News



Southern Baptist Convention President J.D. Greear addresses the denomination's executive committee in Nashville, Tenn. on Feb.18, 2019. He told the gathering that it should immediately investigate 10 churches named in a report detailing sexual abuse among clergy. (RNS/Bob Smietan)

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J.D. Greear, president of the Southern Baptist Convention, said the denomination's executive committee should immediately investigate 10 churches named in a report by the Houston Chronicle and San Antonio Times-Express, including 2nd Baptist in Houston – one of the largest churches in the SBC.

If any churches were found to have covered up abuse and refused to mend their ways, Greear told a gathering of Southern Baptist leaders, then the convention should consider removing them from the denomination, a process known as "disfellowshipping."

"We must take bold and decisive steps to send an unequivocal message: Churches that have a wanton disregard for sexual abuse and for caring for the survivors are not in good fellowship with this convention," Greear said.

Greear made his remarks at a regularly scheduled meeting of SBC's executive committee at their offices in Nashville, a week after the two Texas newspapers published the results of a major investigation of abuse in the nation's largest Protestant denomination. The newspapers found that 380 Southern Baptist pastors and other church leaders had been accused of sexually abusing more than 700 victims in the past 20 years.

He told members of the committee and other leaders that Southern Baptists had to hold themselves accountable for mishandling claims of abuse and making it easy for abuse to be covered up.

Individual Baptists who "aided or abetted" abuse must repent, he said, "but as a convention, we need to repent of a culture that has made abuse, cover-ups, and evading accountability far too easy, he said.



Southern Baptist Convention President J.D. Greear speaks to the denomination’s executive committee on Feb. 18, 2019, in Nashville, Tenn. Just days after a newspaper investigation revealed hundreds of sexual abuse cases by Southern Baptist ministers and lay leaders over the past two decades, Greear spoke about plans to address the problem. (AP/Mark Humphrey)

Greear, who is the pastor of The Summit Church in Durham, N.C., also called on Southern Baptists to repent for failing to listen to victims, for being slow to call law enforcement and for offering easy forgiveness to abusers.

In some cases, Greear said that churches have "directly acted in a manner that was negligent at best and malicious at worst," calling their actions unacceptable.

He said the convention should investigate whether those churches have violated the SBC’s "Baptist Faith and Message" statement, which states that churches should care for the abused.

"We need to be honest with ourselves," he said. "If news stories had listed a number of our churches who were alleged to have changed their position on homosexuality, or performed gay weddings or adopted odious racial policies, we would rightly begin

to ask questions and potentially take steps to cease cooperation, because our position on this issue is clear," he said. "We must take seriously that our position on abuse is clear too."

Baptist churches, he said, also need to change their standards for ordination, noting that some churches often fail to perform background checks or properly screen prospective pastors.

"Ordaining a pastor is serious business — and it should be — and our ordination councils should not come with rubber stamps," he said. "Why is it that our background check and screening process is often more rigorous for people working in children's ministry than people being ordained?"

A committee appointed by Greear, which includes Rachael Denhollander, an attorney and abuse survivor whose testimony helped convict former USA Gymnastics team doctor Larry Nasser of abuse, developed an initial list of 10 recommendations for responding to and preventing abuse in the SBC. The group also helped develop a training program called "Becoming a Church that Cares Well for the Abused," to be used by churches and other Baptist institutions, including seminaries.

Greear said that the training program will be released by June and said all the convention's seminaries had signed on to make it mandatory for all students.

The committee is considering other recommendations, including creating a national database of known abusers. In the past, the SBC has rejected the idea of a database.

Russell Moore, president of the SBC's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, praised the committee's recommendations.

"The recent reports in the Houston Chronicle detailing sexual abuse in Southern Baptist churches are both horrifying and demand immediate and swift action," said Moore in a statement. "Over the last several months the advisory group appointed by SBC President J. D. Greear has been working with an unprecedented breadth of expertise and vigor of spirit."

Moore urged his fellow Baptists to adopt the recommendations.

"The recommendations he brought this evening are a needed advance, and I pray that they will be universally adopted across the spectrum of Southern Baptist life,"

he said.

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