

Responding to the Evil of Sexual Abuse
Executive Committee of the Southern Baptist Convention
June 2008

Noticing the impact of sexual abuse on Catholics and the Catholic church in recent years, the Bylaws Workgroup of the Convention's Executive Committee in 2006 began studying how best to address the challenge of clergy sexual abuse in the local church. The work of the Bylaws Workgroup took on higher visibility after receiving the referral of the 2007 Wade Burleson motion relating to this issue, coupled with heightened interest by the press and special interest advocacy groups. From the outset, the workgroup has believed that any instance of sexual abuse in a local church is extremely troubling.

The workgroup received and assessed information and suggestions from various sources both within and outside Southern Baptist circles. The suggestions (one of which took the form of the motion mentioned above, and each of which are discussed under separate headings below) included:

- Issuing a formal response or general statement about sexual abuse
- Creating a database of Southern Baptist offenders (including those convicted, those confessing, and those against whom a "credible accusation" has been made)
- Establishing a central office to which reports of offenses may be made
- Inaugurating (and funding) a continuing ministry to deal with the issue generally
- Empowering an investigative body to gather evidence of offenses
- Amending the SBC Bylaws in ways designed to "disaffiliate" from the Convention churches failing to adequately protect their members
- Barring known perpetrators from ministry
- Providing counseling and/or legal assistance to victims, or financial assistance so victims might avail themselves of such professional help
- Supplying information and guidance on safer employment and volunteer approval practices
- Endorsing an "approved" background check resource, and negotiating a discount
- Asking the seminaries to train future ministers as to the problem and means of prevention
- Continuing to supply open and widespread reporting of instances of sexual abuse, including the names and locations of the perpetrators and churches involved

Early on, the workgroup agreed that a database of convicted sex offenders should be made available to the churches. At the request of the workgroup, a webpage containing helpful links was designed and posted on SBC.net under the front page menu selection "Resources for . . ." entitled "Sex Abuse Prevention." References to its features are made below, and the page is referred to hereafter as "the SBC.net resource page."

1. A formal response, and some general statements about sex abuse.

The Southern Baptist Convention has not been hesitant to address the issue of sexual abuse in a church context. It adopted two resolutions in a five-year period addressing this subject. These resolutions, issued in 2002 and 2007, lean heavily on applicable biblical passages and are clear statements of how we as Southern Baptists think and feel about sex abuse, and especially as it pertains to abuse by church ministers and leaders. The resolutions use strong terms, and appropriately so, leaving no doubt that Southern Baptists support the punishment of offenders to the fullest extent of the law. These resolutions may be found linked on the SBC.net resource page and at the following direct links –

<http://www.sbc.net/resolutions/amResolution.asp?ID=1117>
<http://www.sbc.net/resolutions/amResolution.asp?ID=1173>

Additionally, the Executive Committee has produced a special edition of SBC Life (June 2008) designed to focus the attentions of affiliated churches on the problem of sexual abuse in a church context, provide advice, and list resources.

At the same time, numerous state conventions have conducted training sessions for their affiliated churches on this topic and have posted resources on their respective state convention Web pages. Our Convention president has addressed this subject through a formal press release and in media interviews. LifeWay Christian Resources and The Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission have used their publications to draw attention to the need for policies and protection of children under the care of our affiliated churches. Our mission boards and our seminaries have also addressed this subject in various ways, an example of which is the IMB's policy on sexual misconduct involving a minor, adopted in 2004. Policy updates are under way as circumstances develop evidencing their need.

Simply stated, Southern Baptists find any instance of sexual abuse to be a reprehensible act. It is inexcusable. It is a crime. It is sin.

2. A database of Southern Baptist offenders

On the surface, creating our own database of Southern Baptist offenders seems like a good idea. How helpful to our churches if they could make a quick check on the Web site to see if any potential staff member or volunteer would be listed. However, in assessing the categories suggested for inclusion ("convicted," "confessed," and "credibly accused"), several questions were raised and several concerns identified.

First, it would be impossible to assure that all convicted sexual predators who ever had a connection with a Baptist church would be discoverable for inclusion on such a list.

Second, sexual predators are opportunistic and frequently migrate from one victim field to another. Since Baptist churches sometimes accept ministers and volunteers not formerly from an affiliated Southern Baptist church, creating a database of "Baptist only" convicted sexual offenders would leave out predators previously identified in other faith groups who could come in under the radar of such a limited design. Therefore, use of the most comprehensive database available was opted for over creating a database that would be limited in scope. Any convicted sex offender, regardless of religious affiliation, is already listed in the Department of Justice's national database of convicted sex offenders. In fact, as soon as its existence, its character as a national central repository, its public availability, and its ease of access were determined, a link to the Dru Sjodin national database was placed in a primary position on the SBC.net resource page.

