

Abuse of Faith

20 years, 700 victims: Southern Baptist sexual abuse spreads as leaders resist reforms

By [Robert Downen](#), [Lise Olsen](#), and [John Tedesco](#)

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First of six parts

Thirty-five years later, Debbie Vasquez's voice trembled as she described her trauma to a group of Southern Baptist leaders.

She was 14, she said, when she was first molested by her pastor in Sanger, a tiny prairie town an hour north of Dallas. It was the first of many assaults that Vasquez said destroyed her teenage years and, at 18, left her pregnant by the Southern Baptist pastor, a married man more than a dozen years older.

In June 2008, she paid her way to Indianapolis, where she and others asked leaders of the Southern Baptist Convention and its 47,000 churches to track sexual predators and take action against congregations that harbored or concealed abusers. Vasquez, by then in her 40s, implored them to consider prevention policies like those adopted by faiths that include the Catholic Church.



In this 2007 file photo, Debbie Vasquez holds a photo of herself at age 14, when she says she was first molested by the pastor of her church in Sanger, about one hour north of Dallas. (Donna McWilliam/Associated Press)

"Listen to what God has to say," she said, according to audio of the meeting, which she recorded. "... All that evil needs is for good to do nothing. ... Please help me and others that will be hurt."

Days later, Southern Baptist leaders rejected nearly every proposed reform.

The abusers haven't stopped. They've hurt hundreds more.

Convicted pastors and prosecutors discuss the prevalence of sexual assault in the Southern Baptist community.

Media: Jon Shapley/Houston Chronicle

In the decade since Vasquez's appeal for help, more than 250 people who worked or volunteered in Southern Baptist churches have been charged with sex crimes, an investigation by the [Houston Chronicle](#) and the [San Antonio Express-News](#) reveals.

It's not just a recent problem: In all, since 1998, roughly 380 Southern Baptist church leaders and volunteers have faced allegations of sexual misconduct, [the newspapers found](#). That includes those who were convicted, credibly accused and successfully sued, and those who confessed or resigned. More of them worked in Texas than in any other state.

They left behind more than 700 victims, many of them shunned by their churches, left to themselves to rebuild their lives. Some were urged to forgive their abusers or to get abortions.

About 220 offenders have been convicted or took plea deals, and dozens of cases are pending. They were pastors. Ministers. Youth pastors. Sunday school teachers. Deacons. Church volunteers.

How we did this story:

Current as of June 2019

Nearly 100 are still held in prisons stretching from Sacramento

In 2007, victims of sexual abuse by Southern Baptist pastors requested creation of a registry containing the names of current and former leaders of Southern Baptist churches who had been convicted of sex crimes or who had been credibly accused. That didn't happen; the last time any such list was made public was by the Baptist General Convention of Texas. It contained the names of eight sex criminals.

In 2018, as advocates again pressed SBC officials for such a registry, [Houston Chronicle](#) reporters began to search news archives, websites and databases nationwide to compile an archive of allegations of sexual abuse, sexual assault and other serious misconduct involving Southern Baptist pastors and other church officials. We found complaints made against hundreds of pastors, church officials and volunteers at Southern Baptist churches nationwide.

We focused our search on the 10 years preceding the victims' first call for a registry and on the 10-plus years since. And we concentrated on individuals who had a documented connection to a church listed in an SBC directory published by a state or national association.

We verified details in hundreds of accounts of abuse by examining federal and state court databases, prison records and official documents from more than 20 states and by searching sex offender registries nationwide. In Texas, we visited more than a dozen county courthouses. We interviewed district attorneys and police in more than 40 Texas counties. We filed dozens of public records requests in Texas and nationwide.

Ultimately, we compiled information on roughly 400 credibly accused officials in

County, Calif., to Hillsborough County, Fla., state and federal records show. Scores of others cut deals and served no time. More than 100 are registered sex offenders. Some still work in Southern Baptist churches today.

Journalists in the two newsrooms spent more than six months reviewing thousands of pages of court, prison and police records and conducting hundreds of interviews. [They built a database of former leaders](#) in Southern Baptist churches who have been convicted of sex crimes.

The investigation reveals that:

- At least 35 church pastors, employees and volunteers who exhibited predatory behavior were still able to find jobs at churches during the past two decades. In some cases, church leaders apparently failed to alert law enforcement about complaints or to warn other congregations about allegations of misconduct.

Southern Baptist churches, including pastors, deacons, Sunday school teachers and volunteers.

[We verified that about 260 had been convicted of sex crimes or received deferred prosecutions in plea deals](#) and sent letters to all of them soliciting their responses to summaries we compiled. We received written responses from more than 30 and interviewed three in Texas prisons.

Find our records that relate to those convicted or forced to register as sex offenders at HoustonChronicle.com/AbuseofFaith.

teenager and now is the principal officer of a Houston nonprofit that works with student organizations, federal records show. Its name: Touching the Future Today Inc.

- Many of the victims were adolescents who were molested, sent explicit photos or texts, exposed to pornography, photographed nude, or repeatedly raped by youth pastors. Some victims as young as 3 were molested or raped inside pastors' studies and Sunday school classrooms. A few were adults — women and men who sought pastoral guidance and instead say they were seduced or sexually assaulted.

Heather Schneider was 14 when she was molested in a choir room at Houston's Second Baptist Church, according to criminal and civil court records. Her mother, Gwen Casados, said church leaders waited months to fire the attacker, who later pleaded no contest. In response to her lawsuit, church leaders also denied responsibility.

Schneider slit her wrists the day after that attack in 1994, Casados said. She survived, but she died 14 years later from a drug overdose

- Several past presidents and prominent leaders of the Southern Baptist Convention are among those criticized by victims for concealing or mishandling abuse complaints within their own churches or seminaries.

- Some registered sex offenders returned to the pulpit. Others remain there, including a Houston preacher who sexually assaulted a

that her mother blames on the trauma.

"I never got her back," Casados said.

Others took decades to come forward, and only after their lives had unraveled. David Pittman was 12, he says, when a youth minister from his Georgia church first molested him in 1981. Two other former members of the man's churches said in interviews that they also were abused by him. But by the time Pittman spoke out in 2006, it was too late to press criminal charges.

The minister still works at an SBC church.

Pittman won't soon forgive those who have offered prayers but taken no action. He only recently stopped hating God.

"That is the greatest tragedy of all," he said. "So many people's faith is murdered. I mean, their faith is slaughtered by these predators."

August "Augie" Boto, interim president of the SBC's Executive Committee, helped draft the rejection of reform proposals in 2008. In an interview, he expressed "sorrow" about some of the newspapers' findings but said the convention's leadership can do only so much to stop sexual abuses.

"It would be sorrow if it were 200 or 600" cases, Boto said. "Sorrow. What we're talking about is criminal. The fact that criminal activity occurs in a church context is always the basis of grief. But it's going to happen. And that statement does not mean that we must be resigned to it."

Gwen Casados, mother of Heather Schneider, says her daughter's life

was ruined by a pageant director at Houston's Second Baptist Church.

Media: Jon Shapley/Houston Chronicle

'A porous sieve'

At the core of Southern Baptist doctrine is local church autonomy, the idea that each church is independent and self-governing. It's one of the main reasons that Boto said most of the proposals a decade ago were viewed as flawed by the executive committee because the committee doesn't have the authority to force churches to report sexual abuse to a central registry.

Because of that, Boto said, the committee "realized that lifting up a model that could not be enforced was an exercise in futility," and so instead drafted a report that "accepted the existence of the problem rather than attempting to define its magnitude."

[Q&A: Investigation into sexual abuse 'shining the light of day upon crime,' Southern Baptist leader says](#)

SBC churches and organizations share resources and materials, and together they fund missionary trips and seminaries. Most pastors are ordained locally after they've convinced a small group of church elders that they've been called to service by God. There is no central database that tracks ordinations, or sexual abuse convictions or allegations.

All of that [makes Southern Baptist churches highly susceptible to predators](#), says Christa Brown, an activist who wrote a book about being molested as a child by a pastor at her SBC church in Farmers Branch, a Dallas suburb.

"It's a perfect profession for a con artist, because all he has to do is talk a good talk and convince people that he's been called by God, and bingo, he gets to be a Southern Baptist minister," said Brown, who lives in Colorado. "Then he can infiltrate the entirety of the SBC, move from church to church, from state to state, go to bigger churches and more prominent churches where he has more influence and power, and it all starts in some small church.

"It's a porous sieve of a denomination."

To try to measure the problem, the newspapers collected and cross-checked news reports, prison records, court records, sex offender registries and other documents. Reporters also conducted hundreds of interviews with victims, church leaders, investigators and offenders.

'So many people's faith is murdered. I mean, their faith is slaughtered by these predators.'

David Pittman, who says he was molested by his youth minister

Several factors make it likely that the abuse is even more widespread than can be documented: Victims of sexual assault come forward at a low rate; many cases in churches are handled internally; and many Southern Baptist churches are in rural communities where media coverage is sparse.

It's clear, however, that SBC leaders have long been aware of the problem. Bowing to pressure from activists, the Baptist General Convention of Texas, one of the largest SBC state organizations, in

2007 published a list of eight sex offenders who had served in Southern Baptist churches in Texas.

EXPLAINER: [What is the Southern Baptist Convention?](#)

Around the same time, the Rev. Thomas Doyle wrote to SBC leaders, imploring them to act. A priest and former high-ranking lawyer for the Catholic Church, Doyle in the 1980s was one of the earliest to blow the whistle on child sexual abuse in the church. But Catholic leaders "lied about it ... covered it up and ignored the victims," said Doyle, now retired and living in northern Virginia.

Doyle turned to activism because of his experiences, work that brought him closer to those abused in Southern Baptist churches. Their stories — and how the SBC handled them — felt hauntingly familiar, he said.

"I saw the same type of behavior going on with the Southern Baptists," he said.

The responses were predictable, Doyle said. In one, Frank Page, then the SBC president, wrote that they were "taking this issue seriously" but that local church autonomy presented "serious limitations." In March, Page resigned as president and CEO of the SBC's Executive Committee for "a morally inappropriate relationship in the recent past," according to the executive committee.

Details have not been disclosed, but SBC officials said they had "no reason to suspect any legal impropriety." Page declined to be interviewed.

Other leaders have acknowledged that Baptist churches are troubled by predators but that they could not interfere in local church affairs.

Even so, the SBC has ended its affiliation with at least four churches in the past 10 years for affirming or endorsing homosexual behavior. The SBC governing documents ban gay or female pastors, but they do not outlaw convicted sex offenders from working in churches.

In one email to Debbie Vasquez, Augie Boto assured her that "no Baptist I know of is pretending that 'the problem does not exist.'"

"There is no question that some Southern Baptist ministers have done criminal things, including sexual abuse of children," he wrote in a May 2007 email. "It is a sad and tragic truth. Hopefully, the harm emanating from such occurrences will cause the local churches to be more aggressively vigilant."



Gwen Casados sits in her daughter's room in Houston. Her daughter, Heather Schneider, was sexually abused inside Second Baptist Church in Houston in 1994 and later died of a

drug overdose.

(Jon Shapley/Staff Photographer | Houston Chronicle)

Offenders return to preach

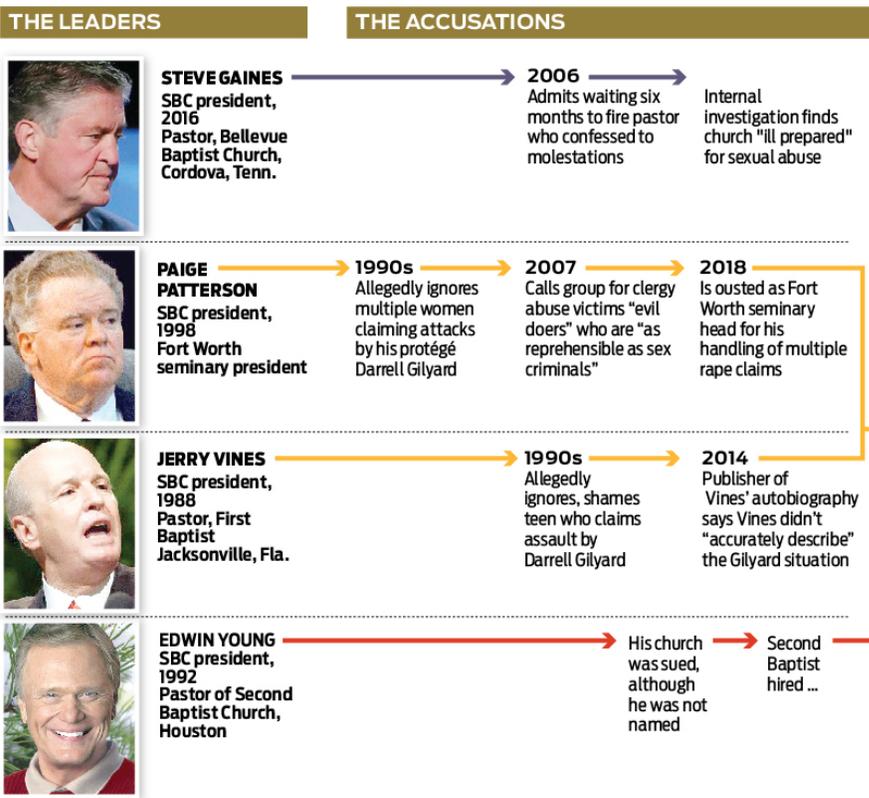
The SBC Executive Committee also wrote in 2008 that it "would certainly be justified" to end affiliations with churches that "intentionally employed a known sexual offender or knowingly placed one in a position of leadership over children or other vulnerable participants in its ministries."

