

# Texas legislators vow to expand statutes of limitations on abuse

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FORT WORTH (RNS)—Robert Morris, former senior pastor of the nondenominational [Gateway Church](#) in Southlake, resigned two weeks ago after Cindy Clemishire accused him of molesting her for four years, beginning when she was 12.

The case has prompted calls for reforms not only in the church but at the state Capitol.

“These actions demand public exposure, should never be tolerated, and any person who harms a child should and must be held accountable,” said Texas state Rep. Nate Schatzline, a Fort Worth Republican whose district neighbors Southlake.

“I will continue to speak the truth regardless of who it affects, and I will continue to advocate for legislation that protects children from abuse.”

State Rep. Jeff Leach, a conservative Christian who chairs the powerful Judiciary and Civil Jurisprudence Committee, told the political newsletter [Quorum Report](#) he plans to hold hearings and consider all remedies, including changing statutes of limitation in such cases.

“The Texas Legislature must improve our laws protecting and ensuring justice for victims of childhood sexual abuse, including substantially strengthening our criminal and civil statutes of limitation,” Leach said.

“We should be leading in this area. As the chairman of the House Judiciary Committee and a longtime advocate for victims and their families, I intend to continue to do just that.”

Morris, 62, became a political force as well as a spiritual leader in North Texas after founding Gateway in Southlake in 2000.

Last year, Lifeway Research in conjunction with the Hartford Institute for Religion Research [listed the church](#) as the ninth largest in the United States—and one of the fastest growing, with about 25,000 worshippers attending every Sunday on 10 campuses in Texas and Wyoming.

Morris was a member of Donald Trump’s evangelical advisory board during his 2016 presidential campaign, and in 2021, Morris was part of an initiative to energize conservatives ahead of Trump’s 2024 run for president.

Trump visited the church in 2020, during his failed reelection bid. In 2017, Texas Gov. Greg Abbott enlisted Morris to support his push for a bill restricting access to bathrooms for transgender children.

Morris publicly acknowledged his involvement with a young woman two days after Clemishire made her accusations.

“When I was in my early 20s, I was involved in inappropriate sexual behavior with a young lady in a home where I was staying,” Morris told *The Christian Post* after the allegations first were reported by *The Wartburg Watch*, a website focused on abuse in the church.

Morris said he had confessed and repented of the sin in 1987. Gateway acknowledged in a statement that he confessed to “a moral failure he had over 35 years ago,” but church leaders said they had no idea the person involved was a child.

Clemishire has disputed that claim, saying a church leader responded to an email she sent in 2005 informing them of her age. A transcript later came to light in which Morris discussed making a payment to Clemishire in restitution.

## Ramifications

The church announced on social media it had hired a law firm, Haynes and Boone, to “conduct an independent and comprehensive inquiry related to the recent events.”

At the firm’s recommendation, Gateway’s new pastor, Robert Morris’ son James, temporarily has stepped aside to avoid conflicts of interest. It also recommended that Kevin Grove, Steve Dulin and Gayland Lawshe, who served as elders from 2005 to 2007, take temporary leaves of absence.

The church said the temporary leaves do not mean they knew of the allegations, and Grove and Lawshe remain employees of Gateway—Grove as the [executive global pastor](#) and Lawshe as the [network pastor](#).

Gateway remains one of two closely related powerful nondenominational churches in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. The other is Gateway’s church plant, Mercy Culture, where Schatzline was once a pastor. Both churches have drawn attention for their outspoken support of local political candidates and opposition to restrictions on politicking by tax-exempt organizations under the federal measure known as the Johnson Amendment.

“Both have toyed with Johnson Amendment restrictions by listing the names of church members running for political office during church services,” said David Brockman, a nonresident scholar at Rice University’s Baker Institute for Public Policy.

“Morris did so in 2023 when he displayed a list of local school board candidates who are members of Gateway-affiliated churches.

“Morris also voices two complaints commonly voiced by Christian nationalists—the prohibition on official school prayer and the legalization of abortion—as signs of America’s departure from the intent of the Founders

and descent into sin,” Brockman added.

He cited a [2023 sermon](#) in which Morris claimed that “America was founded—and you can look it up—William Bradford stood on Plymouth Rock and said we found this nation for the propagation of the gospel of Jesus Christ.”

With the allegations, Morris’ impact on politics has shifted. Leach told a local NBC news affiliate he would focus on extending the civil statute of limitations, limiting nondisclosure agreements and adding penalties for mandatory reporters who don’t report suspected abuse.

“As a born-again believer, I love the bride of Christ,” he said. “I want to protect the church. But the church in many cases like in the case of the pulpit at Gateway has been defiled. We ought to be stepping up and turning over tables and protecting victims.”

He was joined by Rep. Steve Toth of The Woodlands, near Houston, who chairs the Texas Prayer Caucus, part of the Congressional Prayer Caucus Foundation’s American Prayer Caucus Network.

Toth told a local ABC affiliate he was furious about the accusations and wants to increase penalties in sex crime cases against children and require church board members to be mandatory reporters. [Texas’ mandatory reporting requirement](#) currently applies in churches to certain clergy members.

“We want to bring total clarity to the fact that you do this stuff, you cover up, and there’s going to be criminal and civil consequences,” he said. “The civil consequences can include lawsuits of hundreds of thousands of dollars and wipe you out.”

That includes board members, who he said should be sued.

The next Texas legislative session begins in January.