

Breaking the cycle

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How can churches escape the trap of recycling sex abusers?

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Associated Baptist Press

JACKSONVILLE, Fla.(ABP)—What can churches do to prevent clergy sex abuse and break the pattern of recycling abusers? Even among activists and experts, there is no consensus—and sometimes loud disagreement—about the steps to be taken.

- **A ministerial code of ethics.** Doctors, lawyers and counselors have it. And so do most ministers, but not most Baptists, although the Baptist General Convention of Texas Christian Life Commission worked with a clergy ethics committee to develop a “covenant of trust” into which ministers and congregations could enter. Without the ability to withdraw ordination, participation is voluntary and enforcement impossible. But it’s a start.

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• **Seminary training.** Condition Baptist ministers early to avoid moral compromise. But “ministerial ethics is rarely taught in our seminaries, although this area has become a major issue in church life,” said Joe Trull of Denton, who previously taught at an SBC seminary.

• **Church-approved policies.** What to do with an accusation? Who does an investigation? What about a leave of absence for the accused? How do you treat an accuser? Unless it’s in writing, a congregation will resort to self-protection—and have little legal protection. There are lots of resources and training available to churches, but few take advantage. Some conventions offer intervention assistance. But it all starts with a plan. The Faith Trust

Institute of Seattle, founded by abuse pioneer Marie Fortune, has resources.

- **Outside help.** Churches need an independent review panel to receive accusations and oversee investigations—or at least an outside consultant to lend objectivity. This is not the church’s lawyer, however, since his or her duty is to protect the church.

“Local churches are not capable of handling abuse allegations on their own, and they shouldn’t have to,” said Christa Brown, a lawyer and sex-abuse activist whose story of molestation has brought unwanted national attention to the Southern Baptist Convention. Brown leads a Baptist-directed campaign for the Catholic-focused SNAP, the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests.

“Churches are like families, and the dynamics of clergy sex abuse are very similar to the dynamics of incest,” she said. “Most congregations are not capable of objectively considering whether their much-loved and much-trusted minister might actually be someone who molested a kid.”

- **Reporting abuse.** It’s the law. Church leaders have to tell law-enforcement officials when they learn of sex abuse. But they don’t have to tell fellow church members—and often they don’t. Usually the reason cited is a need for confidentiality. But that only benefits the accused and forces the victim to shoulder the burden alone, advocates and counselors say.

Anti-abuse advocate Dee Ann Miller stressed the difference between secrecy and confidentiality. “To not be up-front about the general nature of allegations is secrecy,” she said. “To protect the victim’s identity in order to prevent embarrassment or retaliation is confidentiality.”

Congregations must encourage victims to talk, counselors say, whether to expose abusers or simply to heal. “Far too often, we see exactly the opposite—victims who attempt to speak up are treated with hostility by

church and denominational leaders, and also by congregants,” Brown said. “Clergy-abuse victims can readily see that climate of hostility.”

When abuse is uncovered, churches and their lawyers often rely on confidentiality agreements—usually paired with financial settlements—to keep unsavory details out of public view.

But Miller states flatly, “There should never be a settlement that silences the victim.” Indeed, new Catholic canon law prohibits confidentiality clauses unless requested by the abuse victim.

Confidentiality agreements are “a travesty,” Brown added. “Speaking personally, I would suggest that it is a tactic that resists the movement of God’s Spirit, who might indeed work for healing and justice if Southern Baptists weren’t setting up so many roadblocks.”

- **Abuser database.** The public is used to criminal predator lists in secular world. But critics say they are inappropriate and unsavory for churches and denominations, not to mention a legal liability issue. In a realm where guilt is difficult to prove, and innocence is sometimes harder, what level of certainty is sufficient? Do you list only the convicted? Or do you include the indicted, the accused and those who confess or settle out of court?

SNAP’s stopbaptistpredators.com shows names and photos of Southern Baptist ministers “convicted, confessed or credibly accused.” That practice is “consistent with what Catholics are doing,” Brown pointed out. “Over 700 priests have now been removed from ministry, and most have never been convicted of anything.”

With convictions still rare, advocates say keeping the merely accused off the list is neither an adequate strategy nor necessary to preserve a presumption of innocence. Critics worry aggressive measures like the abuser database stack the deck against those falsely accused. But victims’ groups insist fabricated cases are exceedingly rare—less than 1 percent

among child accusers, reports Darkness to Light.

“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,” Brown said. “To keep that kind of information a secret from parents is unconscionable.

“For any innocent minister to be falsely accused of sexual abuse is a horrible thing. The only thing I can think of that would be worse would be to suffer actual abuse by a minister and then to be disbelieved or attacked by your faith community when you attempt to report it— and to see your rapist still standing in the pulpit.”

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