Current SBC President J.D. Greear reaffirmed that stance in an email to the [Chronicle](#), writing that any church that "proves a pattern of sinful neglect — regarding abuse or any other matter — should absolutely be removed from fellowship from the broader denomination."

Trouble at the top

Six former leaders of the Southern Baptist Convention have directly dealt with allegations of sexual abuse or misconduct involving their church, their employees or themselves.

ACCUSED OF MISHANDLING ALLEGATIONS OF ABUSE



DARRELL GILYARD
1980s
Dozens of allegations brought by members of three churches he pastored

2009
Convicted of molesting two girls at Florida church



JOHN FORSE
1994
Contract employee who coordinated music pageants. Pleaded guilty and received deferred adjudication after molesting teen in choir room. Second Baptist was not part of the settlement of the Forse lawsuit.



CHAD FOSTER
2010
Youth pastor. Quietly fired by Second Baptist for reasons it says were unrelated to sexual abuse, but hired later at another church.

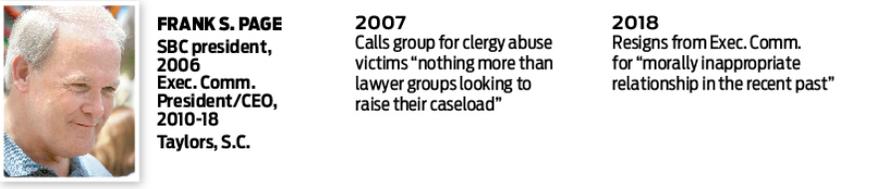
2013
Convicted of five felonies for abusing teens.

2015
Second Baptist and another church settled two lawsuits filed by Foster's victims.

ACCUSED OF MISDEEDS



RESIGNED



Source: Houston Chronicle and San Antonio Express-News Research

Reporting by John Tedesco, Robert Downen and Lise Olsen; Ken Ellis graphic / Staff

"The Bible calls for pastors to be people of integrity, known for their self-control and kindness," Greer wrote. "A convicted sex offender would certainly not meet those qualifications. Churches that ignore that are out of line with both Scripture and Baptist principles of cooperation."

But the newspapers found at least 10 SBC churches that welcomed

pastors, ministers and volunteers since 1998 who had previously faced charges of sexual misconduct. In some cases, they were registered sex offenders.

SEARCH OUR DATABASE: [See the Southern Baptist church officials who were convicted or pleaded guilty](#)

In Illinois, Leslie Mason returned to the pulpit a few years after he was convicted in 2003 on two counts of criminal sexual assault. Mason had been a rising star in local Southern Baptist circles until the charges were publicized by Michael Leathers, who was then editor of the state's Baptist newspaper.

Letters from angry readers poured in. Among those upset by Leathers' decision to publish the story was Glenn Akins, the interim executive director of the Illinois Baptist State Association.

"To have singled Les out in such a sensationalistic manner ignores many others who have done the same thing," Akins wrote in a memo, a copy of which Leathers provided. "You could have asked nearly any staff member and gotten the names of several other prominent churches where the same sort of sexual misconduct has occurred recently in our state."

Akins, now the assistant executive director of the Baptist General Association of Virginia, declined an interview request.

Leathers resigned after state Baptist convention leaders told him he might be fired and lose his severance pay, he said. Mason, meanwhile, admitted to investigators that he had relationships with four different girls, records show.

Mason received a seven-year prison sentence under a plea deal in which investigators dropped all but two of his charges. After his release, he returned to the pulpit of a different SBC church a few miles away.

"That just appalled me," Leathers said. "They had to have known they put a convicted sex offender behind the pulpit. ... If a church calls a woman to pastor their church, there are a lot of Southern Baptist organizations that, sadly, would disassociate with them immediately. Why wouldn't they do the same for convicted sex offenders?"

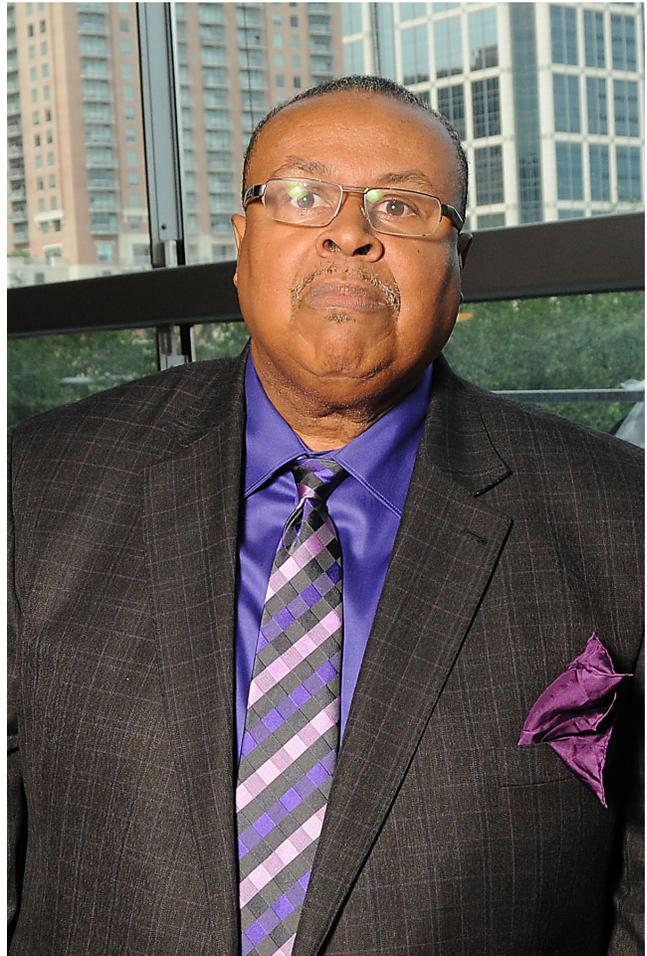
Mason has since preached at multiple SBC churches in central Illinois. He said in an interview that those churches "absolutely know about my past," and said churches and other institutions need "to be better at handling" sexual abuse.

Mason said that "nobody is above reproach in all things" and that church leaders — particularly those who work with children — "desperately need accountability."

In Houston, Michael Lee Jones started a Southern Baptist church, Cathedral of Faith, after his 1998 conviction for having sex with a teenage female congregant at a different SBC church nearby. Jones, also leader of a nonprofit called Touching the Future Today, was included on the list of convicted ministers released by the Baptist General Convention of Texas a decade ago.

In December, Cathedral of Faith celebrated its 20th anniversary at a downtown Houston hotel, according to the church's website. A flyer for the event touted sermons from Jones, another pastor and Joseph S. Ratliff, the longtime pastor of Houston's Brentwood Baptist Church.

Ratliff was sued in 2003 for sexual misconduct with a man he was counseling. The lawsuit was settled and dismissed by agreement of the parties, according to Harris County court records and interviews. The settlement is subject to a confidentiality agreement. Ratliff has been sued two other times, one involving another person who had come in for counseling; the other involved his handling of allegations against another church official, Harris County records show. The disposition of those two cases was not available.



Jones, Ratliff and Ratliff's attorney did not respond to requests for comment.

Dr. Joe Ratliff, the pastor of Brentwood Baptist Church, is pictured in this 2013 file photo. (Houston Chronicle file)

'A known problem'

Wade Burleson, a former president of Oklahoma's Southern Baptist convention, says it has long been clear that Southern Baptist churches face a crisis. In 2007 and 2018, he asked SBC leaders to study sexual abuse in churches and bring prevention measures to a vote at the SBC's annual meeting.

Leaders pushed back both times, he said. Some cited local church autonomy; others feared lawsuits if the reforms didn't prevent abuse.

Burleson couldn't help but wonder if there have been "ulterior motives" at play.

"There's a known problem, but it's too messy to deal with," he said in a recent interview. "It's not that we can't do it as much as we don't want to do it. ... To me, that's a problem. You must want to do it, to do it."

Doyle, the Catholic whistleblower, was similarly suspicious, if more blunt: "I understand the fear, because it's going to make the leadership look bad," he said. "Well, they are bad, and they should look bad. Because they have ignored this issue. They have demonized the victims."

Several Southern Baptist leaders and their churches have been criticized for ignoring the abused or covering for alleged predators, including at Houston's Second Baptist, where former SBC President Ed Young has been pastor since 1978. Young built the church into one of the largest and most important in the SBC; today, it counts more than 60,000 members who attend at multiple campuses.

Before she was molested in the choir room at Second Baptist in 1994, Heather Schneider filled a black notebook with poems. The seventh-grader, with long white-blond hair and sparkling green eyes, had begun to work as a model. She soon attracted attention from John Forse, who coordinated church pageants and programs at Second Baptist.

He also used his position to recruit girls for private acting lessons, according to Harris County court documents.

A day after she was attacked, Schneider told her mother, Casados, that Forse had touched her inappropriately and tried to force her to do "horrendous things." Casados called police.

Casados, who was raised a Baptist, said she received a call from Young, who initially offered to do whatever he could to help her daughter. But after she told Young she already had called police, he hung up and "we never heard from him again," she said in an interview.

John Neal Forse is a registered sex offender. He attacked a fourteen-year-old inside Second Baptist Church in 1994. (Texas DPS)

It took months — and the threat of criminal charges — before Forse left his position at the church, according to statements made by Forse's attorney at the time and Schneider's responses to questions in a related civil lawsuit.

In August 1994, Forse received deferred adjudication and 10 years' probation after pleading no contest to two counts of indecency with a child by contact. He remains a registered sex offender and was later convicted of a pornography charge. He is listed in the sex offender registry as transient; he could not be reached for comment.

Church officials declined interview requests. In a statement to the Chronicle, Second Baptist stated that it takes "allegations of sexual misconduct or abuse very seriously and constantly strives to provide and maintain a safe, Christian environment for all employees, church members and guests."

IN THEIR WORDS: [Victims, families and law enforcement explain the devastation that occurs when a child is abused by a religious leader](#)

The church declined to release its employment policies but described Forse as a "short-term contract worker" when he was accused of sex abuse. "After Second Baptist became aware of the allegations made

against Forse his contract was terminated," the statement says. "Upon notification, Second Baptist Church cooperated fully with law enforcement in this matter."

Schneider's parents filed a civil lawsuit against the church, Forse and a modeling agency. The case against the church was dismissed; its lawyers argued that Forse was not acting as a church employee. Second Baptist was not part of an eventual settlement.

In 1992, before Schneider was molested, a lawyer for the Southern Baptist Convention wrote in a court filing that the SBC did not distribute instructions to its member churches on handling sexual abuse claims. He said Second Baptist had no written procedures on the topic.

The lawyer, Neil Martin, was writing in response to a lawsuit that accused First Baptist Church of Conroe of continuing to employ Riley Edward Cox Jr. as a youth pastor after a family said that he had molested their child. In a court filing, Cox admitted to molesting three boys in the late 1980s.

Young, SBC president at the time of the lawsuit, was asked to outline the organization's policies on child sexual abuse as part of the lawsuit. He declined to testify, citing "local church autonomy" and saying in an affidavit that he had "no educational training in the area of sexual abuse or the investigation of sexual abuse claims."

Young also said he feared testifying could jeopardize his blossoming TV ministry.

Leaders of Second Baptist have been similarly reluctant to release or discuss their policies on sexual abuse in response to two other civil lawsuits related to sexual assault claims filed in the last five years, court

records show. Those suits accuse the church of ignoring or concealing abuses committed by youth pastor Chad Foster, who was later convicted.

Another civil lawsuit asserted that Second Baptist helped conceal alleged rapes by Paul Pressler, a former Texas state judge and former SBC vice president. In that suit, brought by a member of Pressler's youth group, three other men have said in affidavits that Pressler [groped them or tried to pressure them](#) into sex. Second Baptist, however, has been dismissed from the suit, and the plaintiff's sexual abuse claims against Pressler [have been dismissed because the statute of limitations had expired.](#)

Pressler has been a prominent member of Second Baptist for much of his adult life.

