News



In this Wednesday, June 12, 2019 file photo, J. D. Greear, president of the Southern Baptist Convention, talks about sexual abuse within the SBC on the second day of the SBC's annual meeting in Birmingham, Ala. Greear blamed the crisis on years of cover-ups, but praised a new anti-abuse curriculum being offered to all of its churches and seminaries, and he said they must do better in screening potential pastors. (Jon Shapley/Houston Chronicle via AP)

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Entangled in a multifaceted sex-abuse crisis, the Southern Baptist Convention is preparing to host a high-profile conference on the topic that has kindled skepticism even among some of the scheduled speakers.

The three-day Caring Well conference opens Thursday at a resort hotel near Dallas, drawing hundreds of pastors and church officials from the largest Protestant denomination in the U.S. for a program featuring victim advocates, attorneys, therapists and at least 10 survivors of sexual abuse.

Several of those survivors told The Associated Press they had mixed feelings about the conference — hoping it represents a genuine desire for change but concerned it might come across as a public relations exercise.

The first survivor scheduled to speak is Susan Codone, a professor at Mercer University in Macon, Georgia, who says she was abused as a teenager by the youth minister and pastor at her SBC church in Alabama.

She is grateful that SBC leaders now seem to be taking the sex abuse problem seriously, but suggested progress would come faster if the denomination — which espouses male leadership at church and in the home — brought more women into leadership roles.

"The anger in the survivor community has been extremely valuable for instigating change," she said. "But changing the culture of the SBC will take generations."

There's been some sharp criticism of the conference from several anti-abuse activists who were not invited to speak, including Christa Brown, an author and retired attorney who says she was abused by a Southern Baptist minister as a child. She suggested that organizers opted to invite survivors whose stories were deemed "risk-free for the SBC."

"They have picked those who don't ask anything of them at this point," said Brown, who has been pushing the SBC to create an independently run database listing

pastors and other church personnel who have been credibly accused of abuse.

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The conference is being organized by the SBC's Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, which holds a national meeting every year in its role as the SBC's public policy arm. It decided in April to scrap its planned theme, "Gospel Courage," and instead devote the entire meeting to the sex-abuse crisis wracking the SBC and other churches.

The commission's president, the Rev. Russell Moore, says he and his colleagues sought a diverse array of speakers, and are urging them to be "candid and forthright."

"I can understand skepticism from all sorts of people, given the track record of the church, especially over the past several years," he said.

The conference is not intended to produce new policies or recommendations. Its goal, Moore said, is to provide churches with expert advice on how to prevent abuse and support abuse survivors.

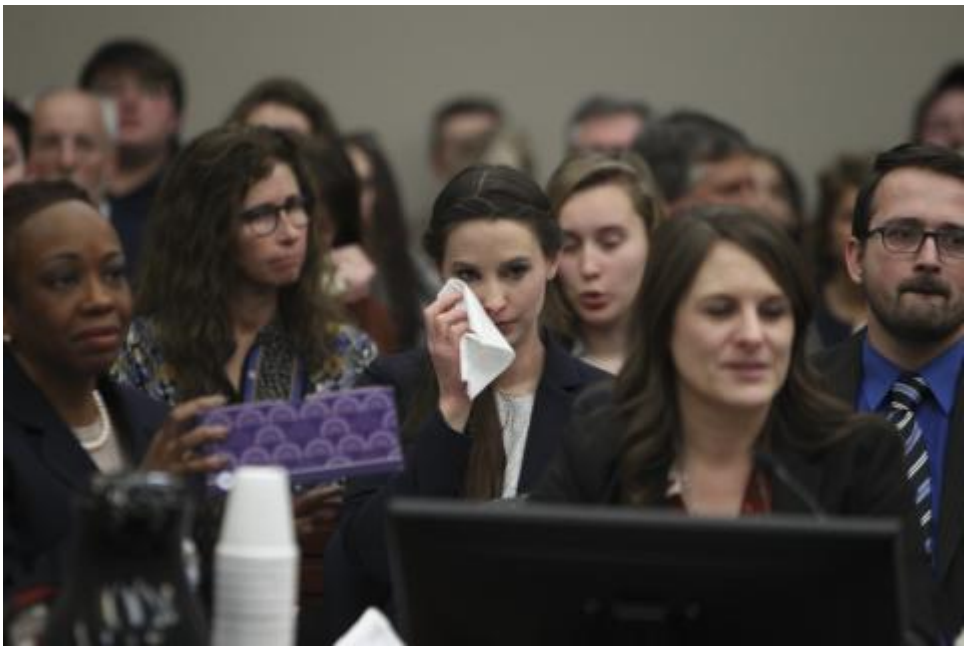
Due to multiple scandals, sex abuse became a major issue for the SBC in 2018. Its president, the Rev. J.D. Greear, formed an advisory group to draft recommendation s on how to confront the problem.

