

# **Pastors demand inquiry into SBC handling of sex abuse cases**

June 8, 2021

WASHINGTON (RNS)—Two Southern Baptist pastors will seek an investigation into allegations that some leaders of the Southern Baptist Convention mishandled several sex abuse claims and bullied sex abuse victims.

The pastors—Ronnie Parrott of Christ Community Church in Huntersville, N.C., and Grant Gaines, pastor of Belle Aire Baptist Church in Murfreesboro, Tenn.—said they will make a motion at the upcoming annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention asking the denomination’s newly elected president to hire an outside firm to investigate.

“The intention behind the motion Grant and I are making is to seek the truth,” Parrott said. “We don’t need any more of the ‘he said this,’ and ‘he said that’ comments. We need the truth. An independent, third-party investigation is the only path forward for the truth.”

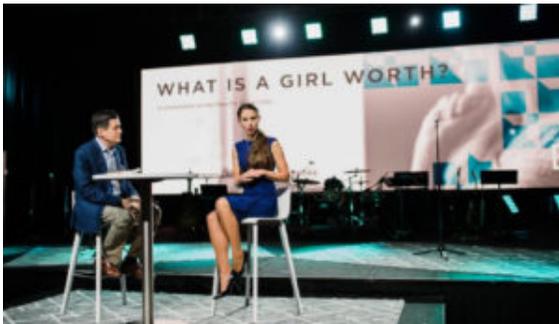
On June 9, the current chair of the SBC Executive Committee, Rolland Slade, joined the call for an independent investigation and affirmed the planned motion by Parrott and Gaines.

“It’s never the wrong time to do the right thing,” said Slade, pastor of Meridian Baptist Church in El Cajon, Calif.

# Two letters from Russell Moore

The allegations were detailed in two letters written by outgoing SBC ethics chief Russell Moore, detailing internal conversations that revealed how top leaders of the convention resisted sexual abuse reforms and tried to intimidate those pushing for them.

Southern Baptists will meet June 15-16 in Nashville for their annual convention, and the ongoing scandal of sex abuse in its churches will be high on the agenda.



Abuse survivor Rachael Denhollander discusses the Southern Baptist Convention's history of addressing sexual abuse with Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission President Russell Moore at the Caring Well conference. (Karen Race Photography / RNS)

Moore, who resigned his position as head of the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, wrote two scathing letters detailing the inner workings of the SBC's Executive Committee, which conducts business of the denomination between annual meetings.

In Moore's first letter, addressed to the ERLC executive committee and written more than a year before his resignation, he explained his troubles with the SBC's leadership in bitterly frank terms, focusing especially on resistance he'd met around advancing issues of racial justice and sexual abuse reform.

A week after the first letter was leaked, a letter by Moore to SBC President J.D. Greear was published on the site the Baptist Blogger. In the May 31 letter, Moore said leaders sought to "exonerate" churches with credible allegations of negligence and mistreatment of sexual abuse survivors.

"You and I were critical of such moves, believing that they jeopardized not only the gospel witness of the SBC, but also the lives of vulnerable children and others in Southern Baptist churches," Moore wrote.

Moore said members of the Executive Committee then became enraged when he invited Rachael Denhollander to speak at a conference. Denhollander is a lawyer and former gymnast who was the first woman to publicly accuse Larry Nassar, former Michigan State University and USA Gymnastics doctor, of sexual assault.

At that conference, Denhollander, a Southern Baptist, detailed the mistreatment of a fellow survivor at the hands of the Executive Committee. That survivor's name is not mentioned in the letter, but it is believed to be Jennifer Lyell, a former leader in Christian publishing who went public several months ago with allegations of sexual abuse against a prominent SBC leader.

"As I knew then and know far better now, if anything, Rachael downplayed the horror this survivor had experienced, and later would experience, at the hands of the Executive Committee," Moore wrote.

# Former Executive Committee chair responds



Mike Stone, pastor of Emmanuel Baptist Church in Blackshear, Ga., is past chair of the SBC Executive Committee. Stone, who is a candidate for SBC president, is on the steering council of the Conservative Baptist Network. (Photo courtesy of BP)

Mike Stone, the immediate past chairman of the Executive Committee, posted a 13-minute [video](#) on June 6, saying Moore slandered him.

“It’s scandalous, it’s unscriptural, it’s ungodly, it’s outrageous,” Stone said of Moore’s letter. He also said he himself was abused by an older man when he was young and, as a victim, would be the last person to interfere

with the convention's work to root out sex abuse.

Stone is a nominee for president of the SBC and a member of the steering council of the Conservative Baptist Network.

But Daniel Akin, president of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, N.C., said June 7 he would support an independent investigation of the SBC Executive Committee.

"I believe facts are our friends, and so is the truth," he said. "When accusations of such a nature are raised, I can't imagine anyone not wanting the truth out, unless they happen to be hiding the truth. If people made mistakes, they need to own those mistakes and ask for forgiveness."

Moore could not be reached June 7. As a conservative Southern Baptist who opposes abortion and same-sex marriage, Moore was hardly a theological outlier among his fellow Southern Baptist leaders. But he found himself criticized and ostracized by the convention after denouncing Donald Trump's character in his 2016 bid for the White House.

As president of the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, he set up the Caring Well Initiative, which called on churches to confront the abuse crisis, institute policies to protect vulnerable women and children, listen to victims and care for them.

He also was outspoken of the need for the SBC to confront racism and gained a following among Black Southern Baptists who appreciated his efforts.

He resigned recently, taking a position with the evangelical publication *Christianity Today* and moving his family's church membership to a non-SBC church. Moore was deemed "a source of significant distraction" in a task force report earlier this year to the SBC's Executive Committee.

He did, however, have followers among a group of younger pastors who form Baptist21, among them Ronnie Parrott, who sits on the group's board.

Parrott told RNS June 7 the allegations Moore raised were potentially harmful for the 14 million-member denomination's public witness and so it was important to resolve them if the SBC is to move forward with a unified message.

*EDITOR'S NOTE: This article was originally posted on June 8. It was updated on June 9 to include additional information from the current chair of the SBC Executive Committee, based on reporting by Bob Smietana and Adelle Banks.*