

June 13-14, 2023

Southern Baptist Convention Annual Meeting

Report and Recommendations

Messengers Sent

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Introduction

The Messengers above who represented MERCYhouse at the 2023 SBC Annual Meeting were tasked with attending and participating in all Convention business matters, critically assessing the progress of the SBC's implementation of abuse reforms, and reporting back to the MERCYhouse congregation. The purpose of this report will be to communicate the things that we found **encouraging or hopeful**, things that we found **discouraging or concerning**, and **recommendations** for MERCYhouse as a result of the Messenger's experience and careful deliberation.

Please note that this is not a detailed report of the Annual Meeting and all of the happenings— for a more thorough reporting of events, we recommend reading the [2023 SBC Book of Reports](#), the [Tuesday](#) and [Wednesday](#) Day Bulletins, and [the recap article](#) published by Baptist Press. You can also watch a replay of any segment from the SBC Annual meeting on [Acts2 Streaming Service](#).

The Team of Messengers

The Elders assumed the responsibility of selecting messengers by inviting members who have demonstrated spiritual maturity, faithfulness in serving the MERCYhouse

church family in its vision and mission, and who have conducted themselves as ones who are quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger (James 1:19).

It is advised, however, that moving forward, MERCYhouse would follow a similar process used for the creation of the Pastoral Search Committee to form a body of messengers to attend the SBC Annual Meeting in 2024. Please see recommendation 1 on page 7.

Things which were Encouraging or Hopeful

1. **The scope of work that the SBC is responsible for.** With the conversations MERCYhouse has been having over the past year and a half narrowly focusing on abuse and abuse reform within the SBC, we found it quite surprising listening to all the reports on what the [Cooperative Fund](#) enables and the global impact that the SBC has made over this past year in the areas of missions, church planting, theological education, training resources, content creation and crisis relief.
2. **Attendance and participation.** There were over 15,000 in attendance with 12,737 registered messengers for the annual meeting. Aside from the 15,726 in Nashville in 2021, it is the largest group since 1996 in Atlanta, when 13,706 messengers were present. Last year's gathering in Anaheim brought 8,133 messengers.
3. **The overall focus on Gospel, Mission, Worship and Prayer.** Despite this being an official and structured business meeting, the time was structured to prioritize these central aspects of our faith. Worship was diverse in genre, style, and people... utilizing everything from big orchestral movements, wiring in missionaries from around the world as singers, to the simple sounds of just voices with an entire worship set done acapella. There was Gospel centered preaching from God's Word each day and thoughtful prayer opened and closed every time we gathered as well as each report that was given. At one point, a soft spoken man made a motion into the microphone for all of us to take time to pray for peace in Jerusalem... to which President Bart Barber called to question and the motion passed unanimously. The business meeting was paused as the room of over 15,000 took time to pray together for peace in conflict-ridden Israel. Additionally, one the major highlights of the two days was the Missionary Sendoff where for over an hour the entire convention prayed for and enthusiastically celebrated the 79 missionaries being commissioned and sent out this year.

4. **The Leadership.** From SBC President Barber to the presidents of SBC organizations and seminaries, to the chairs of committees— we the messengers were all encouraged by the Spirit-filled reports, responses and prayers by everyone who spoke. Each leader was subject to a time of questioning that was typically filled with incendiary questions which were seemingly posed to invoke a response or make a statement. But each leader responded graciously, thoughtfully, and tenderly, while maintaining Gospel integrity in their responses. It was encouraging to see the spiritual maturity of our elected leaders, perhaps especially in the face and context of divisive issues.

(As an example, [see this clip at 7:47](#) during the Lifeway Report when a person asked, “Does Lifeway have a plan to not publish weak and fluffy material?”)

5. **The Abuse Reform Implementation Task Force Report.** This was perhaps our primary focus because it is the source of much turmoil and tension within MERCYhouse. We highly recommend that you [watch the full report](#) and read the report ([linked here](#), page 14) if you have not. By and large the presentation of the report on day two of the Annual Meeting left us feeling encouraged and hopeful. Here are several reasons why.

