

A Statement Regarding the SBC Sexual Abuse Task Force Report

Bella Vista Baptist Church
Brent Summerhill, Senior Pastor



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Church family and friends,

For some 20 years, concerned churches and individuals have urged SBC leadership to address sexual abuse and the coverup of sexual abuse within SBC churches and entities. In June 2021, over 15,000 messengers representing 5,570 churches met in Nashville, Tennessee for the annual SBC meeting where the voices of those concerned were finally heard.

The messengers overwhelmingly approved a motion to take the investigation into sexual abuse and the coverup of sexual abuse out of the hands of the SBC Executive Committee (EC) and form a Sexual Abuse Task Force (SATF) to conduct an independent investigation, requiring attorney-client privilege be waived to help get to the truth. I did not see a ballot raised in opposition to the motion.

The SATF hired Guidepost Solutions to conduct a thorough investigation. On Sunday, May 22, the 288-page report from the investigation was made public. You can read the report and the SATF recommendations at the link in the footnote.¹

This statement from the report summarizes the SBC leadership culture during the previous two decades.

“Our investigation revealed that, for many years, a few senior Executive Committee (EC) leaders, along with outside counsel, largely controlled the EC’s response to these reports of abuse. They closely guarded information about abuse allegations and lawsuits, which were not shared with EC Trustees, and were singularly focused on avoiding liability for the SBC to the exclusion of other considerations.”²

I took two afternoons to carefully read the report and try to process all the information. It was difficult to read the truth about pastors I had admired. It was even more difficult to read stories of the abused. But whatever difficulty is found in reading the report is nothing compared to the difficulties faced by the survivors of sexual abuse, including the treatment received from some in SBC leadership. Despite a list being kept of some 703 abusers, 409 which were believed to be SBC affiliated at some point, the report states that:

¹ <https://www.sataskforce.net/updates/guidepost-solutions-report-of-the-independent-investigation>

² Report, p. 3

“Rather than focusing on these accused ministers, some EC leaders turned against the very people trying to shine a light on sexual abuse. The survivors - those persons who actually suffered at the hands of SBC clergy or SBC church staff or volunteers - who spoke out the most, and who criticized the SBC’s inaction, were denigrated as ‘opportunistic,’ having a ‘hidden agenda of lawsuits,’ wanting to ‘burn things to the ground,’ and acting as a ‘professional victim.’”³

The list of accused ministers was kept private while the abusers kept abusing. The EC leadership was more concerned with protecting the institution from liability than caring for fellow believers in SBC churches.

Following the report’s release, the EC met Tuesday, May 24, and publicly repented of its failures and committed to changing the culture.⁴ They also set up a hotline for sexual abuse claims.⁵ I am grateful for the leadership of Chairman Rolland Slade and other committee members who have been agents of change.

Now, two questions.

First, what’s next?

Messengers from SBC churches will consider the report, the recommendations of the SATF, and determine a path forward in Anaheim June 14-15. Cindy and I plan to be there. Pray for this meeting.

Second, what are we doing at Bella Vista Baptist Church?

1. In partnership with the Arkansas Baptist State Convention (ABSC)⁶ and Ministry Safe⁷, we provide training and background checks for all those who work with children or youth in the church.
2. We have secured our children’s area so that only those who have passed the training and background check are with children during children’s ministry.
3. As spiritual caretakers of children and youth, our policy is to report accusations of abuse, sexual or otherwise, to the proper authorities according to state law.

³ Report, p. 5

⁴ <https://www.baptistpress.com/resource-library/news/%ef%bf%bcsbc-executive-committee-repents-vows-to-listen-to-survivors-release-hidden-list-of-alleged-abusers/>

⁵ <https://www.baptistpress.com/resource-library/news/executive-committee-sets-up-hotline-for-abuse-claims/>

⁶ <https://www.absc.org/>

⁷ <https://ministrysafe.com/>

4. We hold our church leadership accountable to Biblical standards, both morally and doctrinally, and commit to address any sins according to Scripture.
5. We will care for and minister to victims of abuse with the compassion of Christ.

Finally, let me be clear.

The squashing of abuse reports, resistance to implementing abuse policy, and the treatment of abuse survivors by EC leadership was wrong. The attitudes and actions described in this report are sinful.

While I am immensely grateful for the vote of the messengers in 2021, that it took two decades to get there is a shame upon us.

While autonomous in polity, Baptist churches must be accountable to one another. To discreetly dismiss an abuser from one church's ministry so that he finds a ministry position in another church to continue his abuse is inexcusable and makes the former church leadership complicit in the abuser's sins.

I am encouraged. In 2021 over 15,000 voices said in unison, "Enough is enough!" May God now grant us the courage and resolve to see it through.

For the gospel,
Brent Summerhill
Senior Pastor