

SBC agency says 1 in 8 church background checks finds criminal record: LifeWay Christian Resources findings

News in the [September 8, 2009](#) issue

One in eight background checks conducted on volunteers or prospective employees through LifeWay Christian Resources found a criminal history that might have kept an individual from working or volunteering at a church, the Southern Baptist Convention publishing house reported in August.

Last year, LifeWay negotiated a discount for screening services for churches with Backgroundchecks.com, a ten-year-old company with 4,500 clients. Since then, according to officials, about 450 churches have requested more than 5,000 background checks on volunteers and prospective employees.

While most screenings returned clean records or only minor traffic offenses, said LifeWay officials, 80 found serious felony offenses, and more than 600 people had some type of criminal history that may have disqualified them from volunteering or working at a church.

While not a statistically representative sample, the 450 churches represent 1 percent of the 44,848 Southern Baptist congregations claimed in LifeWay's most recent Annual Church Profile. If the numbers held true for the other 99 percent of Southern Baptist churches, that would add up to 8,000 serious felony offenses and more than 60,000 people with some sort of checkered past among those volunteering or applying for staff roles in churches across the convention.

"It is so important in this day and time to run these checks," Barbara Strong, church secretary at Jubilee Worship Center in Westmoreland, Tennessee, said in a press release.

Since Southern Baptist churches are self-governing, the SBC Executive Committee cannot require congregations to conduct background checks, but it “strongly advises” them to be diligent in choosing leaders and volunteers. It also provides an online link to a Department of Justice sex-offender list.

While sex-offender registries are vital, experts say, they alone aren’t very effective in spotting sexual predators. They list only those convicted of a crime. Because victims typically are reluctant to come forward and because molestation laws have statutes of limitations in many states, only an estimated 10 percent of sexual predators are brought to justice.

According to a 2004 study by the John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York City, about 4 percent of Catholic priests who have served in the United States since 1950 have been accused of sexually abusing minors.

While hard numbers are lacking for other religious groups, Philip Jenkins, a professor at Penn State University and a Century columnist, has estimated the figure among Protestant clergy at between 2 and 3 percent.

In 2007 the Associated Press polled three major insurers for Protestant churches and totaled claims of minors being sexually abused by clergy, staff or other church-related figures at about 260 reports a year. The John Jay study found 228 credible accusations against Catholic priests per year.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops responded to its scandal by appointing a 12-member National Review Board, a laity-led panel that monitors and reports incidents of sexual abuse by clergy.

Prodded by the Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests, the same group that pressured the Catholic Church to take action, Southern Baptist leaders last year discussed the feasibility of a similar nationwide system.

In the end, the SBC Executive Committee decided that given Southern Baptists’ free-wheeling style of congregational governance, the denomination lacked “jurisdictional authority” to involve itself in receiving and evaluating reports of abuse within local churches.

Instead the Executive Committee sought to bolster awareness of the issue by creating a resource page for prevention of sexual abuse on the SBC.net Web site

and dedicating an entire issue of *SBC Life*, a newspaper sent to pastors and other church leaders, to “protecting our children.”

The SBC Executive Committee urges churches to vigorously investigate any known or suspected incidents of abuse and to report them immediately to “governing authorities.” To delay reporting in order to avoid embarrassment to the church or to extend mercy to the accused is “unjustified” in cases involving potential child abuse, the committee says. -*Associated Baptist Press*