

TV news magazine investigates sexual abuse in Protestant churches

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Associated Baptist Press

NEW YORK (ABP)—ABC's *20/20* examined the problems with [clergy sexual abuse](#) in the Southern Baptist Convention April 13, warning that some convicted "preacher predators" remain on an SBC's list of ministers available for employment.

Featuring interviews with Southern Baptist Convention president Frank Page and clergy sex-abuse-survivor-turned-activist Christa Brown, the program investigated how denominations without hierarchical authority can protect vulnerable parties from abuse by ministers.

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The show also featured footage of Ken Ward, a former Southern Baptist preacher from Texas who admitted to molesting 40 boys during his tenure. Ward served five years in prison and is now under house arrest.

He said he knows that other predators think the same way he does.

“You look for a vulnerable child,” Ward said. “You look for a child that is needy and lonely, because you take the father’s place.”

Parents have it all wrong when it comes to protecting their children from sexual abuse, he said. Instead of fearing strange men in dark alleys, they should be wary of trusted figures with unsupervised access to children—such as Sunday school teachers or youth leaders who can manipulate children’s emotional attachments to them.

“People saw me as someone that would never harm their child,” he said. “What I would do as a pastor is I would start youth groups. Parents should be aware of a youth-group leader who is too attached to particular children.”

Brown, a longtime advocate of reforming the way the SBC deals with abuse allegations, echoed Ward's warnings. Her efforts stem from her own experience with clergy abuse, which she said happened in 1968.

"There is no place where teens are more exposed and more vulnerable than when they speak their hearts to God," Brown said, adding that she loved church life as a child.

"What's so terrible about this crime is that the weapon is the kid's faith," she said.

One unidentified victim of clergy sexual abuse spoke in the *20/20* segment. The boy, who was molested by music minister Shawn Davies in a Kentucky Baptist church, said he felt betrayed by God after the abuse.

"I felt betrayed by everybody, and I hated everybody. And I hated myself the most," the boy said. "I wanted to die. I didn't want to be alive."

In an interview with reporter Jim Avila, the boy's father said church members "turned their heads" when they learned about the abuse. Davies is now serving 20 years in prison for molesting children at churches in Missouri and Kentucky.

Lee Orth, who was involved in helping churches recover after the Davies case, said even one phone call from one of the churches that harbored Davies could have prevented at least two instances of abuse in churches that subsequently employed him.

Page, the SBC president, has exhorted churches to make that call. On *20/20*, he said even one instance of sexual abuse is too much. And because the denomination's churches are completely autonomous, local church leaders must police themselves, he said.

Despite the absence of a conventionwide database of sexual molesters,

Avila pointed out to Page that six convicted and jailed “preacher predators” were on a list of eligible ministers on the SBC website. Page encouraged churches to investigate such problems.

“If it would help to have some kind of national database, I know we’re looking into that,” Page later said.

[Benjamin Cole](#), an Arlington pastor who intends to [present a resolution](#) regarding clergy sex-abuse at this year’s annual SBC meeting, said he was pleased with Page’s willingness to speak publicly about the issue. The president’s leadership at “this critical juncture in the life of our convention” is essential, Cole said.

Southern Baptists watched as Catholics scrambled to respond to the growing crisis of predatory clergy but were “far too busy noticing the splinters in our neighbor’s eye when motes were lodged in our own,” he said.

“We can no longer claim ignorance or indifference to this crisis,” Cole said. “It remains to be seen how aggressive our efforts will become to protect those who are most defenseless in our churches.”

Cole said he was also moved by Brown’s testimony.

Brown said her abuse was “profoundly painful”—something about which she takes no joy in publicly speaking.

“My constant hope and prayer is that, by doing so, I may help people in the pews to understand the extent of the problem so that they will insist on effective denominational action to make kids safer,” she said.

Sadly, Brown said, 20/20 highlighted only the most recent cases of clergy sex-abuse—“the tip of the iceberg.”

“Because of the nature of the trauma, most people who were sexually

abused in childhood and adolescence do not speak of it for many, many years,” Brown said. “When they do finally speak, it is usually too late for criminal prosecution. The denomination must find a way to effectively address those sorts of clergy-abuse reports.”

And if such reports are treated seriously only when perpetrators earn criminal convictions, then far too many kids will continue to be physically and spiritually abused, she said.

Such a scenario is all too familiar in many of the recent Southern Baptist abuse cases. Ward, the pedophile under house arrest, said many abusers fly under the radar for years.

“Anybody could have talked to the churches I was with, and they would have praised me,” Ward said. “I suspect not much has changed.”