

BGCT responds to clergy sex abuse; victims want more

December 8, 2006

Posted: 12/08/06

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Associated Baptist Press

DALLAS (ABP)—Recent sex scandals among [Catholic](#) and evangelical leaders are prompting renewed calls for action against clergy sexual abuse. But with [research](#) indicating such abuse is more prevalent among clergy—including [Baptists](#)—than other counseling professionals, abuse-victim advocates are asking if enough is being done.

Comprehensive studies are difficult to find. But a 1993 survey by the [Journal of Pastoral Care](#) found that 14 percent of Southern Baptist ministers admitted to engaging in inappropriate sexual behavior. Seventy percent said they knew another minister who had.

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A 2000 Baptist General Convention of Texas report indicated more than 24 percent of ministers said they had counseled at least one person who had sexual contact with a minister. The BGCT report called the level of sexual abuse by clergy “horrific” and noted that “the disturbing aspect of all research is that the rate of incidence for clergy exceeds the client-professional rate for both physicians and psychologists.”

Christa Brown, an attorney from Austin, maintains

www.stopbaptistpredators.org. She works with the [Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests](#), or SNAP, an organization of survivors of clergy sexual abuse. She also recently handed out brochures at the annual BGCT convention in Dallas.

“We call upon the Baptist General Convention of Texas to stop shielding clergy predators and to take action for the protection of kids,” the SNAP leaflet said. It called on the BGCT to hire independent experts to investigate sexual abuse cases within the convention.

Brown, 54, who said she was abused by a Southern Baptist youth minister in 1968, insists if Baptist leaders cared enough about protecting kids from clergy abuse, they would not let congregational autonomy be an impediment to action.

But representatives from the Baptist General Convention of Texas Executive Board staff take issue with Brown’s characterization. They say they’re actually the only Baptist group to take a proactive stand against clergy abuse—all the while working within a denominational structure built to maintain autonomy in local churches and resist top-down management.

Emily Row, coordinator of BGCT leader communication, said her initial reaction to hearing from any victims group is one of sadness. She acknowledged that “there have been and continue to be gaps within the system,” and said she understands “the grief and the anger and the frustration that is bound to be a process of having been a victim.”

Still, she said, there’s a lot of misunderstanding about how the BGCT deals with clergy misconduct, and some of it is hearsay.

“Groups like SNAP say that we are harboring people guilty of sexual misconduct,” Row said. That’s not the case, she added. Instead, churches can report sexual misconduct to a confidential file on a volunteer basis.

“What happens is that duly-elected members of a church provide us with information of incidents of sexual misconduct.... It has to be in writing.”

That practice is intended to protect both the accuser and the accused, Row said.

The issue of confidentiality versus secrecy has remained a large part of the debate, especially concerning the BGCT’s file of ministers who reportedly committed sexual misconduct. SNAP officials criticized the Texas file in a [letter they delivered Sept. 26](#) to the SBC Executive Committee in Nashville calling for an independent review of Baptist abuse.

But BGCT leaders point to the file as proof they’re doing more than other Baptist groups in trying to stop sexual abuse. Indeed, while the file remains confidential, it is a step that others have not yet taken, Row said.

Row stressed that the “file of incidents” is often misunderstood. If a minister is convicted of any indecency or confesses to such, then church leaders can choose to report it to the list. And other churches can have access to the file as well, if they submit an official request.

To check the “confidential, not secret” BGCT file, an elected member of a church must submit a written request inquiring about a particular person. Should that specific person appear on the list, BGCT officials “respond with a form that says if the person indicated has an incident on record in that file.”

“Because we’re autonomous as Baptists, we can’t make anyone tell us anything,” Row said. “Our information is only as good as the church information that is provided, which means that when a church doesn’t report to us what has happened, we don’t have any way of knowing, and that information is not in the file.”

Any clergy members recorded as public sex offenders against children are

listed in public records, and churches “are encouraged” to reference those lists. Those names are not listed on the BGCT site because “it’s already part of public record,” Row said.

