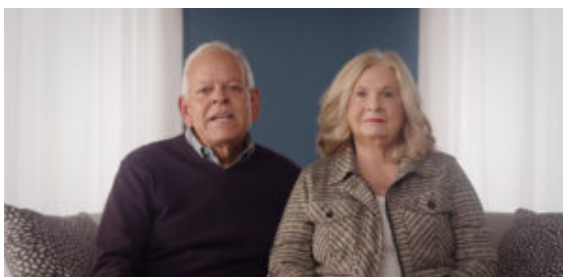


Churches under scrutiny for inviting Johnny Hunt to speak

February 3, 2023

NASHVILLE (BP)—Two churches have been reported to the Southern Baptist Convention’s credentials committee on the grounds the churches are out of step with the SBC stance on sexual abuse.

The reports stem from speaking invitations extended to former SBC President Johnny Hunt. Hunt was named in a 2022 report from Guidepost Solutions on the firm’s investigation into the alleged mishandling of sexual abuse claims by the SBC Executive Committee.



Johnny Hunt seated with his wife (Screenshot from video announcement of Hunt’s restoration process).

Hunt has [admitted](#) to “a brief, but improper, encounter” in 2010 with a woman who wasn’t his wife, but he has denied that it was abuse.

In an email shared with *The Tennessean* by Todd Benkert, the credentials committee acknowledged placing two churches under inquiry.

The churches are Hiland Park Baptist Church in Panama City, Fla., and New Season Church in Hiram, Ga., according to [The Tennessean](#).

[Hunt preached at Hiland Park Jan. 15](#), and is scheduled to preach March 17 and 18 at a [men's conference at New Season Church](#). Hunt and his wife, Janet, are members of Hiland Park, according to a statement made by Hiland Park Senior Pastor Steven Kyle in a Jan. 15 church service.

Benkert is lead pastor of Oak Creek Community Church in Mishawaka, Ind., and a member of the SBC abuse reform implementation task force. Benkert also spoke at a trauma-informed ministry training event at the 2022 SBC annual meeting in Anaheim.

“The SBC messengers made clear statements about how we expect churches to respond to abuse,” Benkert told *The Tennessean*.

Messengers voted in 2019 to amend the SBC constitution to state specifically that mishandling sexual abuse is grounds for a church to be deemed “not in friendly cooperation” with the convention.

In 2021, messengers adopted a resolution stating: “Any person who has committed sexual abuse is permanently disqualified from holding the office of pastor ... [W]e recommend that all of our affiliated churches apply this standard to all positions of church leadership.”



Pastors (from left) Mark Hoover, Mike Whitson, Steven Kyle and Benny Tate appear in a video to talk about their restoration work with Johnny Hunt. (RNS video screen

grab)

In a video released in November 2022, Mark Hoover, of NewSpring Church in Wichita, Kan., Mike Whitson, of First Baptist in Indian Trail, N.C., Steven Kyle of Hiland Park Baptist Church in Panama City, Fla., and Benny Tate of Rock Springs Church in Milner, Ga., announced the restoration of Johnny Hunt to public ministry.

Rock Springs identifies itself as Congregational Methodist, while NewSpring, First Baptist and Hiland Park all are affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention.

SBC President Bart Barber objected to the “restoration,” saying: “I would permanently ‘defrock’ Johnny Hunt if I had the authority to do so.”

Marshall Blalock, chair of the abuse reform implementation task force, affirmed Barber’s sentiments.

“I fully support your (Barber’s) statement. This kind of ‘restoration’ works against abuse prevention efforts and harms those who have suffered abuse,” Blalock said.

Hunt was also scheduled to preach at a Great Commission Weekend later this month hosted by Fellowship Church in Immokalee, Fla., but later was disinvited.

According to the SBC’s website, the credentials committee “will not release comments or updates regarding submissions through the media or by other means unless or until a recommendation is submitted to the Executive Committee for withdrawal of fellowship from a church.”