

Southern Baptists face sexual abuse crisis: Protective steps needed

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Five years after the clergy sexual abuse scandal erupted within the Catholic Church, Southern Baptists are confronting their own allegations of abuse and calls for greater steps to protect minors from predatory pastors.

Although the issue seems to be on a smaller scale for the Baptists, a series of media reports, activists' pleas and recent actions in the nation's largest Protestant denomination indicate what Catholic officials have long insisted: that sexual abuse is not a problem confined to their church.

In one situation, Bellevue Baptist Church, a prominent Memphis-area congregation, issued a lengthy report in January admitting that it was "ill-prepared on several fronts" to handle the case of a minister on staff who had engaged in "inappropriate sexual behavior" with his son 17 years ago. But only after the victim came forward was the seven-month-old report released.

The activist group Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests (SNAP) and a Catholic whistleblower priest have called on Southern Baptists to adopt review panels and registries of offending clergy for greater oversight.

Meanwhile, two young Southern Baptist pastors who have used their blogs to influence other Southern Baptists have authored proposals that they hope will be considered at their annual meeting in June. One calls for a study on developing a database of Southern Baptist ministers convicted of sex abuse, and the other urges churches to "pursue every possible avenue" in vetting a pastor's moral and ethical credentials.

Southern Baptist officials say their denomination's decentralized structure and the autonomy of its congregations prevent them from implementing some of the proposed reforms. However, they say, they have addressed the issue in the past, and they do urge churches to conduct background checks on employees and

volunteers.

“There is no Southern Baptist Convention office which collects and provides any qualifying information, including information about sex abuse convictions or accusations, with regard to any local church employees, including ministers,” said D. August Boto, general counsel of the SBC’s executive committee, in an e-mail response to questions. “The Southern Baptist Convention was formed on the belief that the selection of its ministers is a sacred right held and exercised by the local church alone under the leadership of God,” added Boto.

In recent weeks, media reports—including an ABC News *20/20* program and coverage on EthicsDaily.com, a Baptist Web site—have highlighted men who have been convicted of sex crimes and who have worked or studied in Southern Baptist circles.

As recently as April 18, names matching those of several convicted sex offenders—and in some cases, men who are currently imprisoned— could be found in an online search for ministers on the denomination’s Web site, www.sbc.net. The names have since been removed.

That same day, two male students at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, were listed on the Kentucky State Police’s sex offender registry.

Boto said the “MinisterSearch” list on the denomination’s site is “absolutely not a list of approved or vetted ministers” but simply a list based on reports from churches about their employees.

As for the seminary students, a seminary spokesperson confirmed that the students are at the school, but could not confirm their sex offender status.

“Our current policy is that no student on the sex offender registry can be admitted as a student at Southern Seminary,” said Lawrence Smith. Asked if students admitted prior to the implementation of the current policy can remain on campus even if they are on such a registry, Smith said, “You could draw that conclusion.” When asked if he could say that is the case with the particular students in question, Smith said, “I can’t,” citing privacy issues.

Christa Brown of Austin, Texas, who coordinates SNAP’s activism in Baptist churches and runs a “Stop Baptist Predators” Web site, said she has compiled information on

dozens of cases of Southern Baptist ministers who have confessed, been convicted of or been “credibly accused” of sex abuse of children.

But her research, based on media reports, is not conclusive. “There are no firm numbers out there,” said Brown. “I think part of the lack of data should be attributed to Southern Baptists themselves because they don’t keep records.”

Southern Baptist Convention president Frank Page and other denominational officials say they are considering some kind of list of ministers convicted of sexual abuse but have not made a decision. “We are looking at the creation of such a registry,” Page told one interviewer; he told another, “We’re looking at all options.”

Wade Burleson, a pastor in Enid, Oklahoma, hopes that the convention will take up his proposal to study the possibility of creating a database of ministers convicted of sexual abuse or harassment. “I just think it’s appropriate for the Southern Baptist Convention to take a hard, serious look at it,” said Burleson, who is also a widely read Baptist blogger.

Thomas Doyle, a Catholic priest and canon lawyer in Vienna, Virginia, warned Catholic bishops in the mid-1980s of potential problems with clergy sex abuse. He recently wrote to Page and Morris Chapman, head of the SBC Executive Committee, with a similar warning call.

“While the hierarchical structure of the Catholic Church is different from the congregational structure of Baptists, you should nevertheless realize that your ‘no authority’ argument is actually quite analogous to what Catholic bishops were espousing prior to 2002,” Doyle wrote in a March 30 letter.

“I hope . . . good ministers of the Lord in your denomination never have to endure the nightmare the Catholic Church finds itself in because of its institutional neglect of the Lord’s message.” *—Adele M. Banks, Religion News Service*