

Southern Baptists change direction on sexual abuse after years of delay

by [Bob Smietana](#) in the [July 13, 2022](#) issue



Ballots are collected after an vote at the Southern Baptist Convention's annual meeting on June 15 in Anaheim, California. (Photo by Justin L. Stewart/Religion News Service)

In summer 2008, Morris Chapman stood before a gathering of thousands of Southern Baptists in Indianapolis for their annual meeting and denounced the evil of sexual abuse.

Then Chapman, president of the Southern Baptist Convention's executive committee at the time, told his fellow Baptists the SBC would not set up a database to track abusive pastors—citing local church autonomy.

But on June 14, Chapman raised his hand with a yellow ballot in it, joining a host of other Southern Baptists meeting in Anaheim to approve a series of reforms to

address sexual abuse in the nation's largest Protestant denomination—including the creation of a website that will track abusive pastors and church workers.

The “Ministry Check” site would list those convicted of abuse, those named in a civil judgment, and those credibly accused of abuse by an independent investigation.

“I was proud to support without question the final recommendations of the Sexual Abuse Task Force and even more proud as I sat on the convention floor and listened to the debate among convention messengers who had resolved to move forward now,” Chapman said in a statement.

The 8,133 local church delegates, known as messengers, who were gathered in Anaheim seemed determined to change the direction of the 13.7-million-member denomination, reversing years of inaction and obstruction on the issue of abuse.

In May, an investigation authorized by messengers at last year's annual meeting in Nashville, Tennessee, found that SBC leaders had downplayed the issue of abuse in local churches for years while demonizing abuse survivors as enemies of the church.

During the Anaheim meeting, SBC leaders repeatedly thanked survivors, and the messengers approved a resolution asking survivors for forgiveness for their inaction.

Right after the reforms were passed by an overwhelming majority, Oklahoma pastor Mike Keahbone got up to pray. Before he started, Keahbone confessed he was angry with some of the messengers, especially those who had been critical of some of the abuse reforms. He asked those messengers to forgive him.

“We're brothers and sisters, we ought to be able to have hard discussions without being mean to each other and hurtful,” he said in an interview after the meeting. “There's a line. And we were crossing it.”

Former SBC president J. D. Greear, a North Carolina megachurch pastor, summed up the determination of messengers to combat abuse during an evening workshop on trauma-informed responses to abuse. During his term as president, Greear had urged Southern Baptists to care for survivors and to expel any church that mishandled abuse.

He told those gathered for the workshop—held after abuse reforms were passed—that he'd been waiting in line at the microphone, hoping to speak in favor of those reforms. He was going to end by telling messengers: “We all know what we

came here to do.” —Religion News Service. Adelle M. Banks contributed to this report.