

CURRENT AFFAIRS

The FAQs: Southern Baptists Release Urgent Report on Sexual Abuse

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What just happened?

The Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) released a report last Saturday on sexual abuse within America's largest Protestant denomination.

According to the SBC's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, the report is intentionally designed to educate churches on the sexual abuse crisis, equip churches on how to care well for survivors, and prepare churches to prevent abuse.



What was the impetus for the report?

The focus in the past two years on the sexual abuse crisis in American society and in the church—represented by the #MeToo and #ChurchToo movements—prompted SBC president J. D. Greear to commission a Sexual Abuse Advisory Group within the denomination. The group was tasked with “considering how Southern Baptists at every level can take discernible action to respond swiftly and compassionately to incidents of abuse, as well as to foster safe environments within churches and institutions.”

The group was also asked to study both how Southern Baptists are currently engaging these issues and develop recommendations in consultation with relevant SBC entities on strategies and resources for ministering to victims protecting people and churches from predators.

In preparation for the report, the Advisory Group heard from hundreds of survivors of sexual abuse as well as from church leaders and national experts in the field of abuse recovery and counseling. The purpose of this report, the group says, is to convey the key findings that have emerged from this effort in a way that “reflects on the realities of the past, recognizes the challenges of the present, and resolves to embrace the opportunities of the future.”

How does the report define sexual abuse?

For purposes of the report, sexual abuse was used as an all-encompassing, non-legal term that refers to crimes like sexual assault, rape, and sexual abuse. The American Psychology Association defines sexual abuse as “unwanted sexual activity, with perpetrators using force, making threats, or taking advantage of victims not able to give consent.”

What are the findings in the report?

Some of the key findings included in the report are:

- Research shows that 60 percent of child sexual-abuse victims never tell anyone they have been abused. Only 36 percent of rapes, 34 percent of attempted rapes, and 26 percent of sexual assaults perpetrated against women and girls were reported.
- According to three insurance companies that insure a majority of Protestant congregations in the United States, there are approximately 260 annual reports of children being sexually abused by ministers or other church workers.
- Sex offenders who are most committed to church throughout their life (what the researchers called “stayers”) accumulated the most victims and the youngest victims of all sex offenders. They found that a perpetrator’s involvement in a church community did not seem to deter their criminal sexual behavior; in fact it seemed to worsen it.
- The majority of survivors of sexual abuse know their abuser. The Department of Justice found that three out of four female adult victims knew their offender. Additionally, 90 percent of child victims of sexual abuse know their perpetrator.
- Adult women who were sexually abused as a child are more than twice as likely to suffer from depression as women who were not sexually abused. Adults with a history of child sexual abuse are more than twice as likely to report a suicide attempt. Females who are sexually abused are three-times more likely to develop psychiatric disorders than females who are not sexually abused. And among male survivors, more than 70 percent seek psychological treatment for issues such as substance abuse, suicidal thoughts, and attempted suicide.
- Research finds that church attendance among survivors decreases, they are less likely to trust God, and their relationship with God often ceases to grow. Although a strong and responsive church community can and should be a source of healing and comfort for a survivor of sexual violence, it has not always been the case. When abuse has been mixed with twisted theology or survivors have been met with skepticism or shame within their church community, the effects on their faith can be devastating.

What does the report say about failures of churches to respond to sexual abuse?

The report acknowledges that failures in responding to sexual abuse have occurred in many ways, including:

- Failing to adequately train staff and volunteers—on the national, state, and congregational levels—to be aware of and respond appropriately to abuse
- Using church autonomy improperly to avoid taking appropriate action

- Failing to care well for survivors of abuse
- Failing to take disclosure seriously and to believe the survivor
- Failing to report abuse to civil authorities
- Recommending suspected perpetrators to new employment
- Promoting political, institutional, and congregational leaders whose language and behavior glorifies mistreatment of women and children

“We lament the fact that it took a national movement of reckoning for abuse to force us to take this issue seriously at our own convention,” the report says. “It should now be obvious that the problem has been and still is more widespread than anyone has realized, affecting our congregations all over the country, from the smallest church pastored by a bivocational minister to the megachurch with hundreds on staff.”

“Abuse has known no bounds, affecting seminaries, mission boards, and denominational entities, including our own,” the report adds. “And all too often, it has not been handled justly.”

What does the report say about responding to sexual abuse?

“In the past, some SBC churches and leaders have been most concerned with protecting the reputation of their ministry and the church when abuse comes to light,” the report notes. “Thus, they have failed to protect the survivors of sexual abuse themselves and failed to prevent future victims.”

The report also says that churches “must recognize that our primary responsibility in caring well for survivors of abuse is to place their protection and care as paramount above all other considerations in the process.” The report recommends that churches develop appropriate protocols based on the size, location, and makeup of their congregations, such as:

- Developing a team of caregivers, including both men and women, to walk alongside a survivor of abuse
- Knowing the legal requirements for disclosure
- Getting to know local Child Advocacy Centers (CAC) and other agencies that work with survivors of abuse
- Implementing a policy for how to deal with the accused perpetrator, especially when minors are involved
- Developing an after-care ministry for survivors of abuse or connect them with local resources

What happens next?

The SBC has recently committed to taking measures to “root out and confront abuse within their communities.” For example, ERLC; the Southern Baptist of Texas Convention; Bart Barber, pastor of First Baptist Church in Farmersville, Texas; and others drafted legislation in Texas that would “give immunity from civil liability to churches or other nonprofits that in good faith report allegations of sexual abuse to an individual’s current or prospective employer.” Representative Scott Sanford explained this bill seeks to “end the silence that allows predators to move between organizations.” The bill was signed into law on June 10.

The ERLC and the SBC’s Sexual Abuse Advisory Group have also launched a new initiative called “Caring Well” designed to confront church sexual abuse. According to the SBC, the initiative “provides churches with a simple, adaptable, and attainable pathway to immediately enhance their efforts to prevent abuse and care for abuse survivors.”

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