- I. **A Serious Goal.** It was made evident by the allocation of time for the ARITF Report which was 3 times longer than any other report, and by what was communicated during the report that what is being implemented is a major reform with far reaching implications, and a top priority for the SBC. Marshall Blalock, Chair of the ARITF opened their time by saying: “If we [the SBC] are not protecting our people from abuse, we are compromising our very mission. I want to begin with our end goal. It’s absolutely clear and straightforward: we want to see Southern Baptist churches across this country to be the safest places on earth for your children and for your families to hear the Good news of the Gospel and to come to know and love Jesus. That is the goal.”
- II. **A Committed Team.** It was apparent that the ARITF consisting of 9 diverse individuals including pastors and lay people, men and women, abuse and trauma experts and survivors... is humble, passionate and wholly committed to the task. It was reported elsewhere that this Taskforce has met every other week since September to accomplish its mission. The Task Force is highly collaborative, having invited insight from hundreds of Baptists across the country and intentionally hearing as many survivor stories as they can over these past two years. It is clear that they are committed to the task of doing everything they can to help protect our churches and are competent for the task.

III. **A productive year.** One of the stipulations of MERCYhouse's two year probationary period is to monitor and assess the implementation of the abuse reform, and to determine whether or not there is good fruit coming from the SBC's repentance. Over the past year, the ARTIF has completed the following tasks:

- Creation of the MinistryCheck online Database. "The ARITF vetted more than twenty firms to assist with the creation of the MinistryCheck website. During this process, members of the ARITF met regularly with Southern Baptist leaders, entity heads, state convention leadership and local pastors to receive input and collaboratively approach the process of creating the MinistryCheck site, including vetting multiple firms recommended by SBC leadership. The ARITF has retained a firm to build the website and is working collaboratively with SBC leadership, state conventions, local pastors, and subject matter experts to continue forming the structure, framework, protections and processes for fully implementing the MinistryCheck site. Vetting of candidates to serve as independent review experts is in process, as is the legal review and confirmation of reported criminal convictions and civil judgments."
- The ARITF has also worked collaboratively to design and implement a trauma-informed intake process which properly protects survivor confidentiality and safety and provides a more effective and efficient means of receiving information.
- Creation of "toolbox" materials to assist leaders in understanding abuse dynamics, abuse prevention, and abuse response.
- Beginning the process of updating the Caring Well educational materials (12-Part video to help equip and train churches for abuse prevention and care with accompanying handbook) and examining most effective and helpful delivery methods.
- Vetting individuals who may be retained as Crisis Interventionists and assisting churches which reach out for help in taking the appropriate steps following the receipt of an allegation.
- Vetting individuals who may be retained as Survivor Advocates and serve as a confidential, independent resource for survivors who choose to file a report. These individuals will serve as a confidential and independent resource for survivors to aid them in the reporting

process, provide updates, assist survivors in identifying local, licensed trauma-support services and advocate for survivor well-being.

It's important to understand the massive scale of the MinistryCheck database in particular which will house the list of offenders. To be clear, there is **nothing in the world** that exists to this scale which will be a searchable database housing the name, alias, birth date, offense, location of offense, date of offense and a photo for those who have (1) confessed to being an abuser, (2) have been convicted of being an abuser, (3) who have been served a civil judgment for abuse, or (4) have been determined by a third party with a preponderance of evidence to be an abuser.

(Point 4 is controversial but necessary because 2 out of 3 sexual assaults go unreported. (RAINN) Out of every 1000 sexual assaults, only 25 offenders will ever be convicted. (RAINN) Only 16% of child victims ever tell about their abuse. (NCAC) These facts in addition to the statute of limitations makes the fourth category for the credibly accused necessary or else a majority of abusers would escape this list.)

This would be an unprecedented way to hold people accountable that involves many layers of systems and technologies merging with law enforcement, all abiding by the strictest legal standards. The website would have to be incredibly secure, the process would have to be clearly determined, and one mistaken placement of an individual on this list would make the whole project a failure. The technical ambition of this will later be iterated as a concern, but if this project is successful, it would be a historic achievement with never before seen levels of accountability and protection for churches communities all over the world. *(To learn more about the MinistryCheck website please read [the official FAQ](#).)*

- IV. **Overwhelming Support by Messengers.** While the ARITF has taken steps in the right direction, they admitted themselves that there is still a long way to go. This is why the ARITF recommended that the Task Force be reauthorized by the messengers to continue their work for another year. Discussion was cut short by Griffin Gutledge, Pastor of Madison Baptist Church who spoke from the floor:

“I was present in Anaheim when we overwhelmingly approved the recommendations of the Sexual Abuse Taskforce with tears and full of faith. We approved their recommendations seeing the devastation that sexual abuse has caused globally and especially in our own convention.