Third, Baptists do not recognize any ecclesiastical authority outside the local church. From its inception in 1845, the Southern Baptist Convention has acknowledged and honored this fundamental Baptist tenet of faith. Article IV of the SBC Constitution is clear: "the Convention does not claim and will never attempt to exercise any authority over any other Baptist body, whether church, auxiliary organizations, associations, or convention." Neither the Executive Committee nor the Convention itself claims, or has a right to claim, the ecclesiastical or legal authority to take those actions which would be required to adjudicate a charge of abuse in an autonomous local congregation and to determine whether or not such a charge is credible.

This precludes the Convention having any authority to require local churches to report instances of alleged sexual abuse to their local association, their state Baptist convention, or the national Convention. In fact, the Convention does not have the authority to create a centralized investigative body to investigate whether an individual has been “credibly accused” by someone within a local church in regard to *any* matter. However, Baptists do recognize that God has ordained governments for the punishment of wrongdoers (Romans 13:1-7). Any individual confessing to, or being credibly accused of, sexual abuse should be reported immediately to the governing authorities.

Often, there is a delay in reporting occurrences of known or suspected sexual abuse to law enforcement authorities. Where a delay in reporting stems from the embarrassment of the victim, there is little that can be done by those in the affected church, who are, of course, ignorant of the crime. Where the delay is caused by the coercion and control of the perpetrator, again, there is little that can be done by others in the church who are ignorant of the crime. *But where delay is caused by a desire to protect the reputation of the church, we believe such delay to be completely unjustified.* In fact, once an instance of sex abuse becomes known, any such delay will likely do great harm to the witness of the church in the local community. Once the community loses its trust in a local congregation to act in the best interests of the victims, the witness of the church will be irreparably harmed. Also, such delays indicate a misplaced emphasis on the protection of the church over protection of the victim. Such a backward priority seems to us to be biblically unjustifiable.

Where a delay in reporting stems from confusion over whether mercy or justice should prevail, we believe the delay to be likewise unjustified. Such delay may occur in cases where it is discovered that a venerated church member or leader has engaged in an intentional and particularly egregious crime. But such confusion and delay should not exist, for mercy and justice coexist as character qualities in our Creator, in Whose image we are made and Whose character we are to reflect to the greatest degree possible. Forgiveness must not be used as an excuse for inactivity. The biblical principles of restitution and appropriate judgment are compatible with, and often set the stage for, forgiveness. For these and other reasons, we believe (and in most cases involving minors, *it is required by law*) that contact should be made with law enforcement authorities immediately upon discovery that sexual abuse of a minor has occurred.

3. Establishing an office to receive reports of abuse

Certainly, the process of assessing how SBC-affiliated churches are doing in meeting the challenge of preventing victimization would be aided by an ability to quantify or note trends. However, the process of collecting, categorizing, and quantifying instances of alleged sexual crimes occurring in Southern Baptist churches is something over which the SBC has no jurisdictional authority. As mentioned above, the Southern Baptist Convention has no ecclesiastical authority over any of its affiliated churches. Therefore, reports of alleged sexual abuse would be dependent on each local church’s decision on whether or not to forward such information. Thus, the quality of any compiled data would always be suspect because the *fact* of its complete collection would be at issue.

Additionally, the quality of the compiled data would be a direct result of the *process* of its complete collection. Limiting the input in ways designed to ensure its quality would inject the elements of investigative inquiry, subjective central assessment and authority – all of which are areas foreign to Baptist polity. The degree to which incoming information might be deemed not to be reliable or adequately substantiated would itself render the data to be seen as unreliable, not to mention its likely becoming a subject of dispute and litigation.

Moreover, any alleged sexual abuse failing to meet legal provability tests should not be listed as having occurred, and (as mentioned above) those which have been so proven are already a part of a national database. Therefore, the Convention should not establish an office to undertake activity with regard to any suspected perpetrators whose cases have not yet met those tests, especially when the Convention has no means, nor can create means, to meet them.

Precisely quantifying the extent of the problem in Southern Baptist churches is beyond the scope of the workgroup's ability or expertise. As to the utility a Southern Baptist office might hold in quantifying or noting sexual abuse prevalence, we need no statistics or additional database to be confident that *the potential threat of sex abuse to any local church is tragically underappreciated*. Establishing an office to raise the level of awareness and educate would be helpful if one did not already exist, as is mentioned below.

4. Inaugurating (and funding) a continuing ministry to deal with the issue generally

The workgroup believes such formal steps need not be taken in view of the existence of an SBC entity already assigned the task of assisting Southern Baptist churches through "communication and advocacy of moral and ethical concerns" and "in their moral witness in local communities." That entity is The Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission (ERLC) of the Southern Baptist Convention, which is fully capable of determining the proper construction, prioritization, and provision of ministry called for by sexual abuse victimization.

Continued ministry to assist churches in addressing this vital topic seems to fall naturally within the assignment of the ERLC. Should the ERLC arrive at a different conclusion in the future about the advisability of receiving reports of sexual abuse, as is discussed above in item #3, and desire to serve as the office of receipt, it may so advise the Convention and make appropriate recommendations in that regard.

