

Southern Baptists make changes to address sexual abuse and racism

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by [Adelle M. Banks](#) in the [July 17, 2019](#) issue

The Southern Baptist Convention, faced in recent months with hundreds of allegations of sexual abuse in its ranks, overwhelmingly voted in favor of changes to governing documents that will bring greater visibility to their desire to disaffiliate with churches that do not handle instances of abuse properly.

A new standing Credentials Committee of the nation's largest Protestant denomination also will consider whether churches are not "in friendly cooperation" for that and other reasons, including involvement in "discriminatory behavior on the basis of ethnicity."

The more than 8,100 delegates to the annual meeting, in Birmingham, Alabama, also voted June 11 to amend the constitution of the Southern Baptist Convention so that it will make explicit that churches that mishandle cases of abuse or racial discrimination are not welcome. Votes are taken by having delegates, called messengers, raise their printed yellow ballots.

The SBC has "given a clear signal not only about what we believe about sexual abuse, but [that] we also stand against all ethnic discrimination in the United States and around the world," said Ronnie Floyd, the new SBC executive committee president.

The constitutional amendments will need to be considered a second time at next year's annual meeting before they can become official.

Moments after the votes, about 50 abuse victim advocates and media members attended a rally outside the Birmingham-Jefferson Convention Complex, where speakers declared that what Southern Baptists accomplished inside was not sufficient.

They want the SBC to develop a database documenting convicted and credibly accused abusers, as well as those who have admitted to behavior that meets the definition of abuse. They would also like the denomination to provide mandatory training to help clergy and seminary students recognize and address abuse.

In February, the *Houston Chronicle* and the *San Antonio Express-News* published a joint investigation of sexual misconduct allegations against some 380 current and former Southern Baptist ministers and volunteers. In late May, the *Chronicle* detailed allegations of cover-ups of abuse by five male missionaries.

Christa Brown, an abuse survivor who has been calling for change in the SBC's abuse policy since 2006, including the proposed database, said, as reported by Baptist News Global, "It's been 13 years, and how many more kids will it still take before this convention will do what other faith groups do and at least begin keeping records on credibly accused clergy sex abusers?"

Cheryl Summers, the organizer of the second annual For Such a Time as This rally, noted a new report from the Sexual Abuse Advisory Group commissioned by SBC president J. D. Greear and new training, including a video series and a handbook on a "caring well" theme, released the week before the annual meeting.

She credited the work of activists and victims of abuse for prompting the denomination to act.

"People stood up and spoke up," Summers said. "What we are doing matters. It is making a difference, so keep standing up. Keep speaking up. We will continue to speak for those who imagine they are the only ones living a private nightmare."
—Religion News Service; with added information

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