

More concerns aired as SBC sex abuse discussion unfolds

March 4, 2019

NASHVILLE (BP)—Amid ongoing discussion of sexual abuse in the Southern Baptist Convention, one SBC Executive Committee leader has resigned from the committee and another has noted some “stumbling out of the gate” as the convention seeks to confront abuse.

Meanwhile, two other SBC Executive Committee members, including Vice Chairman Rolland Slade, have been seeking to hear abuse victims’ personal testimonies. Additionally, statements continue to be issued by victims of sexual abuse and churches named by SBC President J.D. Greear in his Feb. 18 report on abuse.

Bylaws workgroup chair resigns

Georgia pastor Ken Alford resigned March 1 both from the SBC Executive Committee and his chairmanship of the bylaws workgroup, citing a desire “to show that I am not insensitive to the concerns of victims of sexual abuse and their advocates.”

In a March 2 statement, Alford noted claims the workgroup’s Feb. 23 report amounted to a “whitewash” and a “rush to judgment.” Alford also responded to criticism he should not chair a workgroup examining the “moral failure” of sexual abuse since he had a personal moral failure 17 years ago.

Baptist Press reported in 2002 that Alford resigned his then-Florida pastorate and his then-chairmanship of the North American Mission Board trustees because of an “improper relationship.”

Despite being a “forgiven child of God” with a restored marriage and ministry, Alford said: “I understand why critics of the bylaws workgroup report would question why someone who had a personal moral failure in his past would chair a group dealing with another type of moral failure, namely the horrific crime of sexual abuse. I truly ‘get it.’”

In his 1,700-word statement, Alford also clarified: “The bylaws workgroup actually conducted no investigation, because we were not authorized to do so, and we did not ‘clear’ any churches, because that determination was not a part of our responsibility. We simply sought to ascertain if the information that President Greear had shared with us was sufficient to warrant further inquiry” concerning any church.

No churches were ‘cleared’

SBC Executive Committee Chair Mike Stone, in a column published in [Baptist Press](#), acknowledged missteps by various groups of Southern Baptists “in our zeal, emotion and righteous anger” over sexual abuse.

“But there is one thing that is beyond dispute in my mind: we seek the same goal,” wrote Stone, pastor of Emmanuel Baptist Church in Blackshear, Ga. “I haven’t spoken to a single member of the EC that isn’t willing to do all we can to address this evil and to seek the convention’s approval to do some additional things we currently don’t have authorization to do.”

A perception by some that the bylaws workgroup’s Feb. 23 report “appeared ‘rushed’” was “an inaccurate but fair perception,” Stone wrote.

The bylaws workgroup “doesn’t have the authority to do an investigation and did not claim to do one,” Stone wrote. “And given the limited scope of authority and information, the preliminary report to the EC was as thorough as it could have been. But an on-looking world, especially victims,

doesn't necessarily understand the limits of the workgroup's authority and shouldn't be expected to do so."

Stone, himself a survivor of childhood sexual abuse, added that "no churches were 'cleared' even though media reports characterized the study that way. ... In fact, if additional information comes to the committee, as has already occurred, it may indicate further inquiries are in order to determine if the actions of the church reflect the faith and practice of Southern Baptists."

Thomas Hammond, executive director of the Georgia Baptist Mission Board, said in a March 3 news release he has obtained new information on at least one of the churches listed by Greear—Trinity Baptist Church in Ashburn, Ga.

"With respect to Trinity Baptist, Pastor Rodney Brown confirmed to me yesterday what he'd stated to Baptist Press: that a staff member allegedly admitted to being a sexual abuser, and furthermore, remained in a leadership position at Trinity. Today, I also learned from the pastor that the perpetrator has been dismissed and instructed not to return. It is my expectation that there is more work to be done at Trinity and more healing to be experienced by the victims; I am committed to both efforts."

Desire to hear from survivors

Slade and fellow Executive Committee member Jared Wellman each said they have been seeking to ensure the Executive Committee hears from sexual abuse survivors.

Slade, pastor of Meridian Baptist Church in El Cajon, Calif., spoke with five sexual abuse survivors the week before the *Houston Chronicle* published a series of articles on sexual abuse and Southern Baptists last month, he said. Then on Feb. 26, Slade tweeted his support of Greear's "10 calls to

action on sexual abuse” and invited victims to share their stories via email.

“The testimonies that have come,” Slade said, have left him “amazed at the strength, courage and grace” of survivors. “It really strengthened my resolve to make sure that ... victims’ and survivors’ voices are heard.”

Slade tweeted March 3 that his wife Adrienne “joined me in the pulpit” that day “and shared her testimony of survival from sexual abuse in the church.”

Wellman, pastor of Tate Springs Baptist Church in Arlington, also noted his support of Greear on Twitter Feb. 26, shared his email address and invited victims to share their testimonies. Wellman said he was seeking to address what he perceived as “a growing gap between the EC and sexual abuse survivors.”

“The response has been incredible,” Wellman said in an email. “I am doing my best to read and respond to each person individually, but it’s taking time because I want to make sure each victim receives a personal response. I feel they deserve that. Those who have reached out are sharing their stories with the hope for SBC leadership to implement real change to protect cases like theirs from ever happening again. I want to stress how graceful and generous the emails have been. There is hope for real change.”

Kentucky church ‘eager to have this issue resolved’

Another church on Greear’s list, Sovereign Grace Church in Louisville, Ky., has expressed “disagreement with being included on the list” and said it is “eager to have this issue resolved in order to remove the suspicion surrounding our church and the godly people the Lord has gathered here.”

Sovereign Grace supports an SBC constitutional amendment on abuse

recommended by the SBC Executive Committee Feb. 19, “including the four criteria that would evidence indifference in addressing sexual abuse and in caring for survivors of abuse,” the church stated. “Sexual abuse is a grievous sin that does unspeakable harm to its survivors and their families, and we are grateful for the attention being brought to this issue by the SBC.

“We believe just as strongly that Sovereign Grace Church of Louisville and its leaders are in full compliance with this proposed amendment. We were surprised to find our church’s name on the list produced by the SBC president. We had not been contacted by anyone in SBC leadership concerning this issue, nor are we aware of any credible evidence that supports our inclusion on this list,” the church stated, noting it is eager to dialogue with the bylaws workgroup.

The bylaws workgroup stated Feb. 23 it believes “further inquiry is warranted” regarding Sovereign Grace based on the information Greear provided.

Within the larger Sovereign Grace Churches network, the Louisville congregation stated, “we are not aware of a single pastor guilty of—much less charged with or convicted of—sexual abuse or conspiring to cover up abuse.”

Southern Baptist Theological Seminary President Al Mohler told the *Chronicle* last month he “erred” in previous support of Louisville Sovereign Grace pastor C.J. Mahaney, former leader of the Sovereign Grace network, which was alleged in a lawsuit to have covered up sexual abuse.

“I wrongly believed that an investigation had been done,” Mohler said in a Feb. 15 release, “and relied on that assurance and the court dismissal of the civil suit, along with my personal knowledge of C.J., when I issued my statement of support in 2013. I deeply regret this.”

Meanwhile, Debbie Vasquez, who asserts she was abused as a teen by the pastor of another church on Greear's list, refuted that pastor's statements to Baptist Press. Texas Pastor Dickie Amyx told BP previously he and Vasquez had a consensual relationship when she was 17 and he was about 30, leaving her pregnant. Vasquez told the *Chronicle* she was molested by a pastor when she was 14, the first of many assaults that she said ruined her teenage years.

The SBC Executive Committee's next scheduled meeting is June 10 in Birmingham, Ala.