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Headquarters of the Southern Baptist Convention in Nashville, Tenn., Dec. 7, 2011 file photo. (AP Photo/Mark Humphrey, File)

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Leaders of the Southern Baptist Convention, America's largest Protestant denomination, stonewalled and denigrated survivors of clergy sex abuse over almost two decades while seeking to protect their own reputations, according to a scathing 288-page investigative report issued Sunday.

These survivors, and other concerned Southern Baptists, repeatedly shared allegations with the SBC's Executive Committee, "only to be met, time and time again, with resistance, stonewalling, and even outright hostility from some within the EC," said the report.

The seven-month investigation was conducted by Guidepost Solutions, an independent firm contracted by the Executive Committee after delegates to last year's national meeting pressed for a probe by outsiders.

"Our investigation revealed that, for many years, a few senior EC leaders, along with outside counsel, largely controlled the EC's response to these reports of abuse ... and were singularly focused on avoiding liability for the SBC," the report said.

"In service of this goal, survivors and others who reported abuse were ignored, disbelieved, or met with the constant refrain that the SBC could take no action due to its polity regarding church autonomy – even if it meant that convicted molesters continued in ministry with no notice or warning to their current church or congregation," the report added.

The report asserts that an Executive Committee staffer maintained a list of Baptist ministers accused of abuse, but there is no indication anyone "took any action to ensure that the accused ministers were no longer in positions of power at SBC

churches."

The most recent list includes the names of hundreds of abusers thought to be affiliated at some point with the SBC. Survivors and advocates have long called for a public database of abusers.

SBC President Ed Litton, in a statement Sunday, said he is "grieved to my core" for the victims and thanked God for their work propelling the SBC to this moment. He called on Southern Baptists to lament and prepare to change the denomination's culture and implement reforms.

"I pray Southern Baptists will begin preparing today to take deliberate action to address these failures and chart a new course when we meet together in Anaheim," Litton said, referring to the California city that will host the SBC's national meeting on June 14-15.

Among the report's key recommendations:

- Form an independent commission and later establish a permanent administrative entity to oversee comprehensive long-term reforms concerning sexual abuse and related misconduct within the SBC.
- Create and maintain an Offender Information System to alert the community to known offenders.
- Provide a comprehensive Resource Toolbox including protocols, training, education, and practical information.
- Restrict the use of nondisclosure agreements and civil settlements which bind survivors to confidentiality in sexual abuse matters, unless requested by the survivor.

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The interim leaders of the Executive Committee, Willie McLaurin and Rolland Slade, welcomed the recommendations, and pledged an all-out effort to eliminate sex abuse within the SBC.

"We recognize there are no shortcuts," they said. "We must all meet this challenge through prudent and prayerful application, and we must do so with Christ-like compassion."

The Executive Committee is set to hold a special meeting Tuesday to discuss the report.

The sex abuse scandal was thrust into the spotlight in 2019 by a landmark report from the Houston Chronicle and San Antonio Express-News documenting hundreds of cases in Southern Baptist churches, including several in which alleged perpetrators remained in ministry.

Last year, thousands of delegates at the national SBC gathering made clear they did not want the Executive Committee to oversee an investigation of its own actions. Instead they voted overwhelmingly to create the task force charged with overseeing the third-party review. Litton, pastor of Redemption Church in Saraland, Alabama, appointed the panel.

The task force had a week to review the report before it was publicly released. The task force's recommendations based on Guidepost's findings will be presented at the SBC's meeting in Anaheim.

The report offers shocking details on how Johnny Hunt, a Georgia-based pastor and past SBC president, sexually assaulted another pastor's wife during a beach vacation in 2010. In an interview with investigators, Hunt denied any physical contact with the woman, but did admit he had interactions with her.

On May 13, Hunt, who was the senior vice president of evangelism and leadership at the North American Mission Board, the SBC's domestic missions agency, resigned from that post, said Kevin Ezell, the organization's president and CEO. Ezell said, before May 13, he was "not aware of any alleged misconduct" on Hunt's part.

The report details a meeting Hunt arranged a few days after the alleged assault between the woman, her husband, Hunt and a counseling pastor. Hunt admitted to touching the victim inappropriately, but said "thank God I didn't consummate the relationship."

Among those reacting strongly to the Guidepost report was Russell Moore, who formerly headed the SBC's public policy wing but left the denomination after accusing top Executive Committee leaders of stalling efforts to address the sex abuse crisis.

"Crisis is too small a word. It is an apocalypse," Moore wrote for Christianity Today after reading the report. "As dark a view as I had of the SBC Executive Committee, the investigation uncovers a reality far more evil and systemic than I imagined it could be."

According to the report, Guidepost's investigators, who spoke with survivors of varying ages including children, said the survivors were equally traumatized by the way in which churches responded to their reports of sexual abuse.

Survivors "spoke of trauma from the initial abuse, but also told us of the debilitating effects that come from the response of the churches and institutions like the SBC that did not believe them, ignored them, mistreated them, and failed to help them," the report said.

It cited the case of Dave Pittman, who from 2006 to 2011 made phone calls and sent letters and emails to the SBC and Georgia Baptist Convention Board reporting that he had been abused by Frankie Wiley, a youth pastor at Rehoboth Baptist Church when he was 12 to 15 years old.

Pittman and several others have come forward publicly to report that Wiley molested and raped them and Wiley has admitted to abusing "numerous victims" at several Georgia Southern Baptist churches.

According to the report, a Georgia Baptist Convention official told Pittman that the churches were autonomous and there was nothing he could do but pray.

The report also tells the story of Christa Brown, who says she was sexually abused as a teen by the youth and education minister at her SBC church.

When she disclosed the abuse to the music minister after months of abuse, she was told not to talk about it, according to the report, which said her abuser also went on to serve in Southern Baptist churches in multiple states.

Brown, who has been one of the most outspoken survivors, told investigators that during the past 15 years she has received "volumes of hate mail, awful blog comments, and vitriolic phone calls."

After reading through the report, Brown told The Associated Press that it "fundamentally confirms what Southern Baptist clergy sex abuse survivors have been saying for decades."

"I view this investigative report as a beginning, not an end. The work will continue," Brown said. "But no one should ever forget the human cost of what it has taken to even get the SBC to approach this starting line of beginning to deal with clergy sex abuse."