In its statement to the Chronicle, Second Baptist said "our policy and practice have been and will continue to be that any complaint of sexual misconduct will be heard, investigated and handled in a lawful and appropriate way. Reports of sexual abuse are immediately reported to law enforcement officials as required by law."



In this 1986 file photo, Dr. Ed Young stands in front of a new worship center at Houston's Second Baptist Church. Young in the 1990s served as president of the Southern Baptist Convention.

(John Van Beekum | Houston Chronicle)

'Break her down'

Another defendant in the lawsuit against Pressler: Paige Patterson, a former SBC president who, with Pressler, pushed the convention in the 1980s and 1990s to adopt literal interpretations of the Bible.

In May of last year, Patterson was ousted as president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth after he said he wanted to meet alone with a female student who said she was raped so he could "break her down," according to a [statement from seminary trustees](#).

But his handling of sexual abuse dates back decades. Several women have said that Patterson ignored their claims that his ex-protégé,

Darrell Gilyard, assaulted them at Texas churches in the 1980s; some of those allegations were detailed in a 1991 Dallas Morning News article.

The Gilyard case bothered Debbie Vasquez. She feared other victims had been ignored or left to handle their trauma alone.

When Vasquez became pregnant, she said, leaders of her church forced her to stand in front of the congregation and ask for forgiveness without saying who had fathered the child.

She said church members were generally supportive but were never told the child was their pastor's. Church leadership shunned her, asked her to get an abortion and, when she said no, threatened her and her child, she said. She moved abroad soon after.

Vasquez sued her former pastor and his church in 2006. In a deposition, the pastor, Dale "Dickie" Amyx, admitted to having sex with her when she was a teenager, though he maintained that it was consensual. He acknowledged paternity of her child but was never charged with any crime. Amyx was listed as the church's pastor as late



Paul Pressler, pictured in this 1999 photo, is a former Texas state judge and prominent Southern Baptist figure. Multiple men have alleged in a lawsuit that Pressler raped, molested or tried to pressure them into sex, though those claims have since been dismissed because they were filed after the statute of limitations had expired. (Houston Chronicle file)

as 2016, state Baptist records show. He could not be reached for comment.

Amyx denies that he threatened or physically assaulted Vasquez. He and his employer at the time of the lawsuit — an SBC church Vasquez never attended — argued that Vasquez exaggerated her story in an attempt to get publicity for her fight for reforms, court records show.

Amyx wrote an apology letter that Vasquez provided to the newspapers; her lawsuit was eventually dismissed, but she continued pressing SBC leaders, including Patterson, to act. In one series of emails, she asked Patterson why leaders didn't intervene in cases such as Gilyard's.

Patterson responded forcefully, writing in 2008 that he "forced Gilyard to resign his church" and "called pastors all over the USA and since that day (Gilyard) has never preached for any Southern Baptist organization."

In fact, Gilyard preached after his Texas ouster at various churches, including Jacksonville's First Baptist Church, which was led by former SBC President Jerry Vines. It was there that Tiffany Thigpen said she met Gilyard, who she said later "viciously" attacked her.

Thigpen, who was 18 at the time, said that Vines tried to shame her into silence after she disclosed the abuse to him. "How embarrassing this will be for you," she recalled Vines telling her. As far as Thigpen knows, police were never notified.

Gilyard was convicted in 2009 of lewd and lascivious molestation of two other teenage girls, both under 16, while pastoring a Florida church. He found work at an SBC church after his three-year prison

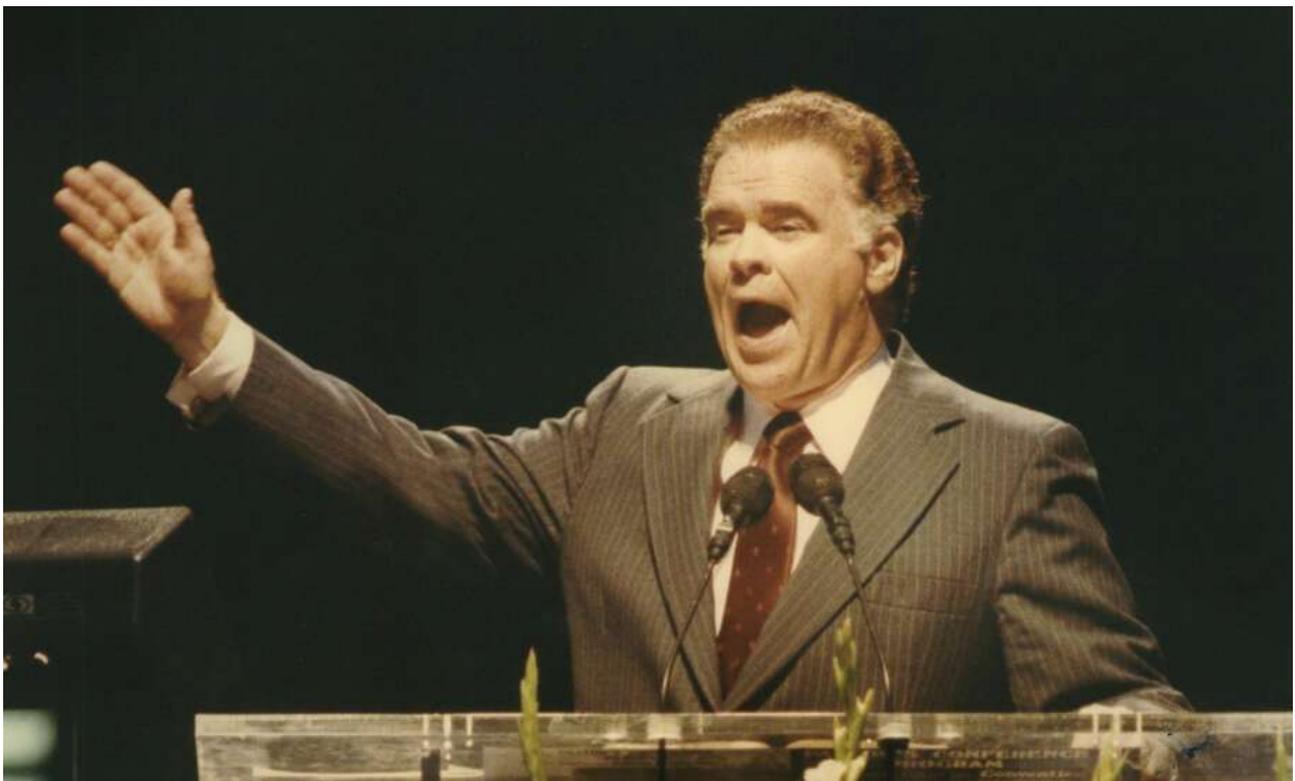
sentence, prompting the local Southern Baptist association to end its affiliation.

Neither Vasquez nor Thigpen have forgiven SBC leaders for their inaction.

Vasquez: "They made excuses and did nothing."

Thigpen said of Vines in a recent interview: "You left this little sheep to get hurt and then you protected yourself. And I hope when you lay your head on your pillow you think of every girl (Gilyard) hurt and life he ruined. And I hope you can't sleep."

Patterson and Vines did not respond to requests for comment. Heath Lambert, now senior pastor at First Baptist in Jacksonville, said in a statement that "we decry any act of violence or abuse."



Former SBC President Paige Patterson speaks to the Southern Baptist Convention in San

Antonio in 2007. Last year, Patterson was ousted as head of a Fort Worth seminary for his mishandling of reports of rapes made by female students. (Morris Goen/San Antonio Express News)

'Lethal' abuse

Defensive responses from church leaders rank among the worst things the abused can endure, says Harvey Rosenstock, a Houston psychiatrist who has worked for decades with victims and perpetrators of clergy sexual abuse. They can rewire a developing brain to forever associate faith or authority with trauma or betrayal, he says.

"If someone is identified as a man of God, then there are no holds barred," he said. "Your defense system is completely paralyzed. This man is speaking with the voice of God. ... So a person who is not only an authority figure, but God's servant, is telling you this is between us, this is a special relationship, this has been sanctioned by the Lord. That allows a young victim to have almost zero defenses. Totally vulnerable."

Rosenstock is among a growing number of expert clinicians who advocate for changes in statute of limitations laws in sexual abuse cases. They cite decades of neuroscience to show that those abused as children — particularly by clergy — can develop a sort of Stockholm syndrome that prevents them for decades from recognizing themselves as victims.

Houston psychiatrist Harvey Rosenstock explains the devastation of a child being abused by a religious leader.

Media: Jon Shapley/Houston Chronicle

Such was the case for most of David Pittman's life.

"Cocaine, heroin, methamphetamine — whatever would quiet my mind and diminish what I was feeling, because I wanted to be numb," he said. "I didn't want to feel any of it."

An athletic child with an incarcerated father, Pittman said he had dreamed about joining the youth group at his church near Atlanta since he was baptized there at age 8.

There, he could play any sport he wanted, and at 12 he found in the youth pastor a much-sought father figure. The grooming started almost immediately, he said: front-seat rides in the youth pastor's Camaro; trips to see the Doobie Brothers and Kansas in concert; and, eventually, sleepovers during which Pittman said he was first molested. Pittman said the assaults continued until he turned 15 and the youth pastor quietly moved to a new church nearby.

"For the longest time, I wouldn't even admit to myself that it happened," he said.

Three decades later, in 2006, Pittman learned that his alleged abuser was working as a youth minister in Georgia. Though Georgia's statute of limitations had by then elapsed, Pittman and others came forward with allegations.

Like Pittman, Ray Harrell grew up without a male figure in his life. His father left early, he said, and his mother later "threw herself" into the church. Eventually the youth minister started babysitting Harrell, then a pre-teen. Harrell still remembers the minister's stuffed monkey, which was used to "break the ice," he said.

"This is a youth minister and the only male influence in my life and so I never thought anything about it," Harrell said in an interview. "And when

the abuse started.... I knew it was wrong, but this is somebody I was supposed to believe in, to look up to, who was in the church."

Pittman reached out to the church's lead pastor and chairman of the church's deacons.

The deacon said in an interview that he confronted the youth minister and "asked him if there had ever been anything in his past and he acknowledged that there had been." The minister also told the deacon that he had gotten "discreet" counseling, the deacon said.

The youth minister resigned, after which the deacon and others began looking through a Myspace account that he had while employed at the church. On it, the deacon found messages "that the police should have," he said.

The deacon said he provided the Georgia State Baptist Convention with evidence that the youth minister should be barred from working in churches.

The youth minister who Pittman and Harrell say abused them still works at an SBC church in Georgia. The church's lead pastor declined to say if he was ever made aware of the allegations, though Pittman provided emails that show he reached out to the pastor repeatedly.

The youth minister did not return phone calls. Reached by email, he declined to be interviewed. The newspapers are not identifying him because he has not been charged.

Anne Marie Miller says she, too, has been denied justice. In July, Mark Aderholt, a former employee of the South Carolina Baptist Convention and a former missionary, was charged in Tarrant County with sexually

assaulting Miller in the late 1990s, when she was a teenager. Texas eliminated its statute of limitations for most sex crimes against children in 2007.

In 2007, Miller told the SBC's International Mission Board about Aderholt after he was hired there, prompting an internal investigation that officials said supported her story. Aderholt resigned and worked at SBC churches in Arkansas before moving to South Carolina, where he worked for the state's Baptist convention.

Miller, meanwhile, was told to "let it go" when she asked mission board officials about the investigation.

'Well, they are bad, and they should look bad. Because they have ignored this issue.'

the Rev. Thomas Doyle, who has urged SBC leaders to act on sexual abuse

"Forgiveness is up to you alone," general counsel Derek Gaubatz wrote in one 2007 email. "It involves a decision by you to forgive the other person of the wrongs done to you, just as Christ has forgiven you."

After Aderholt's arrest, a mission board spokeswoman said it did not notify his future SBC employers about the allegations in 2007 because of local church autonomy. The board also said that Miller at the time did not want to talk with police. She says that was because she was still traumatized.

The charges against Aderholt are pending.

Miller, 38, lives in the Fort Worth area. She says she has received support from Greear, the new SBC president. But she's skeptical that the SBC will act decisively.

"I was really, really hopeful that it was a turning point, but I've been disappointed that there hasn't been any meaningful action other than forming committees and assigning budgets, which is just good old Baptist red tape," Miller said. "That's just what you do — you form a committee, and you put some money towards it and no change actually happens."

The election last year of Greear, the 45-year-old pastor of The Summit Church in Durham, N.C., was seen as a signal that the SBC was moving away from more rigid conservative leaders such as Patterson. Greear has launched a group that is studying sexual abuse at the request of Burleson and others.

Unlike in 2008, Burleson last year directed his request for a sex offender registry to the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, which does moral advocacy on behalf of the Southern Baptist Convention. For the first time, the study of his proposal has been funded.

But Greear said in an email that he is limited by local church autonomy.

