

Oklahoma Baptist church addresses abuse allegation

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BROKEN ARROW, Okla. (BP)—Members of First Baptist Church in Broken Arrow, Okla., learned in mid-January about an allegation of sexual abuse from 2006 and subsequent steps to address it.

Senior Pastor Matt Brooks read a statement during worship Jan. 14. The statement—which included comments from Brooks—and a question-and-answer document were posted to a page on the church’s website, [Addressing Our Past](#). A follow-up communication was sent to membership that afternoon for those not in attendance.

“My heart for us would be to focus on two things moving forward: looking to Jesus and loving and caring well for one another,” Brooks said. The church has initiated an investigation into the matter to be conducted by an external third party.

Current church leadership learned of the abuse from a 2021 social media post and immediately reported it to law enforcement who advised them “that there was no action which they (law enforcement) could take.”

Church leaders told Baptist Press the local police department gave no official reason as to why that was the case.

“But as a church,” a spokesman said, “we recognize that behavior does not have to meet a criminal standard for it to be defined as abuse.”

Alleged abuse by former college and singles minister

The allegation centers on Matthew Kennedy, the church's college and singles minister from 2003 to 2006. The church said it had confirmed that during that time frame "some level of sexual contact" took place between Kennedy and a girl who was a member of the high school student ministry. Kennedy was terminated from his position.

In a call with Baptist Press, a Broken Arrow Police Department spokesperson said there were no arrest reports for charges related to sexual abuse filed in that time span for a Matthew Kennedy. Law enforcement did meet with church leaders in the summer of 2021 and conducted field interviews over the allegation, but an investigator was not assigned to the case.

Church leaders met with the woman after the 2021 social media post.

"We recognize that when abuse has occurred, voice and choice is taken from survivors," the statement said. "Leadership at FBCBA felt therefore that it was of utmost importance to be prepared to walk with individuals who may raise allegations of abuse, *at their pace* (italics in original).

"In light of this, in this initial meeting, we listened attentively and with deep sorrow. We offered an open invitation for further discussion and expressed our willingness to take additional steps whenever she felt comfortable moving forward."

The woman reached out to FBCBA again in August 2023 with the following requests:

- Kennedy be reported to the Southern Baptist Convention.
- First Baptist's current policies and procedures for abuse prevention

and response be analyzed and accounted for.

- First Baptist to provide “tangible consideration” for her suffering.

“It is our desire to consider and respond to each of these requests faithfully and biblically,” the statement said.

Church enlisted outside experts

Nationally known abuse survivor advocate Rachael Denhollander has worked with the church as a consultant, the statement read. Broadmoor Baptist in Madison, Miss., and Tate’s Creek Presbyterian Church in Lexington, Ky., have provided input from going through similar experiences.

Attorneys have been enlisted both in Oklahoma and through a North Carolina-based firm well-versed in “providing morally and Scripturally-guided legal counsel in church abuse cases.”

The church has also enlisted GRACE—Godly Response to Abuse in the Christian Environment—to conduct an independent, third-party investigation that will focus on three goals:

- Examining and assessing the allegations against Kennedy.
- Assessing the church’s prior awareness of the allegations and subsequent response.
- Assessing the church’s current culture in responding to abuse and recommending changes to policies and procedures in that respect.

GRACE has been given “full scope of relevant information” to the case, the statement read. Anyone with potentially relevant information regarding the allegations were encouraged to reach out to the lead investigator.

“We also encourage any of you who may have any potentially relevant information regarding these allegations and Mr. Kennedy to reach out

directly to the lead investigator at GRACE, Robert Peters,” it read. “... Once the investigation is complete, we will share GRACE’s relevant findings with you.”

Church leadership said they chose to name the alleged abuser not only to provide the opportunity for relevant witnesses to come forward, but to prevent speculation on other former staff being subject of the accusation.

“Naming an abuser is not a de facto judgment on allegations, rather it is the means by which a thorough weighing of evidence can take place,” leadership said in the Q&A statement.