

SBC leaders vow to improve how they address sex abuse

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—Leaders of the Southern Baptist Convention have called the reports by two Texas newspapers of hundreds of sex abuse cases in affiliated churches evidence of “pure evil” and “satanic” behavior within their ranks.

Several vowed to improve the ways churches address such behavior.

The *Houston Chronicle* and *San Antonio Express-News* launched an “Abuse of Faith” investigative series that reports about 220 Southern Baptist church leaders and volunteers have been convicted of or pleaded guilty to sexual misconduct in the last two decades. Overall, they found about 380 Southern Baptists who faced allegations from more than 700 victims in that time period.

“Nearly 100 are still held in prisons stretching from Sacramento County, Calif., to Hillsborough County, Fla., state and federal records show,” they reported. “Scores of others cut deals and served no time. More than 100 are registered sex offenders. Some still work in Southern Baptist churches today.”

Abuses are ‘pure evil’



J.D. Greear, president of the Southern Baptist Convention. (SBC Newsroom Photo / Matt Miller)

SBC President J.D. Greear said the news coverage of the abuse shows that Southern Baptist churches have failed the survivors of sex abuse.

“The abuses described in the Houston Chronicle article are pure evil,” he said in a Feb. 10 statement. “We—leaders in the SBC—should have listened to the warnings of those who tried to call attention to this. I hope we listen now, and I am committed to doing everything possible to ensure we never make these mistakes again.”

At the SBC’s annual meeting in June, the convention’s Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission announced it would study the extent of abuse occurring in the convention’s churches. That research is part of a presidential task force that has met with leaders from churches, law enforcement, and anti-abuse advocacy groups to determine how congregations and other Baptist groups can work on the issue.



Russell Moore, president of the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission (Photo/Amber Dion)

"The sexual abuse of the vulnerable is satanic at its very root," said ERLC President Russell Moore in a Feb. 10 statement. "If your understanding of the gospel means that rapists and sexual offenders still have access to those who can be harmed, you do not understand the gospel of Jesus Christ."

'Time for pervasive change'

Greear said that future approaches to abuse will need to include prevention, "full cooperation with legal authorities" and holistic care for victims.

"It's time for pervasive change," he said in his statement. "God demands it. Survivors deserve it."

In a mid-January update on its sex abuse study, ERLC Vice President Phillip Betancourt noted earlier news accounts of religious groups' handling of sex abuse, including the recent *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* investigation of independent fundamental Baptist churches, based on accounts of more

than 200 former and current church members.

“It would not be surprising if journalists are working on a similar type of story focused on Southern Baptist churches as well,” he wrote.

Asked in January if he was worried about such an investigation of Southern Baptist churches, Greear said, “What worries me, really, is the problem behind it.”

At the time, Greear said he thought that often churches were unclear about when to call law enforcement rather than intentionally hiding abuse.

“Sometimes there can be some animosity between church and state; it’s almost like some mistrust,” he said in January, noting the Apostle Paul’s discussion in the New Testament Book of Romans about respecting government authorities. “But in this case, Paul is telling us that there are certain processes and structures that we need to not only be submissive to but we need to be supportive of and take advantage of. And I think this is a clear case of that.”

The *Houston Chronicle/San Antonio Express-News* investigation noted several former presidents of the Southern Baptist Convention, including Steve Gaines, Paige Patterson and Jerry Vines, were accused of mishandling abuse allegations.

‘Inaction is not an option’

Other former presidents tweeted expressions of concern about the journalists’ findings.

“The Southern Baptist Convention faces a crisis as great as any in our history,” tweeted James Merritt, a Georgia pastor who was SBC president from 2000-2002, on Monday. “Now we must weep over the @HoustonChron article on sexual abuse and its coverup in our churches,

repent and raise our membership standards to preclude churches who foment racism & ignore sexual abuse.”

Ronnie Floyd, an Arkansas pastor who was SBC president from 2014-16, added in a tweet: “Inaction is not an option for the Southern Baptist Convention regarding sexual abuse in churches. Change is imperative.”

The newspapers’ investigation comes a decade after Southern Baptist leaders turned down a proposal from activists to create a database that would have tracked clergy accused or convicted of sexual abuse. Baptist executives cited autonomy of local churches as a factor.

They instead provided churches with a link to a Justice Department national database and urged them to contact authorities about any sex abuse allegations.

“Where delay is caused by a desire to protect the reputation of the church, we believe such delay to be completely unjustified,” the 2008 Executive Committee’s report reads.

Debbie Vasquez, who told the investigating newspapers she was molested by her pastor and ended up pregnant, was at the 2008 meeting and urged SBC leaders to take actions similar to ones adopted by the Catholic Church.

Vasquez, whose suit against the pastor, Dale “Dickie” Amyx, was dismissed, told the Texas journalists she feared for other victims because of the lack of action by SBC leaders.

“They made excuses and did nothing,” she told the papers.