"Change has to begin at the ground level with churches and organizations," he wrote. "Our churches must start standing together with a commitment to take this issue much more seriously than ever before."

Part 2: [Southern Baptist churches hired ministers accused of past sex offenses](#)

Part 3: [All too often, Southern Baptist youth pastors take advantage of children](#)

Part 4: [Missionaries left trail of abuse, but leaders stayed quiet](#)

Part 5: [Southern Baptist churches harbored sex offenders](#)

Part 6: [Survivors of Baptist sexual abuse come forward to help others](#)

In this 1979 file photo, attendees of the Southern Baptist Convention's annual meeting, held that year in Houston, form a "human cross" in the Astrodome.

(John Van Beekum | Houston Chronicle)

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Offend, then repeat

Southern Baptist churches hired dozens of leaders previously accused of sex offenses

By [John Tedesco](#), [Robert Downen](#), and [Lise Olsen](#)

Abuse of Faith | Part 2

Multimedia by Jon Shapley

Published Feb. 12, 2019

Second of six parts

Doug Myers was suspected of preying on children at a church in Alabama — but he went on to work at Southern Baptist churches in Florida before police arrested him.

Timothy Reddin was convicted of possessing child pornography, yet he was still able to serve as pastor of a Baptist church in Arkansas.

Charles Adcock faced 29 counts of sexually assaulting a 14-year-old girl in Alabama. Then he volunteered as a worship pastor at a Baptist church in Texas.

The sordid backgrounds of these Southern Baptist ministers didn't stop them from finding new jobs at churches and working in positions of trust.

They're among at least 35 Southern Baptist pastors, youth ministers and volunteers who were convicted of sex crimes or accused of sexual

misconduct but still were allowed to work at churches during the past two decades, an investigation by the San Antonio Express-News and the Houston Chronicle reveals.

Medina County investigator Wayne Springer says sexual abusers groom not just their victims, but those around them.

Media: Jon Shapley/Houston Chronicle

Some were suspected of misconduct but were allowed to leave quietly and work elsewhere. Others had been arrested, had criminal records or even had to register as sex offenders but later found jobs at Baptist churches.

All the men worked at times for churches in the Southern Baptist Convention, the largest coalition of Baptist churches in the United States.

The SBC has rejected efforts to establish a registry to track sexual abuse cases and prevent churches from hiring predatory pastors. In some cases, churches knew of a pastor's past and allowed him to work anyway. In others, the SBC's inaction might have allowed offenders to move from community to community, ruining lives as they slipped through background checks and found jobs at unsuspecting churches.

"There's no other group that does pass the buck better," said Dee Ann Miller, a longtime victims' rights activist in Kansas who speaks out against sexual abuse by Baptist ministers and clergy in other faiths.

The practice of hiring pastors with disturbing pasts is part of a broader problem of sex abuse at Southern Baptist churches across the United States, the newspapers' investigation shows.

At least 700 people — nearly all of them children — reported being sexually abused by those who worked or volunteered at Southern Baptist churches since 1998. Records show that about 220 Southern Baptist church leaders and volunteers have been convicted of sex crimes or took plea deals. The charges range from possessing child pornography to raping children.

The SBC had an opportunity to stop some of the abuse.

In 2007, at their annual meeting in San Antonio, SBC leaders considered a proposal to prevent sexual abuse by creating a database of ministers who had been credibly accused of sexual misconduct. But when the SBC met again in 2008, the committee assigned to study the proposal rejected it, saying it had no authority to compel churches to report sex offenders to the SBC.

With no centralized method of tracking sex abuse at Southern Baptist churches, the Chronicle and the Express-News spent months developing their own database of Baptist offenders by collecting news stories and public records to find perpetrators and gather details about their cases. Studies show most sexual assault victims don't contact police, which means the true number of offenders may well be higher.

August "Augie" Boto, interim president of the SBC's Executive Committee, said sex abuse in churches is a horrendous act. He said the newspapers' database would shine "the light of day upon crime."

"Taking advantage of the vulnerable is what criminals do," Boto said. "And when that happens, our job is to voice it. Not to hide it."

But it's unclear if anything will change at the SBC.

RELATED: [How can Southern Baptist church leaders prevent sexual misconduct?](#)

No religion is immune to sexual misconduct in its ranks. But unlike the Roman Catholic Church, which is wrestling with its own sex-abuse scandal, Baptists don't answer to a pope or bishop.

Local church autonomy is a bedrock foundation of Baptist faith. There's no diocese that assigns priests to a parish. Instead, each church is responsible for ordaining and hiring its own ministers.

Boto said the SBC can't force its churches to participate in any efforts to track sex abuse. That means each Baptist church in the SBC — there are 47,000 of them — decides for itself how vigorously to screen job applicants.

"Pastoral assignment among Baptists is kind of the Wild West," said Ed Stetzer, a Christian author and executive director of the Billy Graham Center at Wheaton College in Illinois. "There's no regulation. There's no system."

At some churches — especially small ones with fewer resources — the congregation's idea of vetting a potential pastor is deciding whether he's a "good speaker," Stetzer said.

"The Wild Wild West approach to moving from church to church has some real consequences for people who don't know that the pastor that they called is the pastor that got fired for abusing a child three churches ago," Stetzer said.

'A bad feeling'

In case after case, Southern Baptists with a sex offense or troublesome behavior in their past have had no problem finding jobs as preachers, youth group leaders or volunteers at churches across the country.

In Georgia, the pastor of the SBC-affiliated Eastside Baptist Church near Atlanta announced it was re-examining its hiring practices after Alexander Edwards, a volunteer youth pastor, was arrested in 2016 on charges of sexual battery involving an 11-year-old boy he had met at the church.

It wasn't Edwards' first criminal charge. While serving as a youth pastor at another Baptist church 160 miles away in Lee County south of Atlanta, Edwards was arrested in August 2013 and charged with using the internet to find a child for a sex act. That case was still pending when Edwards began volunteering at Eastside. He was convicted of the 2016 charges, and the charge in Lee County was dismissed.

"It was incredibly painful," said the current pastor at Eastside, John Hull, who blamed Edwards' hiring on employment practices that have since been revised.

Hull emphasized that Edwards no longer worked at Eastside when the abuse occurred. But he had met the victim and his family at the church and ingratiated himself with them.

"A child was hurt, and it happened on our watch," Hull said.

"Taking advantage of the vulnerable is what criminals do. And when that happens, our job is to voice it. Not to hide it."

August "Augie" Boto, interim president of the SBC's Executive Committee

In Arkansas, Timothy Reddin was director of missions for the SBC-affiliated Central Baptist Association in 1998 when he was caught with child pornography and sentenced to 27 months in prison.

Reddin told the federal judge at his sentencing hearing in 2000 that he would never molest a child. But last July, authorities say, Reddin attempted to solicit a 14-year-old minor for sex in an online chat. At the time, Reddin was pastor of Turner Street Baptist Church in Springdale, Ark., despite his federal child-pornography conviction.

The "minor" was actually Gerald Faulkner, an undercover agent with the Department of Homeland Security who specialized in cases of child exploitation and child pornography.

"I'll never tell!" Reddin told the agent in an online message. "I could go to jail!"

Reddin pleaded guilty to a charge of attempted enticement of a minor to engage in sexual activity; in early February, he was sentenced to 10 years in prison. His lawyer declined to discuss the case.

In Alabama, Charles Adcock was charged in 2015 with 29 counts of rape and sodomy involving a 14-year-old girl he met at the SBC-affiliated Woodward Avenue Baptist Church in Muscle Shoals, where he had worked as a youth minister a few years earlier.

While out on bail under the supervision of his parents, Adcock moved to Texas, where First Baptist Church in Bedford allowed Adcock to

volunteer as a music minister at worship services, despite knowing about his arrest.

"There's not a chance in the world that I would ever hire somebody if they were facing charges like this," said William Rushing, the current pastor of the church in Muscle Shoals. "You just got to be a big idiot to say, 'Hey, you know what? I'm going to hire this person even though they've got this accusation against them.'"

Adcock insisted he was innocent. Without admitting any guilt, he pleaded to a single charge of second-degree sodomy in January 2016 and served 15 months. He is now a registered sex offender.

"He has always, and continues to assert, his innocence," his lawyer, Chris Rippey, wrote in a letter to the Chronicle.

Steve Knott, at the time the pastor of First Baptist in Bedford, said another pastor had hired Adcock. He wasn't allowed unsupervised access to children, court records show. That was little solace to victims' advocates who protested the decision.

"To quietly hire an accused child molester as a music minister, which automatically places him in a position of trust, was astoundingly reckless and irresponsible on the part of the church leadership," the Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests said in a statement. "It shows lack of sound judgment in the care and protection of the children of their church."

An aerial view of First Baptist Church in Hondo, Texas.

(Jon Shapley/Staff Photographer | Houston Chronicle)

'Broken Trust'

The SBC does not keep statistics on ministers accused of abuse, making it difficult to compare the rate of sexual misconduct at SBC churches to other religions, such as Catholicism.

"The problem with Protestants is, we don't have the ability to track," said Wade Burleson, a Baptist pastor from Oklahoma who proposed creating a database of offenders at the SBC meeting in 2007. "Where we should be skewered is that leadership is acting as if they don't care to track. OK, so which is worse, tracking and knowing and doing nothing, or knowing there's a problem and refusing to track?"

Church autonomy didn't stop one of the SBC's state conventions in Texas from keeping its own list of offenders.

Under mounting pressure from critics in 2007, the Baptist General Convention of Texas, one of many groups that fall under the SBC umbrella, published a webpage called "Broken Trust" that included a list of eight Baptist pastors who had been convicted of sex crimes.

The convention also kept a longer, confidential list of others who had been credibly accused of sexual misconduct. Churches could contact the organization to see if a job applicant was on the list.

One of the ministers on the list was John McKay, a pastor at First Baptist Church of Hondo, 40 miles west of San Antonio. A charismatic former Marine who had a strong following, McKay had once received a military commendation for keeping his men out of trouble overseas.

But in the spring of 2003, the parents of a girl who attended the church suspected McKay was sleeping with their teenage daughter. The girl's distraught father asked Medina County Sheriff's Sgt. Wayne Springer to investigate. Springer checked McKay's employment history and

discovered a record of questionable behavior toward women at other churches.

"I started looking into his past and we started calling these other churches where he'd been," recalled Springer, now an investigator with the district attorney's office in Medina County. "And there wasn't one of those churches that we called that didn't tell me something bad about this guy."

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John McKay, former pastor of First Baptist Church of Hondo (Texas DPS)

Springer was told that McKay liked to rub his arm against the breasts of church secretaries when he signed paperwork at the office. One Baptist deacon, Edward Lozano, told Springer that McKay had committed "indiscretions" with married women at a now-closed Baptist church in San Antonio, according to Springer's investigative report about McKay.

In Hondo, McKay began "grooming" a teenager in his congregation when she was only 13 years old, telling her how special she was and how she was more mature than other girls, the report states.

After two years, the relationship turned sexual. The girl was 15; McKay was 57.

McKay drove her to motels in Devine and San Antonio weekly to have sex — a second-degree felony in Texas, since she was under the age of 17.



John McKay took his 15-year-old victim to the Country Corner Inn to have sexual intercourse, according to investigator Wayne Springer.

(Jon Shapley/Staff Photographer | Houston Chronicle)

Springer arrested McKay on April 16, 2003. After pleading guilty to sexual assault and serving nearly nine years in a Huntsville prison, McKay moved to San Antonio, where he lived as a registered sex offender.

McKay's wife answered the door at their house in August. She said he

was in the hospital being treated for cancer and was unavailable for an interview. They had put his past behind them, she said, and didn't want to talk. McKay died in September.

McKay didn't face any criminal charges related to his previous employment in San Antonio, and it's unclear if his past employers told First Baptist Church of Hondo about their concerns.

Mike Vasquez, senior pastor at the church in Hondo, said background checks are conducted for all employees, especially anyone dealing with children. The McKay case was before his time, Vasquez said, but he was told the church fired McKay.

"They dealt with it pretty swiftly," Vasquez said.

Springer said the father of McKay's victim said he "should have known better" but trusted McKay.

After all, McKay was the pastor of his church.

Medina County investigator Wayne Springer says sexual assault cases involving church officials can be tricky.

Media: Jon Shapley/Houston Chronicle

No silver bullet

The Baptist General Convention of Texas, also known as Texas Baptists, eventually removed the public list with McKay and other offenders and stopped maintaining its larger confidential list, saying it was rarely being used and that effectively dealing with sexual misconduct "falls directly on the local congregation."

"While the list was created out of a desire to help churches, utilization

was low and maintenance was challenging," Texas Baptists said in a written statement.

"There were concerns about accuracy, given that the convention did not have the capacity to conduct investigations, and churches in their autonomy were free to choose whether or not to utilize the service," the statement read. "At the same time, the quality and availability of online background checks and registry searches increased dramatically."