More than that we approved the recommendations because God is Holy, abuse is unacceptable, doing nothing is not an option and repeating the past is unsustainable. That was a great moment. But great moments and tears and chill bumps are not enough. To fail to approve this recommendation would make that day an unkept promise, an unfinished work. To fail to see the Abuse Reform Implementation Taskforce through and to not let them continue their work would be the greatest failure of moral responsibility in this convention in half a century. There is no replacement plan. This Taskforce is our collective Abuse response. Will we quit now? [The ARITF Chair] Marshall has given us more than enough reason to continue this work. Southern Baptists: keep your resolve. Steel your spine. Do what is right, speak for the abused, and continue this work of reform. For this reason, because the sole question before us is to extend the task force for another year. I call to question and ask you to vote in favor of this recommendation.”

The motion to move swiftly to the vote was approved, and the motion to reauthorize the Task Force was overwhelmingly approved with much celebration and tears.

6. **Appropriate Responses.** As we approached the appeals made by Fern Creek, Freedom Church and Saddleback to overturn the original decision by the Executive Committee who ruled that these churches (among 5 others) were not in friendly cooperation with the Convention, President Barber compared their disfellowship to divorce. He said, “we see divorce permitted in scripture, but we never throw divorce parties. However these votes turn out, be Christian in your responses.” When announced that all three rulings by the Executive Committee were sustained (91.85%, 96.4%, and 88.46% ballot margin, respectively), it was met with a spirit of somber mourning throughout the entire convention floor.
7. **Overwhelming adoption of resolutions.** Resolutions are statements that reflect what the messengers of the SBC are thinking and feeling each year. The 9 resolutions were all passed overwhelmingly. We recommend you [read these resolutions](#) to have a better sense of where the hearts and minds of the Messengers are.

There are other things that the MERCYhouse Messengers found encouraging or hopeful, but these rose to the collective top.

Things which were Discouraging or Concerning

1. **Are we still grieving?** There did not seem to be a spirit of mourning and grieving over the details that have been revealed over these past two years at this year's Annual Meeting. It's clear that this was the primary tone of the 2022 Annual Meeting. This is not to say that the SBC ceased taking these things seriously, but the tone has shifted much more toward action. We recognize that we did not participate in the corporate mourning done at the 2022 Annual Meeting, but it was slightly concerning for us that there were not many spaces to talk, listen, and engage further with leadership about abuse at the Annual Meeting beyond the ARITF Report. *(Please note that there was a session titled "[SBC Voices Breakout: Understanding Adult Sexual Abuse](#)." We unfortunately found out after and were not able to attend.)*
2. **There is a lot going on.** The firehose of information and the speed of the business meeting itself was overwhelming for us. We found that there was not a lot of room for discussion or conversation. It's important to recognize that this doesn't mean there wasn't conversation happening throughout the year, and much of that was done on the local level through the local conventions. But the application of corporate business, church polity, and Christian ethics at the SBC is highly unique from a standard church or business meeting, and for those not well versed in Robert's Rules of Order, SBC history or the finer points of the SBC creed and constitution, the proceedings can be difficult to follow or engage meaningfully in. The structure of the Annual Meeting prevents derailment of business but can easily become overwhelming and fly over people's heads. We often found ourselves consulting multiple resources both inside and outside of the SBC to understand everything that was happening. The learning curve was steep for first time attendees. While we believe that this is simply a reality of being part of such a large convention, and that the structuring of the Annual Meeting is geared toward efficiency and not necessarily to hear everyone's voice, it was still a point of discouragement.
3. **The scope and scale of the Offender Database.** This project is one that would be groundbreaking if accomplished, but getting there is a genuine concern. This is because there is no precedent, the implications are severe, and the pressure by the Messengers to complete the project is immense. The MERCYhouse Messengers who have experience in business, software technology development, project management and systems deployment are concerned at the sheer magnitude of this project. We hope that the ARITF will be able to balance timeline expectations with quality assurance requirements. In the words of the ARITF Chair on the MinistryCheck website: "We cannot get this wrong."

