

# Hunt defiantly returns to the pulpit after abuse allegations

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PANAMA CITY, Fla. (RNS)—Claiming “false allegations” had ruined his life, former Southern Baptist Convention President Johnny Hunt returned to the pulpit Jan. 15, eight months after allegations that he had sexually assaulted another pastor’s wife became public.



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)

Hunt was the guest preacher at Hiland Park Baptist Church in Panama City, Fla., where his friend Steven L. Kyle is pastor. Kyle was part of a small group of pastors who deemed Hunt fit to return to the ministry, despite the allegations against him.

Kyle introduced Hunt, who joined Hiland Park as a member in 2022, calling him “one of the greatest pulpiteers in our generation.”

“Today we are honored,” Kyle said. “Today I am thankful to have my good

friend Dr. Johnny Hunt preach at Hiland Park.”

## **Guidepost report cites credible allegations**

The former SBC leader, who was also a longtime pastor of a Georgia megachurch, was named in the Guidepost Solutions report on abuse in the SBC, which was released in May 2022. According to the report, Hunt allegedly assaulted a woman at a vacation condo in 2010.

Investigators found the allegations against him credible. Hunt denied the allegations at first, then claimed the incident was a consensual encounter.

During his sermon, Hunt said some of the allegations against him were true, but they would have been easier to survive than the “false allegations,” and he claimed he’d been pressured to quit the ministry.

Psalm 119, the biblical text he drew from, also talked about what happens when people face persecution and their enemies set up traps to snare them.

“When will you punish my persecutors?” the text says in the New International Version. “The arrogant dig pits to trap me, contrary to your law. All your commands are trustworthy; help me, for I am being persecuted without cause.”

## **Hunt says calling cannot be undone**

Hunt also talked about the power of forgiveness and what happens when people make “bad choices.”

“And by the way, have you ever made a choice that you wish you could undo, but you can’t undo it?” he asked the congregation. “What do you do

with stuff you can't undo? You give it to Jesus."

He also told the congregation that if God calls someone to do something, that calling can't be undone. And God called that person, knowing the person might sin and fail, he added.

Hunt said he could retire and no longer had to preach for a living.

"Anybody can quit," he said. "That's why so many do. It's easy. I mean, it hardly takes any energy whatsoever."

During his sermon, Hunt also detailed some of his future plans for ministry, including leading a tour group to the Holy Land and traveling to Uganda to train pastors.

## **Hunt failed to disclose incident**

The allegations against Hunt had stunned many of his friends and supporters, especially since Hunt had hidden the incident for so long. After finishing up his time as SBC president in 2010, he took an extended leave of absence, which he has said was due to physical exhaustion and depression.

But according to the Guidepost report and a video from Kyle and the other pastors who restored the former megachurch pastor, Hunt went through an extended counseling and restoration process after the incident at the condo.

Hunt hid that process from his congregation and from the SBC's North American Mission Board, which hired him as a vice president in 2018. He resigned from that role after the Guidepost report was made public.

Hunt's return to ministry highlights the difficulty the nation's largest Protestant denomination has in dealing with pastoral misconduct and

abuse. While delegates to the SBC's annual meeting have condemned abusive pastors and said they are unfit for the ministry, the denomination has no authority to discipline pastors or ban them from preaching.

Current SBC President Bart Barber has called Hunt's return to ministry a "repugnant act."

"I would permanently 'defrock' Johnny Hunt if I had the authority to do so," Barber, pastor of First Baptist Church in Farmersville, said in November.

Tiffany Thigpen, an abuse survivor and longtime advocate of abuse victims, told Religion News Service in November 2022 Hunt's return to ministry was a sign that Southern Baptist culture has yet to change.

"We are always going to have this network of powerful men who can do whatever they want and think they can get away with it," she said. "And they are right."