

## Baptists urged to root out molesters

Advocates for sex abuse victims in Roman Catholic Church shift their focus

**The Associated Press**

Updated: 3:50 a.m. PT Feb 22, 2007

NASHVILLE, Tenn. - The victims advocates who dogged the Roman Catholic Church over sex abuse by its clergy have now turned their attention to the Southern Baptists, accusing America's largest Protestant denomination of also failing to root out molesters.

The Chicago-based Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests has started a campaign to call attention to alleged sex abuse committed by Southern Baptist ministers and concealed by churches.

SNAP presented a letter Monday to Southern Baptist Convention executive committee members in Nashville, asking the group to adopt a zero-tolerance policy on sex abuse and to create an independent review board to investigate molestation reports.

Church leaders concede there have been some incidents of abuse in Southern Baptist congregations but say their hands are tied when it comes to investigating complaints across the denomination.

Unlike the Catholic Church, with its rigid hierarchy, Baptist churches are independent. They make their own decisions about hiring ministers and conducting investigations, Baptist leaders say.

"They don't want to see this problem," said Christa Brown, a SNAP member from Austin, Texas, who says she was sexually abused as a child by a Southern Baptist minister. "That's tragic because they're imitating the same mistakes made by Catholic bishops."

### **Group: Sexual abuse underreported**

In the past six months SNAP has received reports of about 40 cases of sexual abuse by Southern Baptist ministers — with some of the incidents dating back many years, Brown said. SNAP leaders hold that abuse is typically underreported because being molested is such a painful experience that victims often wait years before stepping forward.

Southern Baptist Convention President Frank Page said the denomination plans to teach its churches how to conduct background checks and to require letters of recommendation for job candidates.

But he said the Southern Baptist Convention, which has 16.3 million members, does not have the legal authority to create an independent board to investigate abuse complaints.

"As much as possible within our structure, we're going to assist churches," Page said. "We're deeply concerned about this. We believe children are the most precious gifts from God."

Southern Baptists passed a resolution in 2002 urging its churches to discipline ministers guilty of sexual abuse and to cooperate with authorities in their prosecution.

But Brown said that's not enough. She says the Southern Baptists need an independent review board precisely because there's no clear chain of command among Baptist churches. The SBC also does not keep a list of ministers who have been accused of abuse. Advocates say this means molesters could move from church to church.

"I believe kids are not safe in Southern Baptist churches," said Brown, who runs a Web site called the Voice to Stop Baptist Predators.

One SNAP member, Debbie Vasquez, said she was raped by a Southern Baptist minister in Texas when she was 15 years old.

Now 48, Vasquez filed a lawsuit last year against the pastor, the Rev. Dale "Dickie" Amyx and his current church, Bolivar Baptist in Sanger, Texas, about 45 miles north of Dallas. She claims the church knew, or should have known, about Amyx's past.

#### **Treated as an outcast**

Vasquez says she was raped when Amyx was a minister at the now-defunct Calvary Baptist Church in Lewisville, another town north of Dallas.

When she became pregnant with Amyx's child at age 18, church leaders forced her to go before the congregation and ask forgiveness as an unwed mother. But the congregation was never told it was Amyx's baby. The lawsuit claims Calvary Baptist helped Amyx get another job at a church in Arizona.

Amyx acknowledged in court documents that he had a sexual relationship with Vasquez and was the father of her child. Texas court records also show that Amyx was convicted in 1967 for giving beer to a minor.

When reached at home Wednesday, Amyx said he couldn't comment on the case and referred all questions to his lawyer, James A. Harrison. The attorney did not return multiple phone calls.

Vasquez said she filed the suit because she fears Amyx could be abusing other girls and she wants to see him removed from his position.

"In any denomination where you have these men with this power that's not questioned and you have these people who are vulnerable ... you're going to have a problem," Vasquez said.

#### **Harder to find abuse?**

Philip Jenkins, a professor of religious studies and history at Pennsylvania State University and author of the book "Pedophiles and Priests," said it's harder to track child sexual abuse in Protestant denominations.

"Southern Baptists are massively decentralized compared to the Catholic Church," he said. "They're independent. It's very difficult to gauge how many abuses might be occurring within the Southern Baptist Convention."

Several child sex abuse cases in Southern Baptist churches have surfaced recently.

Bellevue Baptist, a megachurch near Memphis, fired a longtime minister, the Rev. Paul Williams, last month after he acknowledged sexually abusing his son 17 years ago.

The church's internal investigation found that church leaders, including current pastor, the Rev. Steve Gaines, knew about the abuse last year, but did not act immediately.

The investigation began in December only after the prodding of Williams' son, who asked Gaines why his father was allowed to continue as a minister even after leaders had found out about the abuse.

"I accept full responsibility and could have handled this in a more appropriate way," Gaines told the congregation last month.

In another case, Shawn Davies, a former music and youth minister at the First Baptist Church of Greenwood, Mo., pleaded guilty last month to molesting boys ages 12 to 16.

Vasquez says she's seeking damages for medical costs and mental and physical injury as well as punitive damages.

"They're allowing these men to go from church to church," she said. "They're not protecting the victims. They're protecting themselves."

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