4. **The attitude and disposition toward women in general.** We want to be clear that the SBC did not appear mean, dismissive or negative toward women. On the contrary, one of the Resolutions passed focused on the “Legacy and Responsibility of Women” which sought to celebrate, honor and empower women in the SBC ([Resolution 5](#), page 7). But we felt that Mike Law’s proposed amendment to the constitution which would add 6th qualification to what it means to not be in friendly cooperation with SBC to the constitution was not considerate of the challenges that women have faced in the denomination this past year. And while the Executive Committee encouraged messengers to not approve this motion, it was still passed. It was discouraging to have such a strong focus on what women are not able to do, especially when the verbiage in question (we feel) is already quite clear. It’s possible that this language is necessary in other places where this issue is more confusing, and clarity is truly needed on this biblical position. But because we cannot relate to this at MERCYhouse, where the complementary lines are already drawn, it felt excessive and discouraging. We were concerned that the SBC did not spend more airtime empowering and equipping women and we hope that this tone shifts.
5. **Lack of permanent Abuse Prevention and Care “arm” within SBC.** One of the Guidepost recommendations was for a permanent committee or organizational structure within the SBC to focus on Abuse prevention, reporting and care. It’s possible that this will be formed after the Task Force completes its work and that these two entities would not exist at the same time. But it was slightly discouraging and concerning that it wasn’t made clear to us.

Recommendations

Below are recommendations made the the MERCYhouse Messengers who attended the SBC Annual Meeting.

1. That MERCYhouse would follow the similar process for creating our Pastoral Search Committee by nominating members based on elder-guided criteria and formally recognizing a team of messengers for the 2024 SBC Annual Meeting by way of vote.
2. That MERCYhouse Pastors, Deacons and Staff be required to complete the [Becoming a Church That Cares Well For The Abused training curriculum](#), and that all members be encouraged to do so as well.

3. That MERCYhouse would provide resources for its members to understand the nature of abuse and also to explore non-SBC resources for abuse– both for prevention and care.
4. That MERCYhouse would complete the five step church assessment found at sbcabuseprevention.com and utilize the [Ministry Toolkit](#) to ensure that we are training, screening, protecting, reporting and caring effectively.
5. That MERCYhouse form an Abuse Implementation Task Force to help facilitate and prioritize the completion and implementation of points 2-4.
6. That MERCYhouse aggregates information and provides resources about things that are going on in the SBC throughout the year in preparation for the 2024 Annual Meeting. This includes being prepared for all significant voting measures and determining how the Messengers will represent MH in votes.
7. That MERCYhouse provide physical resources for abuse prevention, training, reporting and care for members and attenders to be aware of.
8. That MERCYhouse create a page on our website to report abuse– this should include the option to report to elders, to the local convention leaders, or to the [SBC's national abuse hotline](#).
9. That MERCYhouse continues to prayerfully engage with the SBC and one another in the conversation regarding abuse in the convention.
10. That MERCYhouse would begin advertising and utilizing other resources that the SBC provides including domestic and international missionary programs through the North American Mission Board and the International Mission Board, other opportunities to serve in Crisis response through the program Send Relief, educational opportunities through the numerous SBC seminaries which provide significant discounts for SBC members. We also recommend participating in other ways to help support our missionaries in the field including regular prayer, maintaining regular contact with missionaries, and giving through the Annie Armstrong and Lottie Moon drives.

Conclusion

There's a lot more to say that we did not include in this report. We invite you to ask questions and we'll do our best to answer them. We are in collective agreement that God is at work in the SBC and that there are very positive steps being taken in the right

direction. We discern that the SBC is keeping with repentance at this time and are hopeful that the implementation of abuse reform will make SBC churches all over the world, including here in Amherst, Massachusetts, safer places to follow and worship our King Jesus.

Thank you for your time and for entrusting us with the responsibility of traveling to the 2023 Annual Meeting on June 13-14 in New Orleans, Louisiana.

Sincerely,

Tommy Moore, Kaitlyn Moore, Vika Katko, Noreen Kelly, and Matthew May

