

Recently it was announced that the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and other Southern Baptist entities were being investigated by the United States Department of Justice (DOJ) for its handling of sexual abuse cases. This is of great concern for Richland Baptist Church (RBC) as a member of the SBC. We hold the SBC Executive Committee to account for their handling of these issues. We also have a strong desire to take seriously the issue of preventing sexual abuse and abuse of power in our congregation and in the organizations that we affiliate ourselves with.

SBC is a convention of over 47,000 independent churches cooperating for the purpose of pooling resources for missions, education, advocacy, and church support. The convention meets once a year and is represented by the SBC executive committee in the time between conventions. This committee is charged with the duties of conducting the will of the churches between these annual meetings.

As a convention of churches, we do not have direct oversight of the activities that occur at other member churches. Each member church is an autonomous body with its own organizing body. The SBC is a voluntary body in which member churches participate. This is important in understanding this concern. While member churches are autonomous, we have a collective responsibility to hold each other accountable to high standards in the protection of the vulnerable. Unfortunately, there have been some member churches that have not taken this issue of sexual abuse as seriously as one would hope. As such, there have been times when neglect, fear of lawsuit, desire to practice grace, and/or admiration of church leaders, has led some member churches to not take steps to prevent further abuse and protect the body of churches against perpetrators of sexual abuse. We believe this needs to change!

Further, the SBC executive committee had taken a position that the due diligence in hiring staff and vetting volunteers was ultimately up to member churches. As such, they took a position that the executive committee was not able to maintain or provide screening at a convention wide level. They did encourage member churches to use existing resources including the national registry of sex offenders and due diligence in contacting previous churches when hiring new staff members. Given the passive approach to handling an issue that required more serious action, there were many complaints over the years that we as a convention ought to do more. This passive approach also was contrary to the will of the member churches as evidenced by multiple resolutions over several annual conventions. Here is a list with links.

- Sexual integrity of ministers (2002) <https://www.sbc.net/resource-library/resolutions/on-the-sexual-integrity-of-ministers/>
- Protecting Children from abuse (2007) <https://www.sbc.net/resource-library/resolutions/on-protecting-children-from-abuse/>
- Sexual abuse of children (2013) <https://www.sbc.net/resource-library/resolutions/on-sexual-abuse-of-children/>
- Abuse (2017) <https://www.sbc.net/resource-library/resolutions/on-abuse/>
- Evil of sexual abuse (2018) <https://www.sbc.net/resource-library/resolutions/on-the-evil-of-sexual-abuse/>
- Abuse and pastoral qualifications(2021) <https://www.sbc.net/resource-library/resolutions/on-abuse-and-pastoral-qualifications/>
- Lament and repentance for sexual abuse (2022) <https://www.sbc.net/resource-library/resolutions/on-lament-and-repentance-for-sexual-abuse/>

- Support for consistent laws regarding pastoral sexual abuse (2022)
<https://www.sbc.net/resource-library/resolutions/on-support-for-consistent-laws-regarding-pastoral-sexual-abuse/>

As a result of inaction and neglect perceived on the part of member churches, we voted for and initiated an investigation (conducted by an independent third party) of actions taken by the Executive Committee with regard to sexual abuse over a period 2000 to 2020. This investigation revealed a lack of action to hear victims of abuse and at times engaging in victim blaming/shaming. This could be described as stonewalling change to be more in line with the will of the convention of churches. RBC is pleased that over the last several years the will of the member churches has been heeded and a more serious and meaningful response to sexual abuse has been adopted.

It would seem the DOJ of justice opening an investigation is the result of the findings in the report conducted by Guidepost at the request of the SBC member churches. It is this action that opened us up to public scrutiny. And while it may be unpleasant for some, we firmly believe transparency and cooperation will ultimately be an important part of our reform efforts.

RBC First and foremost wants to set high standards to protect the vulnerable from those who would take advantage of churches in order to prey on congregants.

We believe it has been illuminated with the recent internal investigation, that the SBC executive committee did not do all that they could to address this issue with the gravity that it deserved. All the committee staff who engaged in the most serious stonewalling at the SBC have stepped down or dismissed from their positions. This has been a moment of reckoning for the neglect that has occurred over the years. We fully support the internal changes recommended by the independent investigators and prayerfully support the task force charged with implementing those changes. This task force was created at the last annual meeting and will bring forward specific changes to the next annual meeting. They also will begin the process of establishing a registry of church staff that have been credibly charged with sexual abuse. We encourage the SBC executive committee to continue in repentance and follow through to show sincere and meaningful change. We support the principles of victim support, transparency, advocacy, and systematic safeguards to prevent sexual abuse.

We also commend the SBC executive committee and other SBC organizations for their commitment to fully cooperate with the DOJ investigation of the matter. This matter is especially important to us and if criminal activity did occur it needs to be dealt with grave concern. At this point those individuals within the member churches and at SBC entities who engaged in neglecting victims of abuse have been reported to authorities in criminal cases and dismissed from their positions regarding unethical behavior. We fully support these actions and encourage fellow member churches and SBC organizations to support these as well. We also fully support the recent changes to disallow participation in the convention by those member churches that do not uphold standards related to sexual abuse.

At RBC we take the matter of protection very seriously. We have regularly conducted background checks and training for all staff and volunteers who work with children. It is our

policy to report abuse that is suspected to have occurred and fully cooperate with those responsible for investigating such accusations of abuse. We have taken steps to support and advocate for victims of abuse. We have set up a team to advise the pastoral staff and church on issues related to protection against abuse. We have implemented policies to safeguard against opportunities for abuse to occur. We have a security team during activities of the church who fulfill the responsibilities of monitoring the safety and wellbeing of those in an attendance.

We make every effort to act on behalf of and take seriously those that have been abused. We believe that our response of support is a central characteristic of recovery from sexual violence. We believe that perpetrators of sexual violence must be held accountable for their actions. And while we believe in the principles of grace, we believe that sexual abuse permanently disqualifies an individual from serving in ministries of the church where access to the vulnerable may occur. We believe that the state should strengthen the laws related to clergy sexual abuse.

One might ask why would RBC continue to take part with the SBC?

First, we have a moral obligation to see this through. The reality is that if the SBC executive committee had continued to allow certain members of its committee to engage in neglect and stonewalling, we may have had to reconsider our cooperation with the SBC. Since the SBC (and remember as a cooperating church we are the convention) appears to be making meaningful change we believe now is not the time to abandon efforts to reform the convention on this critical issue.

Second, we continue to support the cooperative effort to engage in ministry that otherwise would not exist save for cooperation with like-minded and friendly churches. This would include, but not limited to, missions, higher education, seminaries, Christian literature, advocacy for freedom of religion, disaster relief, needs of the poor, recovery programs, and so many more things that are done through cooperation with other churches. To abandon this effort because the misdeeds of a few would be a great loss.

Third, we believe that the cooperation through the convention is the best self-correction model for religious organizations. In this approach the SBC entities are accountable to the member churches. While the democratic process can move slower than we would like at times, we believe that ultimately this organization prevents problems that occur in top-down governance in which the ecclesiological body ultimately determines what the local church can or cannot do. It also should be noted that in top-down organizations there can a lack of accountability to those at the very top. One of the reasons this issue was addressed is because it was the will of member churches. Otherwise, we may still not know about the mishandling of these concerns.

In conclusion, we stand in solidarity with those who have been victims of abuse. Our prayer is that RBC can be a safe place to worship and serve. We hope to create a community of believers that respond to and bring healing to those that have been abused whether this has occurred within or outside the Christian community.

God Bless You

RBC Pastoral Staff