

# Commentary: Why would survivors attend SBC meetings?

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(RNS)—Is there a reason survivors of sexual abuse at Southern Baptist churches and institutions continue to show up for meetings of the nation’s largest Protestant denomination?

It is a good question, one I often ask myself. I choose to attend, even though it can be costly.

Only in the past few years have amazing donors, many we never will know, given to a fund established by Jules Woodson and continued by Pastor Keith Meyer to make sure we can afford to go to the annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention to advocate for ourselves and others, for change.

Why would any survivor go?

It is walking into what feels like a den of lions. What is supposed to be a loving, nurturing fellowship of believers is instead, for many of us, “a trauma-inducing machine,” as survivor Christa Brown has often stated.

Yet, for years, survivors and advocates have held rallies at the annual gatherings and attended the Executive Committee meetings, despite near constant pushback and even harassment.

## History of harassment

In 2018, headlines proclaimed the #MeToo movement had come to the SBC and documented the work of Cheryl Summers in organizing the first “For Such a Time As This” rally and creating space for survivors to be heard.

But, just a year later, survivors were told they could not gather in front of the convention, were not welcome inside, were left in the extreme heat next to smelly dumpsters.

In 2020, amid nationwide racial justice protests and a national pandemic, the rally was a virtual one. And it felt then like maybe people were beginning to see a different side of things and waking up to the reality things were not as they seemed, that maybe more could be done.

While I missed those earlier rallies for personal reasons, I determined at this point I would not miss another.

In 2021, I went to my first convention in person, arriving alone and checking into a nearby Airbnb, hoping to lay low. At the convention, it was surreal and painful to see people who had been so awful to me online, walking around, speaking from stage, crossing paths.

But there was beauty, too. I met fellow survivors and advocates, people I'd only known online. I heard their stories of grooming and abuse. I found a small army of people who, to this day, are standing for what is right and good, who have risked any and all relationships or possible platforming within the SBC to stand for and alongside us.

Yet, the general convention believed us to be part of the “woke” agenda of “liberal justice” troublemakers. We were not seen as the wounded sheep Christ commanded his people to care for. No, we were the problem. The people were instructed to look away and, for the most part, they listened and looked away, but they looked down on us as well.

## **Promises of change**

In 2022, I chose to go again, standing with other survivors who—despite the lack of movement toward any kind of meaningful reforms—wanted to

give it another shot.

A loop of videos, made by Carolyn McCulley of Citygate Films, played in our booth telling our stories as people walked into the convention hall. We were now inside, and it felt like maybe people were beginning to pay attention, to listen to us. Many people told us they were following our work and voting “Yes” for reform.

Could it be change was coming from the grassroots?

The messengers were listening. People were attending breakout sessions regarding abuse in churches, learning how to become safer spaces. The sea of yellow cards voting for abuse reform literally caught our breath.

We were photographed at the moment it all seemed possible the people were voting past the entities and roadblocks. The real voices of the SBC were breaking through—the messengers, not the gatekeepers.

But even in that moment of seeming victory, the cost was so high.

## **Continued harassment**

What we had to endure from those microphones, from some “pastors” and leaders, was beyond horrific. Over and over again, they insisted there aren’t that many survivors, sexual abuse is not a crisis, reforms will cost too much, all of this is a “sham,” and worse.

It was trauma inducing. And there are survivors who refuse to enter that room again. I really do not want ever to be there again.

And we all knew we still had an exceptionally long road ahead.

2023 felt like a step backward. The far-right was stoking another fire to distract from the urgency around abuse reforms, redirecting energy toward

a debate around female pastors. This, they said, was the “real” crisis to be averted.

We knew what the strategy was, and it hit its mark. It was a heavy blow. But the messengers held firm on abuse reform and carrying it forward.

The far-right will try again this year with the Law Amendment, another public-relations move to keep everyone sidetracked, unfocused, unbalanced, unsure where the issues lie.

## **‘But I will be there’**

But I will be there. Not because I think my being there makes a difference, but because I have made a commitment to myself and others to be there until it does not feel right.

I see their games, and their hope is we will give up. They are relying on age-old war tactics: Wear down your enemy, reduce their resources.

But survivors will show up, some for the first time. Like last year, I will warn them of how traumatizing it is. I do not encourage it, but I will stand by and with any who choose it as part of their stand. There is something to it, being present, to standing against it in person.

And there is a visual component for the messengers. When they see us, we no longer are just the enemy online they attempt to portray us as—the fascist, feminist, woke, liberal, problematic voices. They see we are human souls, real people, men and women abused as children, as teens, even as adults.

We are united whether present or online and we will not stop. We will find a way. We will stand with survivors as they come forward, with churches who want accountability. We will name names, we will keep track, we will continue to say, “Enough is enough.” We are an army of survivors, too

many to count, so many still coming forward.

## **‘Still coming forward’**

After the 2022 convention, a gentleman wrote to me. I read his story with such reverence, as we do when holding another’s pain.

He was 74 years old at the time and had watched the convention from afar that week. He had been following me for years, he said, and had cheered on my and other survivors’ pushback.

And now, for the first time, he had just told his family he had been abused by his pastor’s son when he was 12. He carried it in total silence for more than 60 years.

He said, “There are intrinsic costs I don’t see too many people talking about.”

He wished he had begun the healing 50 years or more before and wondered what his life and relationships would have looked like if he had. I think it is so beautiful and courageous he is doing it now.

*Tiffany Thigpen is an SBC abuse survivor and advocate for reform within the SBC. The views expressed are those of the author. This opinion piece has been edited for length.*