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A criminal-background check often includes a nationwide search of public records. But companies that offer such searches rely on a hodgepodge of data from thousands of county courthouses across the United States. In many cases, criminal records aren't online at all, creating gaping holes in the system.

Checking sex offender registries isn't always effective, either. Sex crimes are often difficult to prosecute, and some church leaders plead to less-severe charges that don't require them to register as a sex offender.

Given the limitations of background checks, the proposal for an internal SBC database of offenders could be a powerful way for Baptist churches to police their ranks, said Sean Bigley, a lawyer in Southern California whose firm specializes in background investigations.

"You just got to be a big idiot to say, 'Hey, you know what? I'm going to hire this person even though they've got this accusation against

them."

William Rushing, pastor of Woodward Avenue Baptist Church

"On the whole, the idea has merit," Bigley said. "I don't think anyone's going to argue with wanting to protect children from predators. That's certainly an honorable thing."

But many employers — not just churches — are reluctant to release anything beyond basic information about a former employee because they're afraid of a defamation suit, said Michael Holland, a San Antonio lawyer who represents employers.

"It's a tough problem," Holland said. "It's a sad, frustrating topic, and I really feel bad for people who have been assaulted by folks in the ministry."

Burleson, the Baptist pastor from Oklahoma who proposed a database of offenders back in 2007, has had years to think about handling the sensitive information responsibly.

Burleson primarily views the database as a place for credible accusations — cases where investigators concluded something happened. Burleson also would encourage other Protestant denominations to participate.

Burleson said the SBC should pay the cost of maintaining the database. To avoid any hint of bias, he says that an independent nonprofit should oversee the data and diligently seek out court cases alleging misconduct so it's not entirely reliant on churches to report

wrongdoing.

"Whoever's in power has a tendency to want to protect their buddies," Burleson said. "And I don't like a database in the hands of powerful people in the Southern Baptist Convention."



Wayne Springer, chief investigator for the district attorney's office in Medina County, says John McKay fooled both his victim and others at the church.

(Jon Shapley/Staff Photographer | Houston Chronicle)

Pastor Doug's rule

Some ministers move from church to church for years until they're caught.

Concerns about Doug Myers' behavior around young boys followed him from Alabama to Florida before he was finally caught, then convicted in 2007.

Charles Canida first met Myers in 2000 at Concord Baptist Church in Russellville, Ala., where Canida was a deacon. Myers came from a Southern Baptist church in Maryland.

Myers quickly gravitated toward boys in the youth group, Canida said, despite being hired to minister to adults. Canida was soon suspicious.

"I just had a bad feeling about him," Canida said in a recent interview.

The concerns grew when, a few months after Myers' arrival, a boy told Canida about "Pastor Doug's" rule: Everyone had to swim naked.

Months later, a mother told Canida that Myers "held her son down on a table at the church on his back ... and was blowing on his stomach to tickle him," Canida said. "She was literally in shambles."

Canida said he met with the county's district attorney but no charges were ever filed.

Concerns about Myers eventually split the congregation at Concord. Canida and others started a new church; Myers moved to Florida, where he established new churches for a few years with help from state and local Baptist associations.

Canida wasn't surprised when he found out Myers was arrested. Myers admitted to molesting a minor he met at a church in Eustis, Fla., according to a probable cause affidavit filed in Lake County in 2006; he pleaded guilty a year later and was sentenced to seven years in prison.

The family of the Florida victim sued, alleging that the Florida Baptist Convention and the Lake County Baptist Association had failed to contact Myers' previous churches before entrusting him to start

churches in the Sunshine State. The victim, who according to the suit was 11 when he met Myers, said the assaults caused "shame, humiliation ... suicidal ideations and night terrors."

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A Lake County jury later awarded the victim \$12.5 million. The lawsuit was eventually settled for an undisclosed amount of money, court records show.

Before his release from prison in December 2012, new allegations surfaced in Maryland, where he had been a pastor. Myers was arrested on charges of custodial child abuse and sex offenses against multiple victims from 1995-2001. He was convicted in Calvert County, Md., and is serving a 15-year sentence.



Doug Myers worked at churches in Maryland, Alabama and Florida until he admitted to molesting a minor in 2006. (Florida Dept. of Law Enforcement)

Training and transparency

SBC officials stress the importance of conducting criminal background checks. The SBC's publishing arm, Lifeway Christian Resources, offers discounted screenings to churches through a partnership with a background-check company. They've handled 320,000 checks since 2009.

But even if no criminal records are found, Boto said, that doesn't mean a church's job is done.

When Texas Baptists stopped compiling its registry of offenders, the state convention partnered with MinistrySafe, an organization in Fort Worth that trains churches to develop stronger policies and techniques to prevent sexual abuse.

Katie Swafford, director of counseling services at Texas Baptists, said the training sessions have been eye-opening. One lesson is that background checks, while important, won't catch every threat because most pedophiles don't yet have a criminal record.

That means church members need to ask better screening questions during the hiring process and learn how to spot predatory behavior.

"If you don't understand the risk, you're probably not preparing for the right thing," Swafford said.

Larry Baker and Rex Miller, two FBI agents assigned to the San Antonio Child Exploitation Task Force, have spent years uncovering crimes against children. They once investigated a popular youth pastor who was always around kids — but interacted only with boys.

The pastor had "zero involvement" with girls, even though he was responsible for them.

"Pastoral assignment among Baptists is kind of the Wild West. There's no regulation; there's no system."

Ed Stetzer, executive director of the Billy Graham Center at Wheaton College

"It's tough," Miller said. "For a lot of people, it's hard to imagine that someone would have a sexual interest in children."

It was that very dynamic — the tendency toward denial — that made it difficult for people to believe the allegations against McKay, the charismatic former Marine who served as pastor in Hondo.

"Everybody just thought he was the best guy," said Springer, the Medina County investigator who led the case.

McKay's charm blinded parents and church leaders to the warning signs: the hugs McKay gave his underage victim at softball games; the suspicious phone calls at her home; the little favors McKay did for her.

After McKay's arrest, some who attended the church shunned Springer as if he were the criminal, he said.

Springer said it's crucial for church congregations to understand that sexual predators don't "groom" only victims to gain their trust. They groom everyone around them so no one suspects a thing.

"He was everything that the community wanted," Springer said. "But (they) didn't know about the devil inside him."

Sunset in Hondo, Texas.

(Jon Shapley/Staff Photographer | Houston Chronicle)

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Preying on teens

More than 100 Southern Baptist youth pastors convicted or charged in sex crimes

By [Lise Olsen](#), [Robert Downen](#), and [John Tedesco](#)

Abuse of Faith | Part 3

Multimedia by Jon Shapley

Published Feb. 13, 2019

Third of six parts

Chad Foster, a former firefighter from Missouri, arrived in Texas soon after his divorce and with his 30th birthday fast approaching. He described himself as a fairly new Christian with a history of hard drinking.

He was hired and later ordained as a youth pastor by Houston's Second Baptist Church, one of the largest Southern Baptist congregations in the country.

"When I took the job," Foster later said, "I didn't know anything about it."

Foster preached abstinence and urged teens to sign a contract to save themselves for marriage. But he soon targeted underaged girls at the church's Cypress campus for intimate text messages and physical contact. His brief career as a youth pastor ended in 2013 with guilty pleas to three counts of sexual assault of a child and two of online

solicitation of a minor.

A 16-year-old girl with whom he illegally had sex testified at his sentencing.

"I thought I really loved him," she said. "He's not the person I knew. I feel like he's a sick person. I think he's going to do it again if he's on probation. I have no doubt in my mind that he will."

There are many others like Foster. Scores of Southern Baptist youth pastors across the country, many with little oversight or formal training, used their church positions to groom and sexually abuse children in their flocks, an investigation by the Houston Chronicle and San Antonio Express-News reveals.

Nicole and police investigators say Houston youth pastor Chad Foster used his position to take advantage of members of his youth groups.

Media: Jon Shapley/Houston Chronicle

More than 100 Southern Baptists described as former youth pastors or youth ministers are now in prison, are registered as sex offenders or have been charged with sex crimes, the newspapers found. Their most common targets were teenage girls and boys, though smaller children also were molested, sometimes in pastors' studies and Sunday school rooms.

"You can't let your guard down," said Amanda Griffith, a federal prosecutor in San Diego who has handled dozens of sex crime cases, including those involving predatory youth pastors. "There's the belief that church is sacrosanct, but this can happen anywhere."

Foster toted chicken nuggets to school lunchrooms and delivered passionate sermons as part of his ministry. But behind the scenes, he was prolific in his flirtations, using cellphones and laptops to message multiple girls at Second Baptist and later at a different church.

He asked girls as young as 12 for graphic details about "temptations." He shared his sexual fantasies and masturbated online, displaying himself via social media webcams or describing his activities in texts. He urged his favorites to send their own explicit images and to visit the suburban tract home where he lived alone, Harris County court records show.

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Second Baptist quietly fired him in 2010 after receiving complaints about lying and other inappropriate behavior, court records show. Church members and employees were among those who pointed out problems before his dismissal.

But church leaders did not inform youth group members and parents that Foster had been fired or why. Nor did they tell leaders of another church, the Community of Faith Church in Cypress, a non-SBC church that hired Foster to run its youth group in 2011. He found more targets there, court records show.

Second Baptist officials stayed quiet about Foster's 2010 dismissal, even after Harris County detectives arrested Foster in 2011, investigators say.

Southern Baptist churches are the nation's largest Protestant group, but they lack common hiring protocols or standard pastor training programs. They do not have uniform policies for sharing information

about pastors fired or convicted of inappropriate sexual behavior, sexual abuse or assault — the kind of transparency that could protect churches and their congregants from sexual predators such as Foster.

Second Baptist officials declined an interview request. But in a statement, the church said that Foster's termination on Dec. 6, 2010, had "nothing to do with sexual abuse or allegations of sexual abuse." The church said "Second Baptist was not made aware of any sexual misconduct by Foster until he was arrested in November 2011, almost a year after his termination."

The church, however, had received complaints about Foster's general conduct and about his behavior with an adult girlfriend, court records show. Those complaints included questions about his dishonesty regarding going on a job interview, exceeding time and texting limits on his church-provided cellphone, and sharing a hotel room with his girlfriend on an out-of-town trip.

Regardless, Second Baptist gave Foster a "great reference," according to testimony from the pastor of the church that later hired Foster, Community of Faith.



Chad Foster, sex offender registry photo.
(Texas DPS)

In 2013, Foster begged a female Harris County judge for leniency after

pleading guilty to five felonies that were uncovered after he had become youth pastor at Community of Faith. Three victims – two who had met him at Second Baptist and one at Community of Faith — requested a long sentence.

Foster was sentenced to five years in 2013, a fraction of the maximum possible penalty. He was released in 2017 and is now living in College Station as a registered sex offender. He declined to comment for this story.

The view from prison

Former Southern Baptist youth pastor Gary Welch says he prays for forgiveness every day for having abused his church position to groom and then repeatedly have sex with a teenage girl.

Welch was married and nearing his 40th birthday when he began to cultivate his victim, who was then 13. They met at his church in Navarro County south of Dallas.

Clandestine meetings and sexual contact continued until the victim was 16 and sought help. When confronted, Welch quickly confessed. He pleaded guilty to four counts of aggravated sexual assault in 2012 and was sentenced to 55 years in prison.

He's incarcerated in a dorm reserved for participants in a faith-based program in the Wynne Unit prison on the outskirts of Huntsville.

Like many other Southern Baptist preachers and youth pastors, Welch never attended college or seminary. His father was a preacher and he was a teenager when he felt called by God to teach Sunday school. He worked in churches for years before being formally ordained as a youth

minister by a church in Corsicana.

The process was simple. He was observed by the pastor. Deacons posed a few questions, and then they voted him in. At a ceremony, the whole congregation clapped and cheered. He's still proud of what he accomplished in the name of the Lord, including taking children on mission trips to build a cinder block church in Mexico and pray with the homeless on the streets of Austin.

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Welch said all youth pastors need training and strict guidelines. His church offered both, but when he took the wrong path, no one noticed. Supervisors saw only his successes, he said. And teens tend to glorify their pastors.

"For students, a lot of times, students will say that's what Christ looks like," he said. "... and when you do something that causes them to question what Christ is or who Christ is ... it causes a lot of destruction in people's lives."



Gary Welch, a former youth pastor now imprisoned in Huntsville, is serving time for sexual assaults of a teenage girl.

(Jon Shapley/Staff Photographer | Houston Chronicle)

'Ruining the mood'

Foster's ordination was delayed after Second Baptist leaders received complaints, including reports that Foster lied about a trip he took, sent excessive texts and behaved inappropriately, court records show. But ultimately his certificate was signed by a group that included Ed Young, a nationally-known religious broadcaster, longtime pastor of Second Baptist and a former president of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Foster later told a Harris County judge that he lacked any training in how to teach or counsel adolescents in his youth group at Second Baptist's fast-growing Cypress campus.

