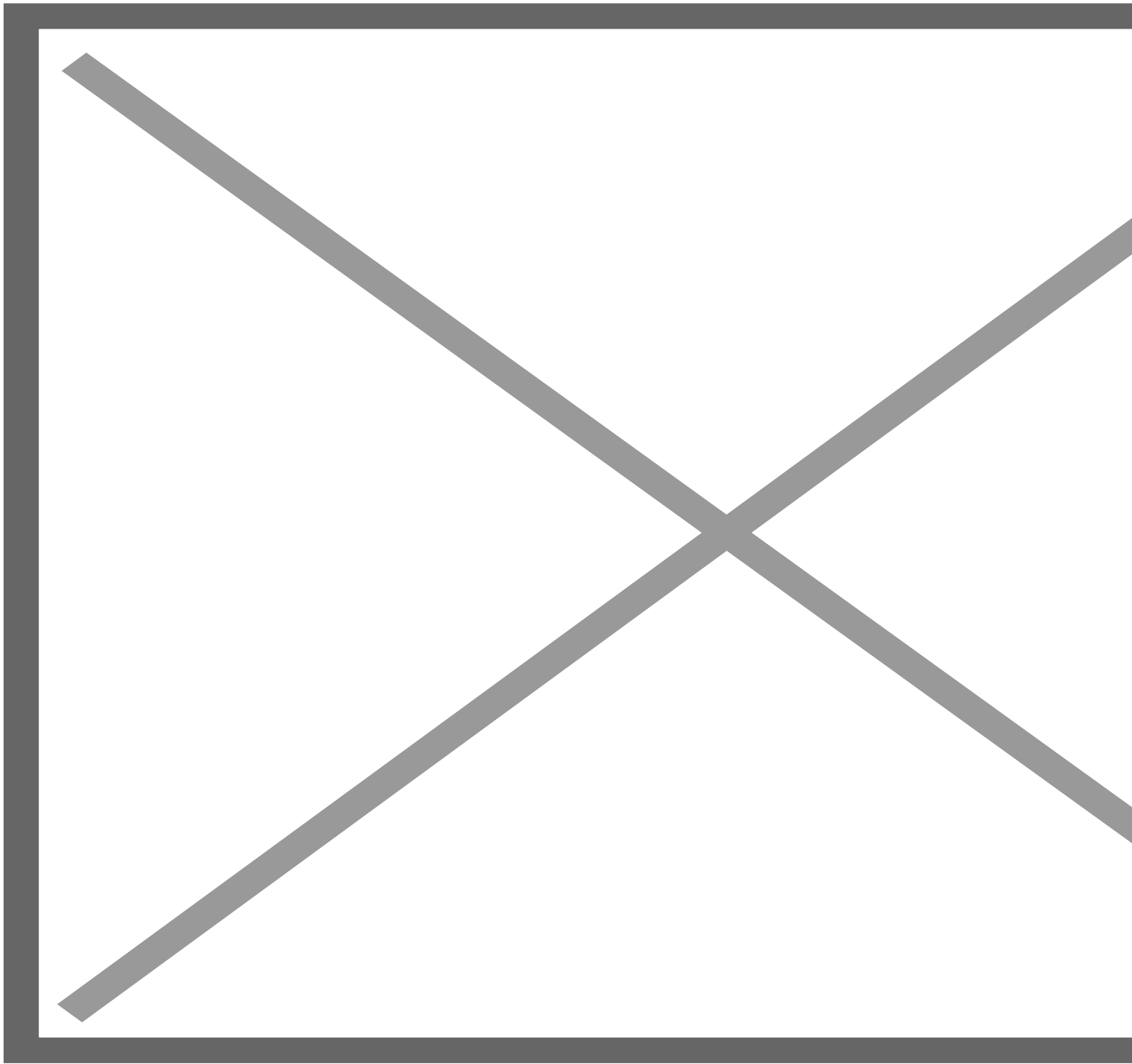


Survivors demand apology after SBC leaders call abuse crisis a hoax

by [Bob Smietana](#)

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Willy Rice, left, and Jack Graham, right. (Tim Heitman/RNS photo. Creative Commons)

A group of abuse survivors, advocates, and pastors have called on a pair of Southern Baptist leaders to apologize for calling the denomination's abuse crisis a hoax.

Those comments, according to survivors and others, make it harder to address the issue of sexual abuse in churches.

"Saying it is a 'hoax' sends the message to people in the pews and the general public to not believe survivors," the survivors and advocates wrote in an [open letter addressed](#) to current Southern Baptist Convention President Willy Rice and Jack Graham, a Texas megachurch pastor.

Both pastors have claimed that the abuse crisis that rocked the nation's largest Protestant denomination in recent years was overblown. Graham has called [it a hoax](#), while Rice, who was elected SBC president earlier this summer, referred to the crisis as a ["ruse" and a "snipe hunt,"](#) a term for a practical joke that involves taking people into the woods to search for a bird that does not exist.

The letter writers also cite comments by Rice that advocates for abuse reforms were "woke" and led the convention astray.

Among the signers of the letter are Tiffany Thigpen and Jules Woodson, SBC abuse survivors who played a prominent role in bringing the issue to the forefront in the SBC—in 2022, the SBC passed a resolution apologizing to them and other survivors for ignoring their calls to address abuse. Author and former Liberty University professor Karen Swallow Prior, and advocate and survivor Rachael Denhollander are also among the more than 80 signatories.

The letter was posted the same week that leaders of a Southern Baptist Church in South Carolina were arrested for allowing a convicted sex offender to volunteer on the church campus and to have contact with children. The leaders [allegedly did](#) not tell parents or teachers at the church's Christian school about the volunteer's status as a sex offender.

The volunteer has been arrested, while the former pastor of Pawleys Island Community Church and his wife, who also worked for the church, have been accused of obstructing justice and criminal conspiracy, according to the *Post and Courier* newspaper. The former pastor additionally faces the charge of unlawfully placing a child at risk.

In a church meeting, the former pastor told the congregation that no abuse had happened while the volunteer was at the church, the *Post and Courier* reported.

Neither Rice nor Graham immediately responded to a request for comment.

Earlier this year, Rice said he believes that Southern Baptists were right to raise concerns about abuse and that more should be done to address the issue.

"It is a very important area to address, and I call upon all churches to take seriously the need to train workers and staff members and adopt strong policies to prevent sexual abuse," he said.

Rice has also been a critic of a major investigation into how SBC leaders dealt with abuse in the past. A 2022 [report](#) from Guidepost Solutions found that SBC leaders had downplayed the issue of abuse for years, had mistreated survivors and stonewalled attempts to address abuse on a national level. That led to a series of reforms—including a database to track abusive pastors—that [have largely stalled](#) due to a lack of funding, denominational red tape and a pair of costly lawsuits filed by pastors accused of abuse.

But Rice has said the report treated SBC leaders unfairly and has been critical of survivors and advocates.

“These activists do not represent all sexual abuse survivors as they claim,” he said in an email earlier this year. “On the contrary, many survivors disagree with their tactics, their suspicion, and their hostility towards faithful SBC churches.”

Letter writers denied their advocacy had anything to do with politics, rejecting the claims of skeptics.

“It is not survivors who have made clergy sexual abuse political, it is some pastors and leaders of the SBC who have intentionally made it political,” they wrote. —Religion News Service