

# Texas Baptists respond to clergy sex abuse

February 13, 2019

For about 15 years, the Baptist General Convention of Texas maintained a confidential file of ministers who were credibly accused or convicted of sexual misconduct, making information available to officials from congregations upon formal request.

Texas Baptists [eliminated the file](#) three years ago, largely because so few churches availed themselves of the information. Instead, the Baptist state convention determined to devote its resources to a sexual abuse awareness and prevention program.

A major investigative report by the *Houston Chronicle* and the *San Antonio Express-News* revealed about 380 ministers and volunteers in Southern Baptist churches sexually abused more than 700 people in 20 years.

Of the offenders who pleaded guilty or were convicted of sexual offenses, more were from Texas than from any other state, the newspapers reported. The news reports did not distinguish between ministers serving in churches affiliated with the BGCT or the Southern Baptists of Texas Convention.

## BGCT executive director responds



David Hardage

When the first in the series of newspaper articles appeared Feb. 10, BGCT Executive Director David Hardage [issued a public statement](#): “We are grieved by the instances of sexual abuse detailed in today’s report, and our highest priority is to provide support to victims and survivors across our Texas Baptist family. We urge anyone with knowledge of an instance of sexual abuse to report to law enforcement immediately.”

Hardage went on to encourage anyone affected by sexual abuse in a BGCT-affiliated church to contact [Texas Baptists’ Counseling Services](#), and he urged congregations to use the educational resources and training Texas Baptists make available through a partnership with [MinistrySafe](#).

“We are aware of the seriousness of the issue of minister sexual misconduct in churches, and the importance of working together to prevent it. We continue to be proactive in our support of churches’ efforts to prevent and respond to minister sexual misconduct,” Hardage stated.

## Looking back

In 2001, in response to a report by a Christian Life Commission committee on clergy sexual misconduct, the BGCT created a file of offenders based on reports from churches.

The convention depended on churches to provide information about clergy sexual misconduct, based on a confession by the minister, a legal conviction or substantial evidence of abuse.

The state convention maintained the confidential file and made information about specific individuals available to church officials—such as chairs of search committees or personnel committees, deacon chairs and trustees—if they submitted a notarized request.

In addition, the state convention in 2007 also posted online a list of

[registered sex offenders](#) who had been on staff at BGCT-affiliated churches. Eight individuals initially were on the list.

In 2015, the convention reviewed the effectiveness of the clergy sexual misconduct file, counseling support and online resources related to the subject. The staff-led review also considered best practices of other Baptist conventions, legislative and legal trends, and sexual abuse prevention efforts in general.

“The review was conducted by senior Texas Baptist staff in conjunction with outside legal review and industry-leading sexual abuse prevention consultants,” a Feb. 13 email from Texas Baptists’ communications office stated.

## **Board took action**

As a result, the BGCT Executive Board in February 2016 voted to revise its clergy sexual misconduct policy, focusing on providing education and information to equip congregations to establish their own preventive policies and procedures. At the same time, the board voted to eliminate its clergy sexual misconduct file.

Rollie Richmond, director of human resources at the BGCT, told the board at its February 2016 meeting that a Texas Baptist webpage devoted to information about clergy sexual misconduct had received 1,100 clicks in two years, but churches requested no information from the clergy sexual misconduct file during that same period.

When the board voted to eliminate the clergy sexual misconduct file, the state convention allowed legal counsel with expertise in the field to review it.

“Information that needed to be reported, though minimal, was identified

and passed on. All other information was destroyed,” the convention’s communication office said in an email.

## **Revised policy**

The revised policy the board adopted said in part: “Clergy sexual misconduct occurs when a person in a ministerial role engages in sexual contact, threats, or inappropriate sexual behavior with oneself, a congregant, client, employee, student, staff member, child, co-worker or volunteer. The betrayal of trust involved creates ripples of grief and mistrust that do damage far beyond the specific situation.

“In accordance with our belief in the autonomy of the local church, the responsibility for directly and effectively dealing with the issue of clergy sexual misconduct falls directly on the local congregation.”

Areas of congregational responsibility as identified in the policy include selecting and hiring employees; understanding relevant laws; creating policies and guidelines, including procedures for handling complaints; conducting timely, fair and responsible investigations; reporting to authorities when appropriate; taking appropriate actions; and offering support to everyone involved in keeping with Christian faith.

## **Relationship with MinistrySafe**

At that point, Texas Baptists entered into a partnership with MinistrySafe, a national organization focused on preventing child sex abuse in churches. The Executive Board set aside \$100,000 of income from a trust fund for the initial three-year agreement with MinistrySafe to provide training events and online resources.

The board will consider a similar funding request for another three years at

its meeting next week.

## **The board in 2016 voted to provide:**

- Educational and awareness material on relevant topics, processes and procedures.
- Sample policies and guidelines churches can use to help them structure their clergy sexual misconduct process.
- Reference to resources to help churches meet their responsibilities.
- Help with counseling for the victim, the victim's family and others when needed and requested.

Since January 2017, Texas Baptists' MinistrySafe online site has registered more than 9,000 page views, ranking in the top 20 most-visited web pages on the convention's website. Last year, it ranked at No. 15 in overall page views.

To date, 1,181 pastors, church leaders, BGCT staff and volunteers have received MinistrySafe sexual abuse prevention training, and 175 churches have participated in one of 19 regional training events.

Texas Baptists noted positive responses from individuals who attended the training events.

"This training is vital for anyone who is responsible for children of any/all ages," one participant said.

Another responded: "I believe there is not a church or an organization which deals with youth or children that would not benefit from this training. As a pastor and former youth minister, I wish I had this training years ago."