5. Empowering an investigative body to gather evidence of offenses

As already mentioned, the workgroup believes Southern Baptists uniformly find the idea of a central authority attempting to exercise jurisdiction over their local church an unacceptable concept. Any move to establish a centralized, investigatory body with authority to gather evidence would necessarily require the approval of each affiliated Southern Baptist church. Each local church is not only capable of protecting its members, it is better motivated to do so than some far-distant, quasi-judicial ecclesiastical body.

6. Amending the SBC governing documents in ways designed to "disaffiliate" from the Convention churches failing to adequately protect their members

We do not support amending the Southern Baptist Convention's governing documents to add laundry lists of conduct deemed reprehensible in the Scriptures. The governing documents in their present form already permit messengers attending any annual meeting to move to withdraw fellowship from any affiliated church for any reason. But in our opinion, declaring a church not to be in "friendly cooperation" with the Convention would certainly be justified in any specific case where a church intentionally employed a known sexual offender or knowingly placed one in a position of leadership over children or other vulnerable participants in its ministries.

7. Barring known perpetrators from ministry

The Southern Baptist Convention has no authority to bar individuals from ministry. Local autonomous churches and ministries determine who they will and will not employ for service. The Convention may and should determine with which churches it wishes to affiliate, as stated above. Again, the workgroup is strongly persuaded that *no church or Baptist entity should employ a known sex offender*.

8. Providing counseling and/or legal assistance to victims, or financial assistance so victims might avail themselves of such professional help

Establishing special funds for specific purposes has traditionally been avoided by Southern Baptists, who have preferred focusing and channeling their resources toward a limited set of ministry entities under their Cooperative Program Allocation Budget. Participating entities in turn design their ministries in keeping with their ministry assignments. Southern Baptist volunteerism is also often utilized for special problems. The workgroup does not recommend a special offering or societal approach to providing for the needs of victims, believing that the ministries already funded may apply resources as needed and warranted.

9. Supplying information and guidance on safer employment and volunteer approval practices

The workgroup believes this suggestion is well-founded. The need for current, accessible, and useful information will continue into the future. Such materials address the problem of sex abuse from the standpoint of prevention, and the importance and use of preventative practices cannot be overemphasized.

Soon after the workgroup began its review of the sexual abuse problem, it suggested the design of the SBC.net resource page, mentioned above. Resources are added regularly as churches and others report their usefulness and acceptability. The national sex offender database is the top link listed.

Southern Baptist State Conventions are also rallying to assist churches in this regard. Links to state convention resources are included on the SBC.net resource page. State convention links include such matters as resources offered by the state, background check discounts, contact numbers, services, and ministries. Updated contact information is added as often as states forward information to the Executive Committee.

The Executive Committee's convention relations division is producing a special insert for the 2008 annual meeting edition of *SBC Life* (in June) completely devoted to covering the issue of sexual abuse in a church context. This issue will be widely disseminated before, during and after the annual meeting, thus reaching as many churches with the message that the threat of harm from sexual predators in the church is very real, and providing useful information about prevention and how to react if harm occurs. Safer hiring practices will be discussed in that resource, and are also covered in articles linked from the SBC.net resource page.

10. Endorsing an "approved" background check resource, and negotiating a discount

Selecting and utilizing service providers already has begun. On a state level, several state conventions are taking the lead in negotiating discounts for churches wishing to use the recommended service or services. On a national level, Lifeway Christian Resources has negotiated an affinity-based group discount for background check services provided by backgroundcheck.com, a link to information about which has been included on the SBC.net resource page. The workgroup encourages churches to exercise careful comparison and be sure to understand levels and extents of service when selecting a background check provider.

Churches are also encouraged not to view simple criminal history reports as complete background checks, but to be diligent in pursuing a comprehensive knowledge about the backgrounds of the employees and volunteers that are being considered for service. Techniques and checklists for doing a thorough review of applicants may be found on the SBC.net resource page.

11. Asking the seminaries to train future ministers as to the problem and means of prevention

A formal request to the seminaries need not be repeated in light of the Convention's 2002 resolution "On the Sexual Integrity of Ministers," of which the seminaries took due note. The SBC seminaries recently reported to the workgroup that they remain committed to assisting students in developing effective personal and professional responses to sexual impropriety related to ministry organizations and regularly review curricula to be sure these subjects are adequately addressed.

12. Continuing to supply open and widespread reporting of instances of sexual abuse, including the names and locations of the perpetrators and churches involved

The workgroup is confident that Baptist Press and other news agencies will continue to supply such information, and that the Internet provides a means of access to such information that is sufficient.

In summary, prevention of sexual abuse, and proper response when victimization occurs, are best accomplished by churches diligently utilizing procedures, information, and resources already readily available. Churches are strongly encouraged to recognize the threat of harm as real, to avail themselves of such information, and to aggressively undertake adequate steps at the local level to prevent harm and protect victims.

The Executive Committee strongly encourages local congregations to devise policies and execute strategies (1) to be diligent as they choose and supervise their ministers, employees, and volunteers, (2) to be vigorous in their investigations of known or suspected sex abuse within their ranks, and (3) to be honest and forthcoming in revealing the facts to their sister congregations when asked about former ministers, employees, and volunteers.