

# **Baptists need national sex-offender database**

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The Southern Baptist Convention missed a great opportunity to protect its members when the SBC Executive Committee declined to create a sexual-offender database.

Executive Committee President Morris Chapman cited “belief in the autonomy of each local church” as the rationale against creating a system to help churches identify sexual predators. Chapman made the announcement during the Executive Committee’s report to the SBC annual meeting in Indianapolis last week.

But the Executive Committee’s logic is faulty. The Baptist General Convention of Texas operates a similar database that not only honors church autonomy but also aids churches in their quest to weed out people who pose as ministers while preying on the weak, vulnerable, young, gullible and simply innocent.

The Executive Committee considered the possibility for a year. During the 2007 SBC meeting, Oklahoma pastor Wade Burleson proposed a sexual-offender registry “in order to assist in preventing any further sexual abuse or harassment.”

Defending the decision to decline Burleson’s suggestion, an Executive Committee report exhibited more illogical reasoning. Since “it would be impossible to assure that all convicted sexual predators who ever had a connection with a Baptist church would be discoverable for inclusion on such a list,” the committee decided not to act.

By that reasoning, the Executive Committee will come out with a proposal

to do away with capital punishment. After all, a vigorous effort to execute murderers in Texas hasn't succeeded in rounding up all the killers in the Lone Star State.

To his credit, Chapman urged Baptists to access a national sex-offender database, [www.nsopr.gov](http://www.nsopr.gov), to screen prospective staff members. That's a significant step, and every church should take it.

But conventions of all stripes should take every step to close the door to people who pose as ministers and abuse children and—most notably among Baptists—women.

Baptist polity and practice make our churches most particularly vulnerable to sexual predators. It's the "autonomy of each local church," which Chapman cited, that enables offenders to move from church to church. We don't have bishops or presbyteries or other officials who validate ministers' credentials. Churches can hire anybody they want to fill any pastorate or other vacancy. And because of shame and/or expediency, many churches fail to confront, much less publicly label, offenders.

Besides, without a database, they can't do much to warn other churches.

At least the Baptist General Convention of Texas is making an effort to help churches protect themselves.

The BGCT's sexual misconduct file is designed to preserve local-church autonomy, protect innocent ministers and guard Baptists against predators.

In order to place a proven predator—as well as ministers who engage in "consensual" extramarital affairs and Internet pornography—on the list, a person with official standing, such as a pastor or elected lay leader, may contact the BGCT and provide that name. This process is deliberate and serious. Anonymous, random and undocumented accusations are not accepted.

In order to screen ministerial candidates, a person with official standing, such as a pastor, staff member or search-committee member, may contact the BGCT and determine if any candidates' names are in the sexual misconduct file. The process prevents "fishing." Screeners are not allowed to ask for all the names on the list; they only are allowed to present names of candidates, to determine if they are on the list.

To access the BGCT sexual misconduct list, utilize the official form available on the convention's special webpage, [www.bgct.org/brokentrust](http://www.bgct.org/brokentrust) . Ron Herring, the BGCT's intervention specialist, also can guide churches through this process or the process of submitting information to the file. He can be contacted at (214) 828-5169 or [ron.herring@bgct.org](mailto:ron.herring@bgct.org).

This system is not perfect. But it gets stronger each time it is used, and each time a proven abuser's name is added. The SBC should adopt this system, for the sake of the innocent and vulnerable.