The only advice Foster contends he received before being dispatched to save the souls of dozens of junior- and senior-high kids was to "become friends" and "become popular" and let the parents know if children were actively suicidal, according to a sentencing transcript.

That simple formula seemed to work. Soon after Foster began as youth pastor in 2007, the Cypress campus' youth group population boomed. Junior and senior high girls fought over who would bring him coffee, recalls Nicole, who initially admired Foster but later counted herself among his victims. She asked that her last name be withheld.

Nicole, now in her early 20s, described herself as naive and deeply religious as a teen. Foster began to break down boundaries with her and others by sending flirty texts, sharing bus seats on a church trip and inviting girls to his house, she said. Receiving sexually-charged missives from the man who delivered sermons and performed baptisms left her troubled and confused. As a young teen, she didn't realize she was one of several targets.

Later, she and her parents left the Baptist faith.

For years, Second Baptist Church leaders have denied that they knew Foster was behaving inappropriately with teenagers before his well-publicized arrest.

Foster was fired by Second Baptist in late 2010 and told to cease communicating with church teens, according to court documents and his sentencing transcript. His confused youth group members and their parents got no explanation.

In its statement to the Chronicle, the church noted that the youngest victim, who first met Foster at their church when she was 12, was hit

with a barrage of sexual texts that were the subject of criminal charges only after Foster was terminated by Second Baptist.

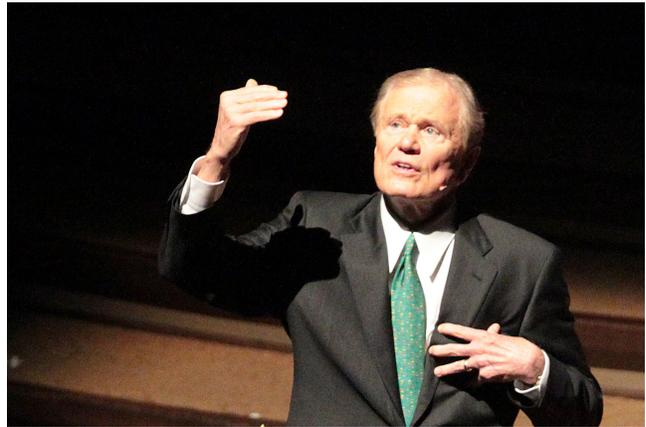
Second Baptist later settled at least two lawsuits filed by two of Foster's victims.

Foster first attracted his 16-year-old victim — whose name is being withheld because she is a sexual assault victim — during a 2011 summer church camp for his new church, Community of Faith. He visited the girls' dorm late one night to share his message about being saved by God from the depths of drinking and divorce and later managed to get her alone on the beach in Alabama. On the way home from camp, they exchanged cellphone numbers.

A few days later, she began texting Foster about a problem she was having with a boy when he stopped her. She was "ruining the mood," he said. When she asked why, he replied that he was masturbating, according to Harris County court transcript. Foster then began to share his detailed sexual fantasies, swore her to secrecy and pressured her to begin a "relationship."

Foster had been leading the youth group at Community of Faith for less than a year when the mother of the 16-year-old spotted his texts. By then, Foster had already invited the girl alone to his home and illegally engaged in sexual intercourse with her at least three times.

The 16-year-old suffered an emotional crisis. She confided in a teacher



Dr. Ed Young speaks at Second Baptist Church in Houston. (James Nielsen/Houston Chronicle file)

[who alerted police](#); police alerted the church. Her pastor at Community of Faith quickly reached out to others.

RELATED: [How can Southern Baptist churches and parents help prevent sexual abuse?](#)

That's when a second victim came forward — the girl who first met Foster at Second Baptist when she was just 12.

The same girl testified that Foster began texting her with inappropriate messages when she was 12 and 13, but his behavior accelerated to web-cam displays of his erections and ejaculations after she got a computer for Christmas in 2010. Over the next year, she received 15,000 texts as well as Skype and Facebook messages from Foster, including explicit live videos of masturbation, invitations to send him nude photos and warnings to delete all logs and never tell anyone.

"My life has turned upside down. I can't relate to what people are going through any more. My innocence is gone," his youngest victim later said in court, breaking down in tears. "I no longer have a relationship with God, and that was once something very special to me. I don't trust anyone in churches anymore."

As part of the criminal case and civil lawsuits that unfolded after Foster's arrest, Second Baptist officials were informed that Foster had aggressively flirted and sent sexual texts to the 12-year-old as well as at least three older youth group members during the time Foster still worked at their church — including one who testified under oath that he seduced her five to 10 times while she was still in high school, court records show.

It's unclear from court records whether church officials reviewed the

content of Foster's cellphone texts or the contents of his church computer email either after receiving complaints prior to firing Foster in 2010 — or later when police and a parent requested help to identify additional youth group victims.

Youth pastor pornography

The methods Foster used to cultivate Houston-area teens show up in dozens of other cases nationwide. Other sexually abusive youth pastors have changed churches, left the state or received support for mission trips abroad even after complaints surfaced or criminal probes began, court records show.

Some predatory youth pastors were caught and charged only after they began distributing images of teenage victims across state lines.

Two brothers — guitar-playing music minister Jordan Earls and his brother, Joshua, a newly-ordained youth pastor — worked together with a youth group at a Southern Baptist Church in Garland for nearly four years beginning in 2009.

They were the sons of a Southern Baptist preacher and rented an apartment where they threw pool parties. The brothers were single and still in their 20s. They sent girls explicit texts and exchanged pornographic photos and videos with the teens, criminal and civil court files show. The younger brother inappropriately touched girls while in the church and elsewhere, according to the Dallas civil lawsuit.

"Essentially, these men, who lived together in a one-bedroom apartment, ran a child pornography ring using their positions of authority and (church) facilities to exploit impressionable pubescent girls," parents of one youth group victim alleged in a lawsuit that the

church settled.

Those parents alleged that the younger of the two brothers, Jordan Earls, sexually molested their daughter inside the church and attacked another girl in a home. A related Dallas County prosecution was dropped after federal charges were filed.

SEARCH OUR DATABASE: [See the Southern Baptist church officials who were convicted or pleaded guilty](#)

The pair left the church before Garland police sought to formally question them about complaints of inappropriate contact with teens, according to court records and interviews with a Garland police detective and a federal prosecutor. Both Jordan and Joshua continued to work with youth in other churches despite the ongoing criminal investigation.

The Earlses ultimately were caught mainly because they continued to contact Texas victims after leaving the state. Federal prosecutors got involved because both exchanged graphic images of masturbation with teen victims via the internet and cellphones.

Joshua Earls had moved to another church at the time of his arrest in 2013, and Jordan Earls had traveled to South Carolina to work at a church run by their father.

Ultimately, the brothers were convicted of possession of federal pornography for sending and receiving lewd images of their victims and themselves across state lines. At sentencing, Joshua Earls in 2015 begged forgiveness from his victims, from his family and for "having sinned against the government."

"And most importantly, I am sorry to God. I sinned against him, and I should have known better."

Both remain incarcerated: Jordan Earls was sentenced to 15 years and Joshua 12.



Joshua and Jordan Earls were convicted in federal court of pornography charges. Their former church was successfully sued on behalf of victims who were members of their youth group. (Dallas County civil court)

Arapaho Road Baptist Church in Garland settled lawsuits filed by parents of two victims and declined comment because of a confidentiality agreement. Leaders "continue to pray for all parties involved," said spokesman Carolyn Alvey. "From the moment they learned there was anything inappropriate going on, they wanted it to be

in the light and they wanted to make sure the parties responsible were held accountable."

In other cases, pastors made arrangements to meet victims online, using Back Page ads, chat rooms or email to meet and seduce minors from out of town — sometimes encountering undercover police instead.

It's not just youth pastors who cruise online for teenage victims. Joe David Barron, then a 52-year-old pastor at Prestonwood Baptist in Plano, drove 200 miles after arranging online in 2008 to meet someone he thought was a 13-year-old girl. He primed her for the experience by sending along an image of himself in his underwear with an erection. He arrived at the meeting place, an apartment building just outside Bryan, with large box full of condoms after promising to be gentle when he took her virginity.

Barron was arrested by undercover officers who intercepted his SUV as he circled the parking lot. Barron was fired by his church, which cooperated with investigators, according to Bryan Police Detective Travis Hines.

[In a letter to the Chronicle](#), Barron said he took responsibility for his "choices and behaviors." He attended treatment and has had no reported problems in a decade as a registered sex offender. He now works with ex-offenders in a nonprofit.

"I determined my life would not be defined by my failure," he wrote. "Rather I want my life to be defined by how I responded to my failure."

Bryan police detective Travis Hines describes his pursuit of Joe David Barron. Barron, now out of prison, says he wants to be judged on he has responded to his mistake.

Media: Jon Shapley/Houston Chronicle

More victims?

Chad Foster was found guilty of three sexual assaults of the 16-year-old and two more felonies for his obscene online behavior with the younger girl. During his 2013 sentencing hearing, he asked a Harris County judge for mercy and probation.

At Foster's sentencing, three victims testified. Nicole, the eldest of the trio, took the stand first to tell the judge that there were even more youth group members who were afraid to speak out.

"Although these girls didn't come forward, this is not an isolated incident, and there are a lot more that have come to me," she said.

In an interview with the Chronicle, she described a long-term pattern of aggressive flirtation or abuse that Foster conducted with her and at least five other youth group members at Second Baptist.

Nicole said Foster started with a barrage of texts and detailed personal questions about what she would do in various sexual scenarios. His behavior with her escalated after she turned 17 — the age of consent in Texas — and after her parents moved away from Houston. She stayed in the region as a college student and au pair.

In 2013, she testified about an incident that began when Foster offered a ride after her car broke down. Instead of driving her home, she said, he illegally supplied her with beers and then took her to his place, invited her to sit on his couch and put his hand on her upper thigh.

In an interview, she told the Chronicle she had to repeatedly request to be taken home before Foster finally agreed.

After that episode, she suffered nightmares and panic attacks for years. She still has trouble staying alone in locked rooms, she said.

Two lead investigators at the Harris County Sheriff's Office told the Chronicle that Foster likely groomed and sent suggestive texts to more girls from the Second Baptist youth group, based on texts and emails they reviewed, along with other evidence.

Harris County Lt. J.D. Philpot, who has investigated sex crimes for decades, described Foster as a particularly prolific sexual predator who used his position and "charismatic personality" to build trust and cultivate multiple victims simultaneously.

"There is no doubt that the victims in this case truly believed themselves special to him and that they were boyfriend and girlfriend," he said.

Foster's computer contained a trove of inappropriate, explicit or obscene messages and images addressed to many girls who appeared underage but were identified only by first names or emails and could not be readily identified, according to documents and interviews with Philpot and Gary Spurger, another investigator who also worked the case.

Philpot and Spurger said Community of Faith officials were cooperative but that Second Baptist church leaders didn't supply information.

"We obviously knew he'd worked at a previous church," Philpot said. He said Second Baptist didn't tell detectives Foster had been fired and didn't provide information to help identify other victims.

Second Baptist and Community of Faith were later involved in

confidential settlements of two civil lawsuits filed by the families of the two girls who were the subject of Foster's criminal convictions, according to civil court records and interviews. Family members and attorneys declined to comment.

As part of the lawsuits, another teen who attended Foster's youth group before he was fired by Second Baptist provided sworn testimony that Foster seduced her at least five times while she was still in high school and began doing so after she turned 17.

Harris County prosecutors and victims opposed Foster's parole. Nicole's mother informed Texas officials in a letter that her daughter and others still suffered from Foster's long pattern of sexual harassment and inappropriate behavior.

"He is a predator and a manipulator," she wrote in 2015. "It sickens us to know that he had us all fooled and did a very good job of it."

Janis hugs her daughter, Nicole. Nicole counts herself among Chad Foster's victims and testified at his sentencing in Harris County.

(Jon Shapley/Staff Photographer | Houston Chronicle)

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Design by [Jordan Rubio](#) and [Jasmine Goldband](#)

Abused by missionaries

Baptist leaders stayed quiet after trail of abuse

By [Lise Olsen](#) and Sarah Smith

Abuse of Faith | Part 4

Multimedia by Jon Shapley

Published May 31, 2019

Fourth of six parts

George Thomas Wade Jr. had been spreading the gospel as a missionary on African training farms and in bush villages for six years when his Southern Baptist supervisors learned a horrifying secret: The supposedly devout man of God was molesting his own daughter.

A supervisor met once privately with the girl, who was attending boarding school in Johannesburg, and later consulted leaders based 7,500 miles away at the Richmond, Va., headquarters of what's now called the International Mission Board. Wade promised to stop, the supervisor said. His daughter said she was told to forgive Wade and was sworn to secrecy.

