ever vigilant,” Iorg said. “Even one case is one too many. That’s why we’re taking the proactive steps I’ve already listed tonight and creating ongoing processes beyond resolutions and study committees to equip churches to protect the vulnerable. We can and we will do this together.”

The second conclusion, he noted is “that abuse is not being frequently reported in Southern Baptist churches.”

“While we fully acknowledge reported incidents of sexual abuse,” he noted, “we also reject the false narrative Southern Baptist churches are dangerous places for children, that Southern Baptist churches are protecting predators – and that Southern Baptist churches are uncaring in their response to survivors.”

He added, “the data indicates a continuing problem. Thirteen total contacts and five referrals per month are too many, but it also puts the problem in perspective among more than 12 million Southern Baptists and 47,000 churches.”

Thousands of Southern Baptist churches, he noted, have already implemented prevention measures over the past five years. “Southern Baptist churches,” he noted, “even those contacted by the Credentials Committee, are cooperating to prevent abuse.”

Financial picture

Also addressed by Iorg during his report were items related to finances. Over the past two years, Iorg said, several referrals from the SBC annual meeting have related to various business and financial components of the convention and its entities. Expenses related to legal actions also have taken a toll on the EC's financial picture.

"After considering [these issues], it became clear that the best response, rather than piecemealing each one individually, was to incorporate an overall response for revising the SBC business and financial plan."

Iorg noted that the plan will be voted on in a Tuesday plenary session.

"We've worked for months to produce and propose revisions involving the Executive Committee, staff and officers, entity presidents, chief financial officers, entity attorneys, executive committee attorneys, and executive committee members," he noted.

He added, "the revised business financial plan uses plain language, not technical or legal language, unless necessary for clarity.

"We've also eliminated redundant sections and archaic practices," he said. "In doing this, we were also able to shorten the document, standardize the language, and simplify the format. ... If we discover the deficiencies, the business of financial plan can be amended until we feel it is adequate for its purpose."

Concerning ongoing legal challenges and difficult actions made by messengers on the Convention floor in the past, Iorg noted, "Decisions were made by (SBC) messengers in 2021. Those decisions have consequences, which have costs – and those bills are due and must be paid."

Unless the SBC building (which is on the market for \$35

million) sells soon, then the remaining as well as upcoming legal bills related to the sexual abuse investigation will be paid with Cooperative Program funds, Iorg explained. The EC has spent its reserves down to about \$1 million covering legal bills to this point, so all other options have been exhausted.

“I signed on (as SBC EC president) to guide us through these current challenges, not around them but through them. My hope is that the leaders in this room (EC meeting), thousands of pastors and millions of Southern Baptists will sign on to go through this together.”

To read more on the financial picture, see the latest report from Baptist Press.

Watch Iorg’s full report below:

<https://www.youtube.com/embed/XVw8DPx-qwM>