

# Churches urged to support survivors of sexual abuse

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DALLAS—The #MeToo Movement brought to light issues of sexual abuse the church should have addressed long ago, the leader of a workshop at the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship general assembly insisted.

“Hollywood has done a better job confronting abuse than the church,” said Pam Durso, executive director of Baptist Women in Ministry.

The #MeToo Movement—started in 2006 by Tarana Burke—only recently was expanded to include #ChurchToo. Durso pointed to that long delay as evidence of churches’ inattention to sexual abuse, when they should have taken the lead.

## Support and believe survivors

Durso facilitated discussion at the workshop, which focused both on how churches can support survivors of sexual abuse and how congregations can take steps to prevent sexual offenses.

One woman in five will experience rape or attempted rape, Durso noted. Many more will encounter sexual harassment or discrimination based on their sex.

“I’ve never talked to a woman who hasn’t experienced sexism,” Durso said.

Since the lives of most women already are affected by an abusive society, churches should not compound their pain by failing to adopt and implement policies that respect the survivors of sexual abuse, Durso insisted.

Too many churches respond to reported cases of sexual abuse the wrong way, she asserted. Too often, churches find reasons to blame the victim rather than the perpetrator—because of the clothes she wore, or because she was in the wrong place at the wrong time, or because she trusted a man too much, she said.

Sexual violence and abuse happen so often that it often is normalized, Durso explained. Whether because men are understood as sexually driven beings, or because women are blamed for not strongly avoiding the situation, she said, churches can see these attacks as a normal occurrence and therefore not take action.

“They will tell women, ‘You need to just accept what happened and not question it,’” Durso observed.

Particularly in cases of clergy sexual abuse, churches tend to doubt what women say about the sexual violence they suffered, she insisted.

Many ministers are so beloved, even if a woman says she was attacked, churches will question her statements, Durso said.

Because women realize they will face the obstacle of disbelief, 63 percent of rapes go unreported, she noted.

“It’ll cost them too much to report what happened,” she said, whether that means not being believed or being blamed for the offense. “Churches have been slow to believe women.”

## **Christian educational institutions**

That extends to many Christian institutions, she added. In May, the *Washington Post* [reported](#) how Paige Patterson allegedly mishandled a rape report when he was president of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Megan Lively later came forward to reveal she was the woman who reported the assault, and she said the seminary placed her on probation for two years after she reported the incident—presumably for being alone in her apartment with a man.

After the story came out, Lively had to endure personal attacks on the Internet for “ruining a ‘good man’s’ reputation,” Durso said.

While discussions about sexual assault never are easy, churches must provide safe places where victims can come forward and trust their account will be trusted, she insisted.

“It’s uncomfortable, but if we can’t do it in the church, then where is it going to happen?” Durso asked.

In addition to creating safe spaces for victims of sexual abuse and harassment, Durso called on churches to move beyond “thoughts and prayer” and take tangible action by not only reporting incidents, but also providing follow-up with survivors.

“While some reports may happen, follow-through and due process often does not,” she said.

## **Begin with honest conversation**

For churches to respond quicker and not be taken by surprise, Durso urged church leaders to prepare policies regarding clergy misconduct beforehand.

“This starts with conversation,” she said.

Seminaries need to address sexual abuse before ministerial students graduate or enter churches to serve, she added.

Churches need policies in place to protect women and children in the congregation, and pastors need to preach about the issue of sexual abuse from the pulpit, she said.

“If we do not think proactively, we will not move in the right direction,” Durso said. “We need to make it a matter of public worship.”

Considering that 93 percent of CBF senior pastors are male, Cooperative Baptists cannot wait for women pastors to take the leadership in addressing sexual abuse in churches.

“We cannot say women pastors need to lead when most pastors are men,” she said.

When the people of God do not listen and do not believe victims of sexual violence, they do not love the victims, Durso said. It is not surprising when the survivors do not feel loved by God because of what the church does, she added.

Churches need to engage in serious conversations about who God is and who God has called the church to be, Durso insisted.

And any deep conversation about the love God has for all people should include the themes of sexuality, consent, respect and love for each other, she added.

“At the heart of all this, there is really bad theology,” Durso said. “The church then must have a safe space where serious conversation about theology can happen.”