No one told Wade's wife, also a missionary, what he had done, court records show.

His daughter was never again asked about the abuse, which continued, even after she attempted suicide at 15.

"I felt stupid for having told anything to anybody," she later testified. "The concern was for my father. ... It didn't matter what happened to me."

The practice of the Southern Baptist mission board — the world's largest sponsor of Protestant missionaries — has been for years to keep misconduct reports inside the hierarchy of the organization, a Houston Chronicle investigation reveals. The board is a massive charitable organization that as of 2018 fielded more than 3,600

missionaries and "team associates" overseas and managed an annual budget of \$158 million or more, nearly all tithes from members of churches that belong to the Southern Baptist Convention.

Anne Marie Miller told the International Mission Board in 2007 that one of their top missionaries allegedly abused her. The board did not notify police.

Media: Jon Shapley/Houston Chronicle

By the time Wade's wife, Diana, finally learned of the cover-up, her husband had abused three children, causing what she described in a letter to her employers as the "most shattering and devastating time in my life." Wade was prosecuted and went to prison for child abuse in Alaska. He was later arrested again in Georgia in 1997 and remains a



registered sex offender.

The Chronicle found a long trail of alleged cover-ups involving sexual misconduct or crimes committed abroad by a small number of Southern Baptist missionaries, all salaried employees of the mission board. Collectively, five men were credibly accused or convicted of abusing about 24 people, mostly children, court records, documents and interviews show.

These new revelations come as the Southern Baptist Convention, the largest and most influential coalition of Protestant churches in the United States, is wrestling with a [burgeoning sexual abuse crisis](#) as it prepares for its national meeting in Birmingham, Ala.

The missionary cases followed a similar pattern: Leaders were informed of alleged abuse but made no public statement to immediately alert others and often delayed or took no action to remove an accused offender. In at least three of five cases, survivors allege that the board's failure to act gave perpetrators the opportunity to harm more people, according to court records, correspondence and interviews.

Nationwide, other major Protestant groups have hired consultants to devise new policies that better fit a modern world with an enhanced awareness of the dangers of charismatic predators who misuse charitable fronts to hide child abuse, sex tourism, child pornography or pedophilia.

REACH OUT: [Do you know of abuse by a missionary? We want to hear your story](#)

But the practice of relying on church insiders to privately investigate allegations of sexual abuse involving missionaries still prevails at the

IMB, though leaders repeatedly promised to address failures and enact reforms. Copies of policies, letters, court documents and interviews show that the board refused to change despite being repeatedly confronted by survivors and their families:

■ In 1992, Wade's wife, the daughter of a Southern Baptist pastor, reluctantly filed a lawsuit in Richmond, claiming the board failed in its promise to protect her children. A jury awarded \$1.5 million in damages. But the board appealed, the Supreme Court of Virginia overturned the verdict and the board did not alter its policies.

■ In 2004, the IMB established a hotline for abuse victims after another major scandal erupted over ex-missionary William "Mac" McElrath, who publicly admitted to molesting his colleagues' children during decades in Indonesia. Since then, the board has received 100 calls to the hotline, spokeswoman Julie McGowan told the Chronicle. But McGowan said she could not provide further information or statements about related board action.

■ In an email addressed to McElrath's victims, the board's attorney promised to handle future allegations openly. "We want to affirm our commitment to promptly and completely investigate any new charges of sexual abuse made against missionaries and to terminate and publicly expose any missionary found guilty of such abuse," the letter from June 2002 says.

But the board broke that promise only five years later, its own records show. That's when Anne Marie Miller, of Fort Worth, first told the IMB that missionary Mark Aderholt allegedly initiated sexual contact with her when she was a teenager, according to affidavits. The IMB substantiated her complaint but said nothing publicly and did not

contact police.



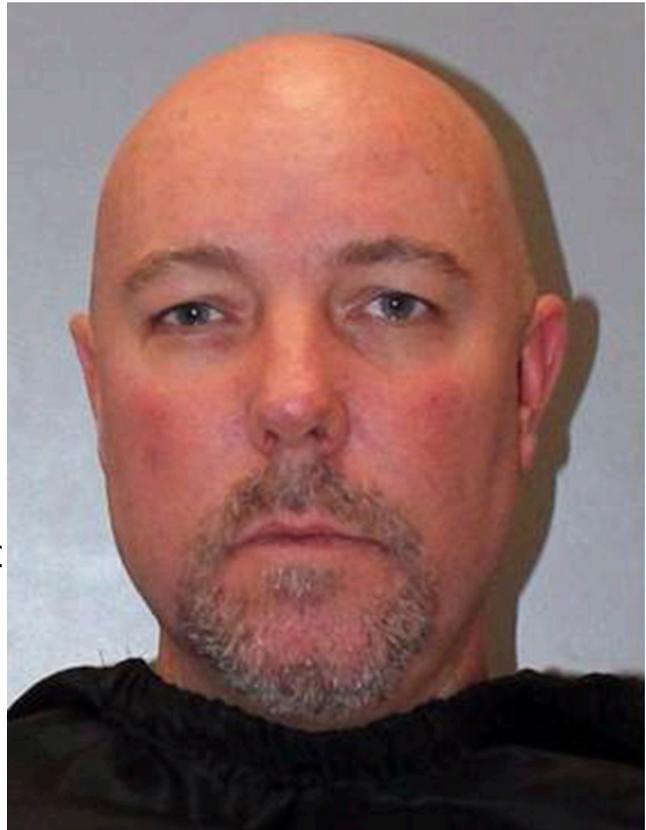
Anne Marie Miller sits on a picnic table at Greenbriar Park in Fort Worth, where she says Mark Aderholt would take her to make out when she was a teenager.

(Jon Shapley/Staff Photographer | Houston Chronicle)

Current IMB policy calls for “zero tolerance” of child abuse and asks for anyone who has personally experienced abuse or sexual harassment to “bring this conduct into the light by means of a secure report to IMB leadership.” The policy still does not require officials to report child abuse to police, though that soon could change.

In 2018, the IMB’s outgoing president formed a task force and hired a Minneapolis-based law firm, Gray Plant Mooty, to review its conduct and policies after Aderholt’s arrest.

In late May, the firm provided an update, recommending sweeping changes to how the IMB handles sexual abuse allegations — including reporting allegations to law enforcement in the United States and abroad even if the law doesn't require it. The IMB's current elected president, Paul Chitwood, pledged that the board would adopt those recommendations, but he did not provide a timeline.



It's unclear when or whether the mission board will release a full report on past failures, including who could have been complicit in enabling alleged abusers over decades. In addition to the president, the IMB is overseen by a board of trustees, who also are sworn to secrecy under its policies.

Mission board leaders turned down requests for an interview; McGowan responded to questions via email.

"IMB leaders believe it is absolutely critical for the IMB and for churches to have guidelines related to child abuse and sexual harassment, which underscores IMB's commitment to a serious, rigorous examination of its policies and practices," she said.



Dee Ann Miller served as a Southern Baptist missionary in Malawi. She wrote a book in 1993, five years after she claims she was assaulted by a fellow missionary, to expose collusion and coverups of sexual abuse and sexual harassment in the faith community. (Earl Richardson/Contributor | Houston Chronicle)

Allegations in Africa

The board has never responded publicly to accusations of a cover-up of alleged abuses by a Texas-based missionary described in a 1993 book written by another longtime former missionary, Dee Ann Miller.

Miller, now 72, was born into the Southern Baptist world. Her father and grandfather were both pastors. By age 10, she knew she wanted to be a missionary, one of the few leadership opportunities open to women.

She and her husband, Ron, were thrilled to be appointed to Malawi in 1978. There she met Gene Kingsley, a missionary since 1960.

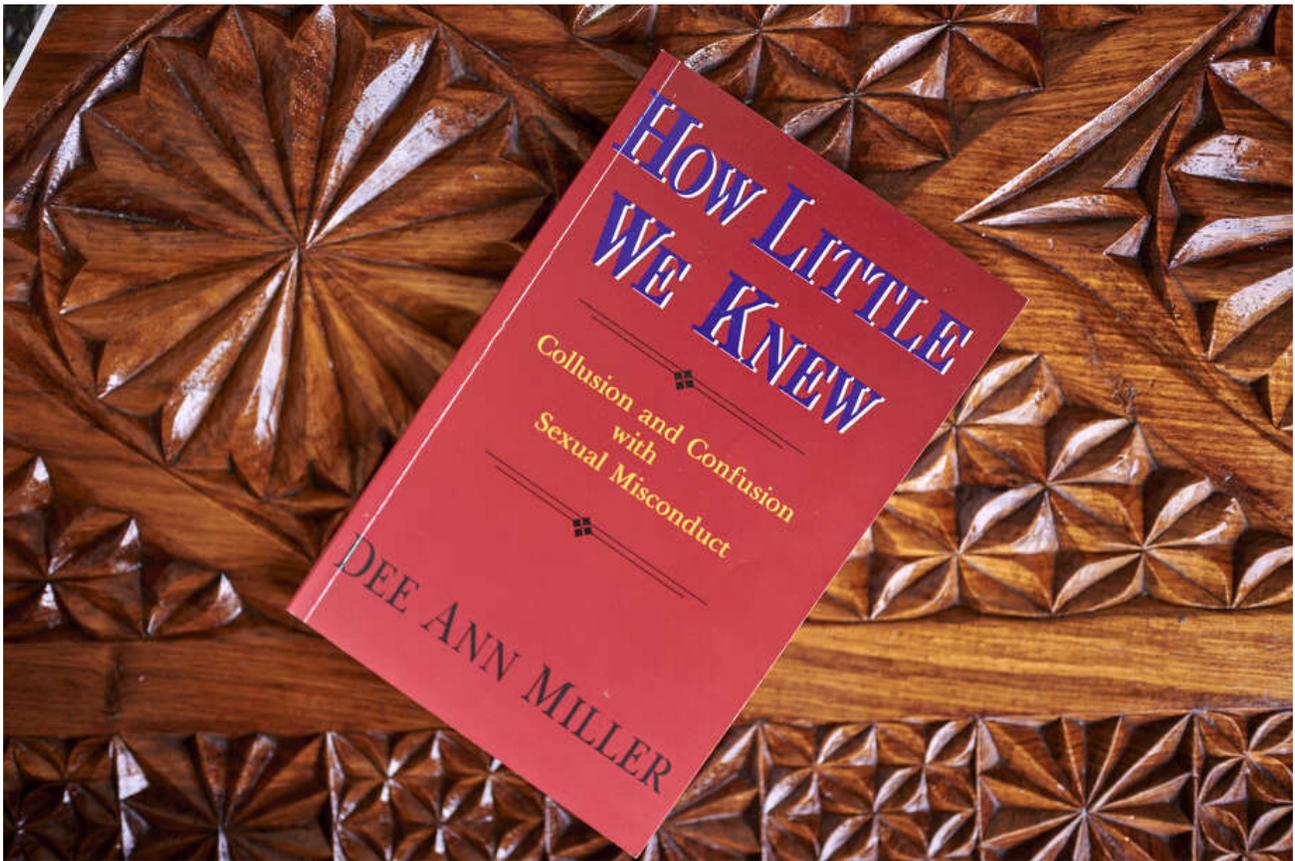
She visited his house in May 1984 and he hugged her, as usual. Then, Kingsley "assaulted me, quickly and skillfully pulling me a foot off the floor, continuing to tighten his arms as I struggled and he groped until I yelled, commanding him to put me down," Miller said in an email to the Chronicle.

PART 1: [Southern Baptist sexual abuse spreads as leaders resist reforms](#)

Miller, who had worked with abuse cases as a psychiatric and public health nurse, reported him to a member of the personnel committee. Nothing happened. Two years later, she decided to make a written complaint, after learning others in her "mission family" also had reported being inappropriately touched or worse.

Her complaint went up the chain of command to leaders in Richmond. Miller said as far as she knew Kingsley was permitted to resign rather than be terminated.

Miller described in interviews and in her book how two other women, as well as a teenaged girl, also complained but said those reports were initially ignored and inadequately investigated.



Dee Ann Miller wrote a book published in 1993 titled, "How Little We Knew" that detailed the abuse allegations made by four missionary family members against fellow missionary Gene Kingsley. Kingsley was never prosecuted.

(Earl Richardson/Contributor | Houston Chronicle)

Miller said she was told there was a policy change, but she didn't see any evidence of it.

"I pushed for people to take action," Miller said. "Nobody did anything."

Kingsley died in Texas in 2016.

Some of the same supervisors took a similar approach when George T. "Tom" Wade Jr., another missionary in Africa, was accused of child sexual abuse: Say nothing, and send the alleged abuser back home quietly.

Like Miller, Wade's wife, Diana, was the daughter of a multigenerational Baptist family and "loved being a missionary," court records show. She discovered that her husband was a pedophile in June 1985, after the family returned to Alaska. She was shocked to learn that her supervisors already had known for at least three years that her husband was abusing their eldest daughter.

