

Southern Baptist leaders address reports showing decades of sexual abuse

“It’s time for pervasive change,” said SBC president J. D. Greear.

by [Adelle M. Banks](#) in the [March 13, 2019](#) issue



The Southern Baptist Convention headquarters in Nashville, Tennessee. Photo courtesy of Baptist Press.

Leaders of the Southern Baptist Convention, the nation’s largest Protestant denomination, vowed to improve the ways churches address sexual abuse as they responded to reports by two Texas newspapers of hundreds of such cases in SBC churches.

The *Houston Chronicle* and *San Antonio Express-News* published an [Abuse of Faith investigative series](#) beginning in February that reports on 220 Southern Baptist church leaders and volunteers who have been convicted of or pleaded guilty to sexual misconduct in the last two decades. Overall, they found about 380 Southern Baptists who faced allegations from more than 700 people in that time period, with dozens currently imprisoned across the country.

“Some still work in Southern Baptist churches today,” they reported.

SBC president J. D. Greear said in a statement February 10 that the denomination has failed survivors.

“The abuses described in the *Houston Chronicle* article are pure evil,” he said.

“We—leaders in the SBC—should have listened to the warnings of those who tried to call attention to this. I hope we listen now, and I am committed to doing everything possible to ensure we never make these mistakes again.”

When the SBC met in June, the convention’s Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission announced that it would study the extent of abuse occurring in the convention’s churches. That research is part of a presidential task force that has met with leaders from churches, law enforcement, and antiabuse advocacy groups to determine how congregations and other Baptist groups can work on the issue.

“The sexual abuse of the vulnerable is satanic at its very root,” said commission president Russell Moore in a statement. “If your understanding of the gospel means that rapists and sexual offenders still have access to those who can be harmed, you do not understand the gospel of Jesus Christ.”

Greear said that future approaches to abuse will need to include prevention, “full cooperation with legal authorities,” and holistic care for victims.

“It’s time for pervasive change,” he said in his statement. “God demands it. Survivors deserve it.”

The *Houston Chronicle-San Antonio Express-News* investigation comes a decade after Southern Baptist leaders turned down a proposal from activists to create a database that would have tracked clergy accused or convicted of sexual abuse. Baptist executives cited autonomy of local churches as a factor.

They instead provided churches with a link to a Justice Department national database and urged them to contact authorities about any accounts of sexual abuse.

“Where delay is caused by a desire to protect the reputation of the church, we believe such delay to be completely unjustified,” the 2008 Executive Committee’s report reads.

Debbie Vasquez, who came forward with an account of being abused as a teenager, was at the 2008 meeting and urged SBC leaders to take actions similar to ones adopted by the Catholic Church.

“Listen to what God has to say,” she said at the meeting, according to a recording she made and shared with reporters. “All that evil needs is for good to do nothing.”

Vasquez [told the Texas newspapers](#) that she became pregnant at age 18 after four years of abuse by her pastor, in his thirties. After she filed a lawsuit in 2006 against the pastor, he admitted to fathering her child in what he called a consensual relationship. He was listed as the congregation’s pastor as recently as 2016, reporters found in state Baptist records. Her lawsuit was dismissed.

Vasquez said of SBC leaders, “They made excuses and did nothing.” —Religion News Service

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