

Church leader questioned about handling of sexual abuse allegation

by [Bob Allen](#)

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CLINTON, Miss. (ABP) – Questions about a Mississippi Baptist church's handling of child sex-abuse allegations against a former minister are focusing on a church elder and politician who is nominated as the state legislature's first Republican Speaker of the House since Reconstruction.

Philip Gunn reportedly advised elders at Morrison Heights Baptist Church in Clinton, Miss., not to talk to police about their internal investigation of former associate pastor of music and ministries John Langworthy, who faces trial on eight felony counts of gratification of lust stemming from acts alleged to have taken place in the early 1980s.

Gunn, an attorney and Baylor University graduate, claims church leaders are bound to secrecy under priest-penitent privilege. A series of reports by local television station WJTV questioned his interpretation of state law. Mississippi College law professor Matt Steffey [told](#) the station Nov. 25 it does not exempt ministers from reporting a crime.

Steffey said the rule cited by Gunn applies only to testimony during a trial, not when prosecutors are investigating a crime. Gunn denies the church is withholding evidence, saying the charges against Langworthy are now public knowledge since alleged victims have come forward.

County prosecutors say they would still like to know what Langworthy told church leaders and may file a subpoena to force them to testify.

Amy Smith, a victims' advocate, worked for a year behind the scenes to make public that Langworthy was accused of sexual abuse of young males in 1989 while serving on the staff of Prestonwood Baptist Church in

Dallas. She says leaders at the Texas church including future Southern Baptist Convention President Jack Graham took the allegations seriously enough to fire Langworthy but did not report him to the police.

Smith, who worked at Prestonwood as an intern at the time and now is Houston representative for the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, said one thing that bothers her most about Morrison Heights Baptist Church's handling of Langworthy was an e-mail she received from Gunn offering to "discuss a resolution" to the case.

"It is very troubling that Philip Gunn as the legal representative for Morrison Heights Baptist Church is trying to keep information from Hinds County prosecutors about a recently arrested and indicted child molester on whose behalf Gunn attempted to 'discuss a resolution' with me last May," Smith said Nov. 30.

"It certainly seems that Mr. Gunn has some explaining to do about why he, as an elder and attorney, participated in an internal church investigation into child sex crimes without going to the police," she said. "It raises the question of what he and the church leadership are trying to hide that could help effectively prosecute a confessed child molester."

In addition to involvement in his local church, Gunn is a trustee of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky. He was re-elected in June to a second term that expires in 2016.

Southern Seminary's president, Albert Mohler, said recently that in light of public attention to how abuse accusations were mishandled in the Penn State athletic department, Baptist churches should immediately report any suspicion of child abuse to legal authorities.

"We all need an immediate reality check," Mohler wrote in a [blog](#) Nov10. "I discovered yesterday that the policy handbook of the institution I am proud to lead calls for any employee receiving a report of child abuse, including child sexual abuse, to contact his or her

supervisor with that report. That changes today. The new policy statement will direct employees receiving such a report to contact law enforcement authorities without delay. Then, after acting in the interests of the child, they should contact their supervisor.”

“In a real sense, the whole world changed today,” Mohler continued. “We all know more than we knew before, and we are all responsible for that knowledge. The costs of acting wrongly in such a situation, or acting inadequately, are written across today’s headlines and the moral conscience of the nation. The tragedy at Penn State is teaching the entire nation a lesson it dare not fail to learn.”