

# Timeline shows SBC sexual abuse crisis 40 years in the making

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—The report on the Southern Baptist Convention’s handling of sexual abuse, conducted by the independent review firm Guidepost Solutions, is unsparing in its criticism of the actions and the inaction displayed by the denomination’s leaders over a two-decade period, from Jan. 1, 2000, through June 14, 2021.

But allegations and recommendations about how to respond to those allegations existed long before that period and in the years since.

Here’s a timeline of Southern Baptists and sexual abuse:

## 1980s

Darrell Gilyard, a protégé of former Southern Baptist Convention Presidents Paige Patterson and Jerry Vines, is fired from several churches after being accused of sexual abuse. He eventually is convicted of sex crimes against minors but returned to the pulpit. He is listed by Florida authorities as a registered sex offender.

## 2000

In a letter responding to a pastor seeking advice about preventing sexual abuse, SBC President Paige Patterson describes the benefits of holding a “lunch and one-hour awareness seminar” should the church later be pulled into litigation related to sexual abuse.

At the annual meeting, messengers pass a resolution, “On Condemning the

Trafficking of Women and Children for Sexual Purposes.” It reads in part, “We acknowledge our own fallenness and the need to prevent such appalling sins from happening within our own ranks. ... (W)e encourage those religious bodies dealing with the tragedy of clergy abuse in their efforts to rid their ranks of predatory ministers.”

## **2002**

After the Catholic Church’s sexual abuse scandal erupted in Boston, Southern Baptists pass a resolution at their annual convention on “sexual integrity” of the clergy. It calls on ministers “to be above reproach morally” and urges churches “to discipline those guilty of any sexual abuse in obedience to Matthew 18:6-17 as well as to cooperate with civil authorities in the prosecution of those cases.”

## **2004**

August “Augie” Boto becomes Executive Committee general counsel, advising SBC Presidents Morris Chapman, Frank Page and Ronnie Floyd in the committee’s responses to allegations of sexual abuse.

At the annual meeting, SBC President Jack Graham rules a motion recommending the creation of a child abuse study committee “out of order.”

A lawyer for Christa Brown, a survivor of clergy sexual abuse, sends a 25-page report about her experience of being abused at age 16 by a youth minister, who was later transferred to another SBC church.

James Guenther, an SBC lawyer, responded by saying, “The convention has no spiritual right to defrock a minister” and noted that the name of the person in question was not found in a list of SBC ministers.

“We regret the pain Ms. Brown expresses,” he wrote. “We pray that Ms.

Brown can find peace.”

## **2006**

In September, Brown and leaders of Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests hold a media event outside Executive Committee offices in Nashville, Tenn. Boto responds three days later opposing her “adversarial posture.”

In December, an Executive Committee staffer presents Boto with a memo “on the SNAP proposals and how they fit with SBC polity,” according to Guidepost’s report. Boto appeared to take no action.

The same month Steve Gaines, who served as SBC president from 2016-2018, acknowledges he delayed acting on knowledge that a staffer of his prominent Memphis, Tenn., church had previously sexually abused a child.

“I realize now that I should have discussed it further with this minister and brought it to the attention of our church leadership immediately,” he said in a statement quoted in Baptist Press.

## **2007**

In January, the same Executive Committee staffer provides Boto with information based on internet searches of 66 accused individuals thought to be Southern Baptists. Boto appeared to take no action.

In the spring, survivor Debbie Vasquez emails SBC President Frank Page and Boto alleging sexual abuse and rape by her pastor when she was a minor that led to her becoming pregnant with the abuser’s child.

Brown, now a SNAP coordinator for Baptist churches, criticizes Southern Baptists’ failure to keep records about sex abusers. Southern Baptist Convention President Frank Page says: “We’re looking at all options” as

leaders mull a decision about an offenders list.

At the June annual meeting, Oklahoma pastor Wade Burleson seeks a feasibility study for a proposed database of sex offenders. Messengers pass a nonbinding resolution expressing “moral outrage and concern at any instance of child victimization.”

## **2008**

At the June annual meeting, the Executive Committee rejects a proposed abuser database, instead suggesting churches rely on national registries of sex offenders and report allegations to police immediately. The committee says it would be “impossible” to ensure that all convicted sexual predators could be discovered, and a “Baptist only” list might leave out predators who had identified previously with other faith groups.

In September, identifying himself as general trial counsel for the Executive Committee, Boto testified on behalf of a Tennessee gymnastics coach who had been convicted of abuse during the coach’s appeal of his conviction.

## **2013**

Boto tells the Executive Committee staffer who had assembled lists of ministers accused of sexual abuse to send the lists to Guenther “as they may need to be produced in litigation,” the report states.

## **2017**

Former SBC Vice President Paul Pressler is sued by a former assistant who alleges the onetime Texas appeals court judge sexually abused him over the course of several decades, starting when the plaintiff was in his mid-teens.

## **2018**

In March, Frank Page, now president and CEO of the Executive Committee,

announces his retirement. Later the same day, the committee chairman says he learned from Page that the retirement “was precipitated by a morally inappropriate relationship in the recent past.”

In May, former SBC President Paige Patterson is fired from his leadership role at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary after new evidence surfaces of an alleged rape cover-up.

In June, messengers adopt resolutions showing compassion for the abused and expecting “moral and sexual purity” of their leaders.

## **2019**

In February, the *Houston Chronicle* and *San Antonio Express-News* publish “Abuse of Faith,” an investigative series reporting that 220 Southern Baptist church leaders and volunteers have been convicted of or pleaded guilty to sexual misconduct in the past two decades. Overall, they find about 380 Southern Baptists who faced allegations from more than 700 victims. Southern Baptist leaders vow to improve how churches address such behavior.

In June, during the SBC annual meeting, Southern Baptist President J.D. Greear leads a litany of lament during a 45-minute period of prayer and planning at the annual meeting over what he called a crisis of sexual abuse.

In October, the SBC’s Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission hosts the “Caring Well” conference in Nashville, featuring stories of abuse survivors and comments from critics of the denomination’s response to abuse.

## **2020**

In February, Russell Moore, then president of the Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, defends himself in a letter to ERLC trustees after a task force is mounted to investigate complaints against

him. “The presenting issue here is that, first and foremost, of sexual abuse,” he writes.

## **2021**

In May, Brown, now a former SNAP board member, calls for an investigatory “Truth and Justice Commission” for survivors of abuse by SBC clergy.

At the annual meeting in Nashville in June, messengers overwhelmingly approve a motion to create a task force to direct a third-party investigation of the Executive Committee’s handling of sexual abuse allegations.

The denomination’s constitution also was amended to say only churches that do “not act in a manner inconsistent with the Convention’s beliefs regarding sexual abuse” will be considered in good standing.

In October, the Executive Committee votes in favor of waiving privilege, allowing for a more comprehensive investigation by Guidepost Solutions.

## **2022**

In February, Southern Baptist leaders announce reaching a settlement with Jennifer Lyell, a sexual abuse survivor, whose story was mishandled when she came forward in 2019. After telling Baptist Press of her abuse she experienced for years by a former Southern Baptist seminary professor, it was characterized as a “morally inappropriate relationship.”