

Baptist pastor resigns amid abuse allegations

by [Bob Allen](#) in the [November 27, 2013](#) issue

An independent Baptist pastor has resigned his church in Georgia after allegations about sexual abuse 18 years ago in Michigan resurfaced on the Internet.

Leaders at King's Way Baptist Church in Douglasville, Georgia, confirmed in a letter dated October 18 that Bill Wininger has resigned after more than 15 years as pastor. Another letter dated October 27 acknowledged that church leaders were aware of recent allegations and charges.

Wininger's troubles started when a woman who is now 25 years old claimed she had been abused by Wininger, stating that it began when she was three at North Sharon Baptist Church in Grass Lake, Michigan. A Facebook group titled Justice for the Victims of Bill Wininger went online October 23 and in the first week grew to 466 members.

"The beauty of the technological age we are in today is that perps cannot hide any longer," Julie Silvestrone, an Iowa resident who studied at Hyles-Anderson College, posted October 25. "We are forming an army that will not be silenced and powerful in-roads are being made behind the scenes."

Hyles-Anderson is an independent fundamentalist school operated by First Baptist Church of Hammond, Indiana, whose former pastor, Jack Schaap, was sentenced to 12 years in prison in March for having sex with a member of the church when she was 16.

The Facebook page carries an online petition calling for a criminal investigation of Wininger. "This is where change begins," an entry reads. "It takes people standing together and collectively being a voice and shouting loud. Change needs to happen, a serial predator of women and children needs to be brought to justice."

The page also contains a testimonial by Bethany Foeller Leonard, Wininger's lead accuser, about what she claims happened to her and the lasting toll it took on her

mental and spiritual health.

Police investigated the case when she first came forward three years ago and no charges were filed, but the investigation was recently reopened after new information emerged concerning other possible victims, according to the *Douglas County Sentinel*.

Leonard says Wininger left her church when she was six, but most people either knew nothing about the allegations or didn't believe them. Church members wept and lamented losing a "wonderful pastor," and a few families even followed him to his new church in Georgia.

When she finally opened up about what happened after years of counseling, she says she discovered she was far from his only victim. The current pastor of North Sharon Baptist Church denied there was a cover-up, telling the *Sentinel* that church officials learned of the allegations two years ago and went immediately to the Michigan State Police.

Recently a Southern Baptist leader sparked controversy with comments that there is no place in the church for whistleblowers.

"We don't take matters before unbelievers," Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary president Paige Patterson said in a chapel sermon October 15. "This also means that you don't take matters to the press. What goes on in the church of God doesn't go to the press."

Patterson didn't specify what kind of internal church matters he meant, but critics termed his blanket statement ill-advised and potentially dangerous given the Southern Baptist Convention's lack of safeguards for reporting and evaluating abuse allegations that are not prosecuted by police. —ABP