

Statement by Baptist Press on Sexual Abuse Task Force report

The past few years have changed Baptist Press. For some, the changes have not been enacted with enough expediency, but, regardless, this news organization of the Southern Baptist Convention is different.

For more than 75 years, Baptist Press has been a source of news and information for Southern Baptists. Over the years, it has been more than a job for our reporters and editors. It has been a calling. It has been a way for them to serve Southern Baptists and help the Great Commission go forward.

In recent years, we have faced challenges regarding the reporting of allegations of sexual abuse and the handling of those allegations in our churches and entities. As was stated in the Sexual Abuse Task Force report, this has caused harm to individual survivors and the overall survivor community.

We greatly regret the editorial mistakes and missteps in those stories. It is with deep sorrow that we recognize the impact of those consequences on survivors.

We regret that prior to the last few years we did not regularly report when Southern Baptist pastors, church leaders, and those affiliated with SBC entities were charged with sexual abuse by law enforcement. To the best of our ability, we are reporting those instances now.

We regret the harm and hurt that has come to the survivor community because of our reporting or lack of reporting.

We issued formal apologies to Jen Lyell on Oct. 15, 2019, and on Feb. 22, 2022.

Today, we offer an apology to survivors, churches and those who have been harmed by the reporting or lack of reporting on the issue of sexual abuse by Baptist Press.

We take the sixth strategic action of Vision 2025 seriously when it calls Southern Baptists to “prayerfully endeavor to eliminate all incidents of sexual abuse and racial discrimination among our churches.”

Much of our BP staff has changed in the past three years. Though we are under the authority of the SBC Executive Committee, we are, ultimately, a team of three reporters and two editors. Only one of our reporters has been here longer than two years, and our current managing editor has been in her role for less than two years.

These competent professionals are committed to serve Southern Baptists well and that certainly includes the survivor community. In the Guidepost report, there are recommendations for Baptist Press to work with the Executive Committee and Credentials Committee to better serve the survivor community. We look forward to opportunities to do that.

In addition, there are specific recommendations from Guidepost Solutions aimed at Baptist Press.

They wrote, “Baptist Press should commit to seek and report truth by: acting independently, ensuring accuracy, verifying information, and using original sources where possible.”

The report recommended, “Baptist Press should minimize harm by balancing the public’s need for information against potential harm or discomfort. Baptist Press should use heightened sensitivity when dealing with juveniles, victims of sex crimes, and sources or subject who are inexperienced or unable to give consent.”

We could not agree more with these recommendations. We are currently discussing ways for there to be greater

accountability within Baptist Press.

In February 1986, the Executive Committee approved operating guidelines for Baptist Press. Those guidelines were reaffirmed by the EC in September 1991.

The guidelines charge us to “report forthrightly and accurately the valid news produced by controversy and adverse events.”

They instruct us to “utilize the highest professional standards and techniques of the journalism profession in a ministry of news and information about the life and work Southern Baptists.”

They call us to “strive to be factual and fair, as objective as possible, staying not only in the bounds of legality but also at a high level of professional and Christian ethics.”

The guidelines also speak to the Executive Committee and other SBC entities and their relationship with Baptist Press.

They call on the EC to “provide the required freedom and responsibility necessary for the benefit of Southern Baptists.”

The guidelines say that BP should “have a right to expect Southern Baptist agencies, institutions, boards, commissions, organizations and committees to be open and cooperative in news handling.”

These guidelines are not abstract to us. We see them every day as they hang on our walls. We talk about them in regular staff meetings and trainings. We take them to heart. We are far from perfect, but we are committed to being a better Baptist Press for the sake of the SBC and for the glory of God.

The 13th guideline says, “All who serve in the Baptist Press system will keep in mind that to achieve its ultimate purpose,

the news service must be both highly professional in journalistic function and highly useful as one specialized means employed in the broad denominational effort to bring all persons to God through Jesus Christ.”

This is our goal, and, today, we are recommitted to Southern Baptists that we will be a better Baptist Press in the days ahead.

“And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” Colossians 3:17 (CSB)

All current Baptist Press staff members affirm this statement, including:

Scott Barkley, national correspondent

Diana Chandler, senior writer

Timothy Cokes, staff writer

Laura Erlanson, managing editor

Brandon Porter, associate vice president for convention news



Porter

Erlanson

Cokes

Chandler

Barkley