The crisis intensified this year, in part due to articles by the Houston Chronicle and San Antonio Express-News asserting that hundreds of Southern Baptist clergy and staff had been accused of sexual misconduct over the past 20 years. Many of them returned to church duties, the articles said, and more than 700 victims were left with little in the way of justice or apologies.

At the SBC's national meeting in June in Birmingham, Alabama, Greear issued an emotional apology for the crisis as he shared a stage with tearful survivors of abuse.

Among the most prominent invitees to the upcoming conference is attorney/activist Rachael Denhollander, the first woman to go public with sexual assault complaints against now-imprisoned former sports doctor Larry Nassar.

"Looking at the lineup of speakers, there are some incredibly important voices, but there are others who don't have credibility in the survivor network," said Denhollander, who attends a Reformed Baptist church in Louisville, Kentucky. "You're going to see a very sharp divide between those who want to deal with the problem honestly and those who want to preserve the status quo."



In this Wednesday, Jan. 24, 2018 file photo, Rachael Denhollander wipes a tear from her eye as Larry Nassar, who admitted molesting some of the nation's top gymnasts for years, is sentenced, during the sixth day of victim impact statements in Ingham County Circuit Court in Lansing, Mich. Among the most prominent invitees to the October 2019 Southern Baptist Convention conference is Denhollander, an attorney/activist who was the first woman to go public with sexual assault complaints against now-imprisoned former sports doctor Larry Nassar. (Matthew Dae Smith/Lansing State Journal via AP)

Another scheduled speaker is Boz Tchividjian, an attorney who is the grandson of evangelist Billy Graham and who heads GRACE, an organization working to combat sexual abuse in faith-based organizations.

Tchividjian has close ties with many abuse survivors and says he understands many of their concerns about the SBC's resolve in combating this problem. He said he initially wrestled with his decision before agreeing to speak, but intends to be "constructively direct" about how the SBC is fueling such concerns among many

people who were abused within SBC churches.

"I think the SBC must go through a season of substantive lament, learning and changes if it ever wants to become a genuine leader in preventing and addressing all forms of abuse," said Tchividjian. "I want to remain hopeful for change, but time will be the true test."

Psychologist Diane Langberg, who runs a clinic near Philadelphia, will address the conference on how to help support abuse survivors. She's an expert on abuse and other traumas occurring in the context of Christian churches, and says she wants to provide "a strong voice" at the conference on behalf of victims.

"This is a systemic issue — and it's going to take years for a system to change," she said. "It's like turning a huge ship. I want to strengthen the voices calling for the ship to turn, so they do it strongly and clearly, and know it's a long haul."

Among abuse survivors, there are sharply contrasting views about the SBC's anti-abuse efforts.

Jules Woodson, a Colorado Springs-based flight attendant, says she was sexually assaulted by her youth pastor in Texas two decades ago at age 17 and received no support after reporting the incident to her senior pastors. Only in 2018 did Woodson file a police report, eventually prompting the former youth pastor to apologize and resign from his current church position.

The upcoming conference, Woodson says, "is giving off a false hope that the SBC is taking this seriously."

"I have not seen genuine repentance or genuine moves toward change," she said. "It's all words right now — it's lip service."

By contrast, Megan Lively of Wilson, North Carolina, says she's been solidly supported by SBC leaders since identifying herself as a key figure in a 2003 sexual-assault incident that contributed to last year's ouster of the Rev. Paige Patterson as president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. Patterson was faulted for discouraging Lively from filing a report with police after she told school administrators she'd been raped by a fellow student while attending Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. Patterson was president of the school at the time.

Lively, one of the scheduled speakers at the conference, says she doesn't consider herself a "safe option" for the organizers.

"I know that SBC leaders have listened to women inside and outside the church," she said. "For over a year, I've been telling them things, making suggestions. They have listened to me."

Added Lively, "For me, it's more important to stay involved in the process from within than to demand change from the outside."

The Southern Baptist Convention encompasses more than 47,000 individual churches. It had 14.8 million members in 2018.