Christa Brown, however, called that limited availability a “very dangerous way of thinking.” FBI reports say less than 10 percent of child molestation cases are ever detected, much less prosecuted, so hundreds of cases go unreported in public databases every year.

“The contents of that file are kept secret from the very people who are most in need of knowing what’s in it—the parents in the pews of Baptist churches,” Brown said.

Secrecy contracts, or agreements that forbid the victim from speaking about the inappropriate contact, have contributed to the problem, Brown said. Often, women who had an affair with a pastor are asked to quietly leave the church in order to save themselves—and the church—the embarrassment of a scandal.

“Even if (Baptist leaders) can’t actually remove men from ministry, they could at least take on the obligation to inform people in the pews when there is information about a minister reported for molesting a kid,” she said. “To keep that kind of information a secret from parents is unconscionable.”

For her part, Row stressed that not all of the people in the file were guilty of criminal behavior or child abuse. Some are included because of adultery with consenting adults, for instance. Others may have looked at legal pornography. And she urged churches to contact authorities immediately in cases of illegal behavior, harassment or rape.

What’s more, the BGCT has an “intervention specialist” who deals with cases of clergy misconduct, Row said. And the convention has published several guides on ministerial ethics, one specifically about preventing and

confronting clergy sexual misconduct.

In June 2002, the Southern Baptist Convention also passed a resolution on the sexual integrity of ministers. It urged seminaries to emphasize ministerial integrity in the training of pastors and other leaders, and called on civil authorities to punish to the fullest extent of the law sexual abuse among clergy and counselors.

“We call on our churches to discipline those guilty of any sexual abuse in obedience to Matthew 18:6-17, as well as to cooperate with civil authorities in the prosecution of those cases,” the resolution said. “...We pray for those who have been harmed as a result of sexual abuse and urge our churches to offer support, compassion and biblical counseling to them and their families.”

Phil Strickland, in a letter of introduction for *Broken Trust: Confronting Clergy Sexual Misconduct*, wrote that 96 percent of sexual exploitation by professionals involves a man in power capitalizing on a woman’s trust. The late director of the BGCT’s Christian Life Commission, Strickland said clergy sexual misconduct happens when a person in a ministerial role engages in sexual contact, threats or sexual behavior with a congregant, client, employee, student, staff member, colleague or volunteer.

Sometimes it’s done once, spontaneously, by a leader who is emotionally vulnerable and lonely. Other times, the abuse happens from a leader who has a pattern of abusing power—a serial abuser who actively looks for opportunities to take advantage of congregants.

“Congregations should conduct background checks on prospective staff and assure appropriate supervision of all staff,” said Strickland, who died last year. “If there is a complaint of sexual misconduct, the church must act immediately to investigate and intervene properly and responsibly.”

Dee Ann Miller, an author and former Southern Baptist missionary, has

worked with people affected by clergy abuse for more than 15 years. Of the 2,500 clergy-abuse survivors she has helped, she said on Brown's website, at least 300 of them claim to have been abused by Southern Baptist clergy.

Miller, who wrote [*How Little We Knew: Collusion and Confusion with Sexual Misconduct*](#), said she had good response from Baptists when she first got involved with the issue in 1995. But she sees little progress toward training ministers and lay people to prevent and deal with sexual misconduct.

"I could not understand then and still have only partial understanding of the rationale that would put other individuals and congregations at risk while giving 'opportunity for restoration' to a perpetrator with multiple victims..." Miller wrote in [a series of essays for *Baptists Today*](#).

In an issue so mired in hurt and mistrust, solutions seem few and far between. Miller and Brown have repeatedly and emphatically said the BGCT's action is "not even close" to proper investigation and prevention of misconduct. Brown has called it "a bit of talk and some words on paper" that effectively recycle predators from church to church.

Row maintains that the convention has committed to improving "communication and to make use of our clergy sexual-misconduct file." Convention leaders truly want to prevent sexual abuse and help those whom it affects, she said.

"My hope is that as more of these instances are made public knowledge, that churches will see the need to begin to report these things," Row said. "That they will see that they can be a part of bringing about a solution. My hope is that those who have been bold enough to step forward and say something will be rewarded."

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