

Johnny Hunt sues Southern Baptist Convention

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—A disgraced former Southern Baptist president is suing the denomination he once led, saying he was defamed by allegations he assaulted another pastor's wife.

In a complaint filed in the federal court for the Middle District of Tennessee, lawyers for Johnny Hunt, a long-time Georgia megachurch pastor, admit Hunt "had a brief, inappropriate, extramarital encounter with a married woman" in 2012. But Hunt claims the incident was consensual and was a private matter that should not have been made public in a major 2022 report.

"Some of the precise details are disputed, but at most, the encounter lasted only a few minutes, and it involved only kissing and some awkward fondling," according to the complaint.

The complaint said Hunt sought counseling and forgiveness for the incident, which the complaint said was "a sin." However, Hunt never disclosed the incident to First Baptist Church of Woodstock, Ga., where he was the pastor for three decades, or to the SBC's North American Mission Board, where he was a vice president until resigning in 2022.

The incident became public in May 2022, after it was discovered by investigators at Guidepost Solutions, a consulting firm that had been hired to investigate how SBC leaders had dealt with the issue of abuse.

Guidepost's investigators included the incident as part of their report and described it as a sexual assault. Those investigators said they found the allegations against Hunt credible. The former SBC president at first denied

the allegations, then claimed the incident was consensual.

Claims Hunt made a ‘scapegoat’ for SBC

The complaint alleges the SBC and Guidepost engaged in defamation and libel, that they invaded Hunt’s privacy and intentionally caused emotional harm.

“The decision to smear Pastor Johnny’s reputation with these accusations has led him to suffer substantial economic and other damages,” according to the complaint.

“He has lost (his) job and income; he has lost current and future book deals; and he has lost the opportunity to generate income through speaking engagements.”

Hunt also claims he was made a scapegoat to pay for the SBC’s past sins. He said current SBC leaders and Guidepost were engaged in damage control to repair the 13-million-member denomination’s reputation.

“By focusing on the allegation against Pastor Johnny—an allegation by an adult woman that involved noncriminal conduct—and by then taking aggressive action against Pastor Johnny, the Defendants sought to create the appearance that the SBC has learned from its previous mistakes and is now working to protect victims of sex crimes,” the complaint claims.

Alleges Hunt named to ‘deflect attention’

The complaint accused current SBC leaders and Guidepost of intentionally causing him “personal anguish and harm.”

“Defendants’ decision to feature the allegation against Pastor Johnny in their public report was a strategic decision to deflect attention from the SBC’s historical failure to take aggressive steps to respond to reports of child sex abuse and other sex crimes in its past,” the complaint claims.

A spokesperson for the SBC’s Nashville-based Executive Committee said SBC leaders are aware of the suit.

“We are reviewing the complaint and will not be commenting on active litigation at this time,” the spokesman said in a statement.

Guidepost Solutions declined to comment.

Return to the pulpit

Hunt made a defiant return to the public in January at a Florida megachurch, after a group of pastors announced that Hunt had been through a restoration process and was fit to return to ministry after a brief hiatus.



Pastor Johnny Hunt preaches at Hiland Park Baptist Church on Jan. 15, 2023, in Panama City, Florida. (Video screen grab via RNS)

During that sermon, Hunt said “false allegations” had ruined his life. But he

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.

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

Hiland Park Baptist Church in Panama City, Fla., which hosted Hunt and whose pastor oversaw Hunt’s restoration, could face consequences at the upcoming SBC annual meeting in June.

The church has been reported to the SBC’s credentials committee for hosting “an individual who has been credibly accused of sexual abuse, according to the standards adopted by the convention.”