By the time Diana Wade discovered the truth, her daughter's life was falling apart: She was pregnant at 17 and planning marriage when she announced why her father should not perform or attend the ceremony.

Diana Wade immediately called police. Tom Wade was convicted of five counts of felony sex abuse of a minor in Alaska. In 1985, he was sentenced to 12 years in prison, records show.

She also filed for divorce, a step her church considered an "unpardonable sin" but that she considered necessary to protect her children, letters to her employer show. She sought compensation for counseling and medical bills to address "mental and emotional scars (that were) much more devastating than any physical effects."

To her shock, her requests were denied. And she and her estranged husband were both forced to resign, letters show.

"I am deeply hurt. ... I find it difficult to accept that because of what Tom alone did ... my calling and commitment and ministry are of no account and are to be thrown away along with his," she wrote.

SEARCH OUR DATABASE: [Look at Southern Baptist church officials who were convicted or pleaded guilty](#)

Diana Wade filed a lawsuit alleging that the mission board had broken

contractual promises to protect her family and increased harm to her children by concealing her husband's criminal behavior. A jury decision favored the family. But the Wades lost in 1991 after the board appealed to the Virginia Supreme Court. Mission board leaders were forced to address the allegations publicly only because of the lawsuit.

Board officials never said whether they later investigated if other children were abused by Wade, a missionary in Kenya and Botswana from 1976-84. In all five cases the Chronicle investigated, it was unclear if missionaries who'd been accused of — or admitted to — abusing missionary children were investigated to see if they abused local children.



Dee Ann Miller, right, served as a missionary in Malawi. During her time there, she says she was assaulted by another missionary and her complaint was ignored. (Courtesy Dee Ann

Miller)

Trouble in Taiwan

Allegations of cover-ups involving child abuse weren't confined to the missionary hierarchy in Africa.

In 1984, 15-year-old Harriet Sugg told a pastor at her Taiwan boarding school that a missionary molested her. The pastor called the principal, who called her parents, both missionaries, to the school. She was sitting in the headmaster's office when she first told them what happened, said Sugg, who contacted reporters after reading [the Chronicle investigation, "Abuse of Faith."](#)

The man she accused, Walter Dildy, was friends with Sugg's parents and worked as the school's maintenance director. She called him "Uncle Walter." When Sugg was 9, she said Dildy called her over from the playground and took her upstairs to a bedroom in another family's house.

"He said, 'I'm going to show you what we'd do if we were both grown-ups,' " Sugg said.

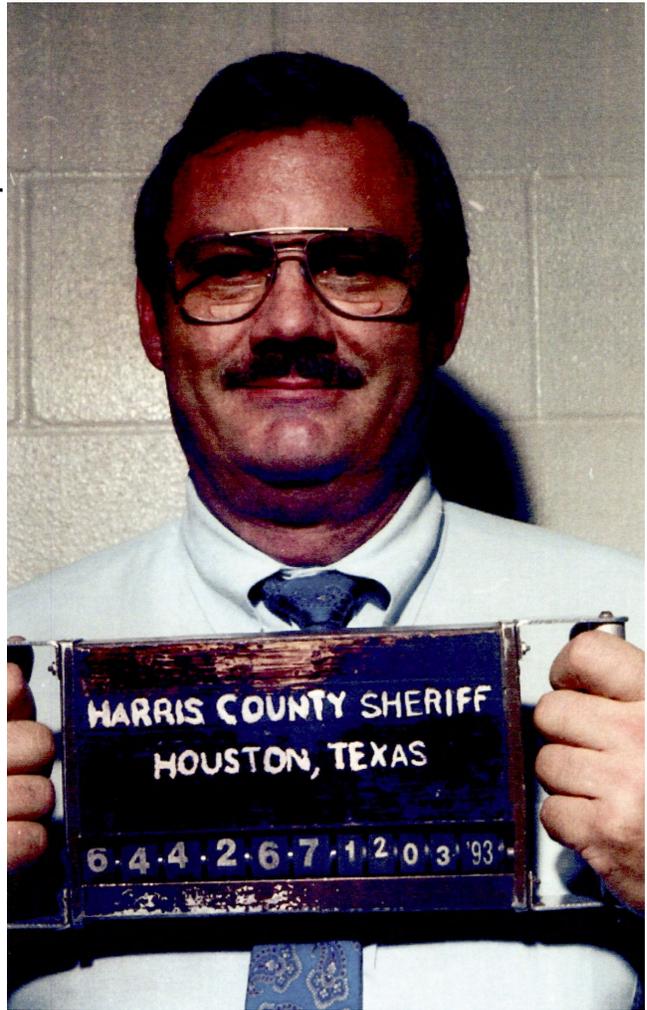
After Sugg complained, Dildy was sent back to the United States and resettled in Texas. She thought he would be treated and get better.

"The good thing is, my mission leaders believed me," said Sugg, now a 50-year-old teacher in Florida. "From the distance of years, I see the action wasn't enough."

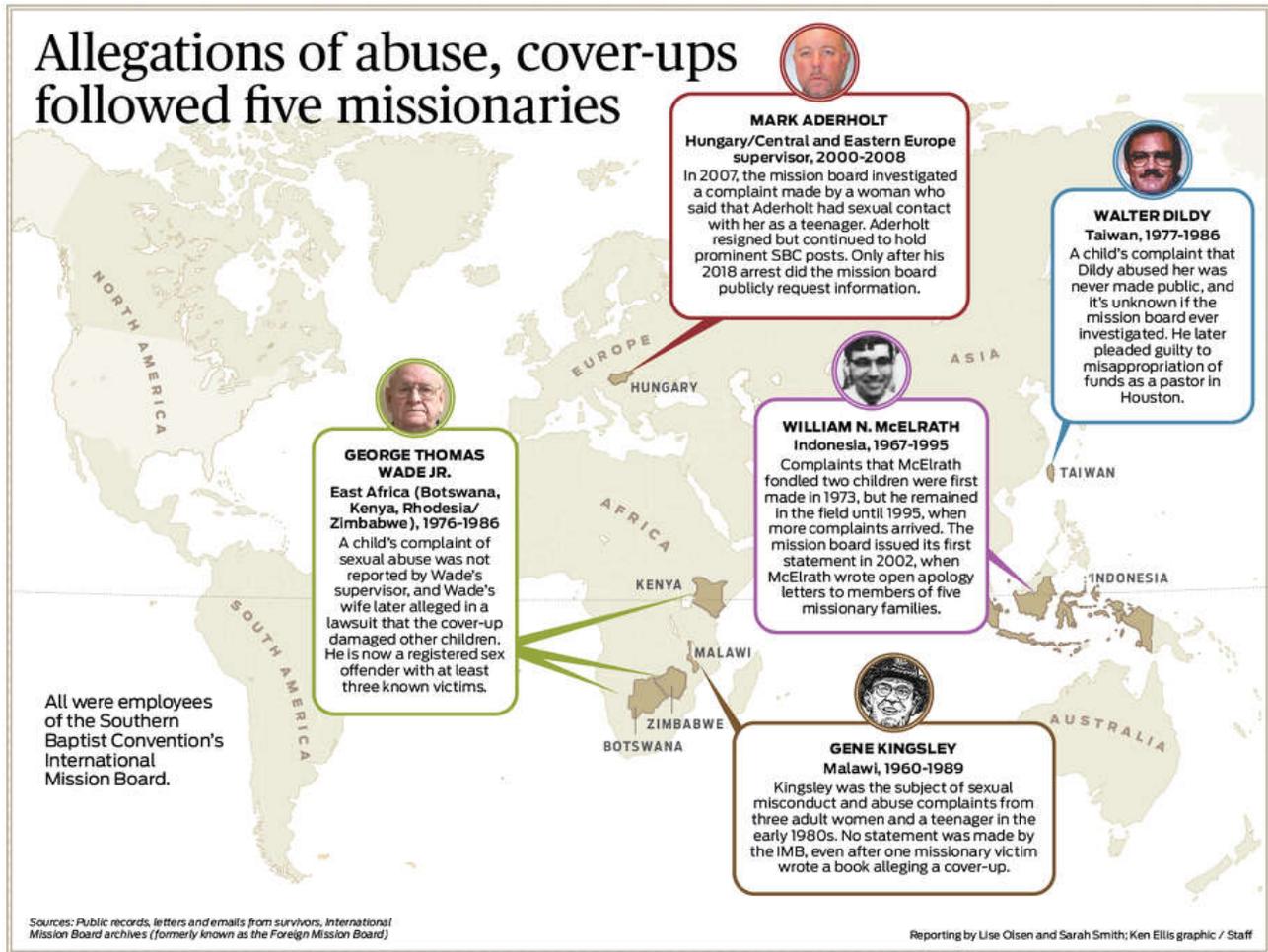
The mission board released no information to the public about Dildy, who died recently. Board archives show he and his ex-wife were based in Taiwan from 1977-86.

Dildy wound up in Houston, where he worked as a pastor at First Baptist Church Recreation Acres. In 1994, Dildy accepted a plea deal for deferred adjudication on a charge of misappropriating approximately \$16,000 in church funds.

His second wife and widow, Kay, told the Chronicle she had heard child abuse allegations about her husband but called them "lies" invented by his ex-wife, a former missionary who has since died.



Walter Dildy pleaded guilty in 1994 to misappropriation of more than \$10,000 by a fiduciary. He was never convicted of sexual abuse.



The board responds

The mission board was forced to make public statements about abuse allegations involving a different former missionary in 2002 — three decades after William McElrath, a longtime Indonesia missionary, first privately told employers that he had abused colleagues' children, McElrath's own letters show.

Linda Davarth, 55, had lived in Indonesia since she was 8 with her brother and missionary parents at the same time as McElrath. Known as "Mac," he was a gifted writer who played the banjo. He always seemed to have a child on his lap. When Davarth was 9, in 1972, McElrath sat her on his lap at a playground and fondled her.



William McElrath, a Southern Baptist missionary in Indonesia, is pictured at a camp where he worked. In 1995, he was sent back to the United States after multiple people complained he abused them as children. (Courtesy)

It took until she was 14 for her to tell her parents. Her father, she said, immediately reported what happened to a mission board official in Indonesia. Nothing happened.

"All the adults knew about it, and no one did anything," Davarth said.

By the time Davarth reported McElrath in 1977, mission board leaders had already heard similar accusations, letters and other records show. In 1973, he confessed to molesting another child and a note was placed in his file, but mission leaders let him continue to serve. In 1978, another incident caused the organization to restrict McElrath's interactions with children. Still, he remained in the field, board records

and correspondence provided by victims shows.

Finally, in 1995, Davarth and several others wrote Jerry Rankin, mission board president from June 1993 to July 2010, complaining about McElrath. That same year, the board fired McElrath for “immoral lifestyle unbecoming to a missionary.”

McElrath separately sent letters to members of six missionary families he described as “impacted” by his actions — both parents and children.

“Please forgive me for having touched you too intimately when you were a child many years ago,” he wrote in sharp cursive to Linda Davarth. “I deeply regret having abused a family-like situation.”

Davarth’s brother, Eddy Ruble, later exchanged letters with Rankin.

Rankin, as a former missionary in Indonesia, had served with McElrath and admitted he’d heard ugly rumors. As board president, he advocated for keeping the incident within a small circle.

“I see no constructive purpose by making a general accounting of (this) matter to all our missionaries and to Southern Baptists in general,” Rankin wrote to Ruble.

After leaving Indonesia, McElrath and his wife moved to Raleigh, N.C.,



and joined a Southern Baptist Church in North Carolina. He regularly worked with children, taught piano lessons and helped raise his blind niece. (In his 2002 "open letter" to family and friends, McElrath said he informed that church's senior pastor about what he had done as a missionary, but denied abusing children after 1973.)

When survivors learned in 2002 that McElrath was still involved with children, they again contacted the mission board. The agenda of a June 2002 meeting notes that they wanted to publicly share their stories, create an independent advisory committee, notify law enforcement and monitor all perpetrators after termination.

The IMB subsequently issued an unusual news release.

"Even though wrong behavior took place nearly 30 years ago, the scars and repercussions are very real and painful," Rankin told Baptist Press. "We are firmly committed to reaching out to victims and dealing decisively with violators."

Five years after the IMB promised survivors it would "publicly expose any missionary found guilty of such abuse," the board quietly investigated another missionary, Aderholt, for sexual abuse. Internal



Jerry Rankin, president of the International Mission Board during two major abuse accusations.

investigators concluded that he had “more likely than not” had an “inappropriate sexual relationship” with an underage girl, Anne Marie Miller. But the information was not shared with the public or police.

By then, Aderholt, who went to Hungary in 2000 as a missionary, had become the IMB's regional strategy associate in Central Europe. According to his own résumé, he had visited 29 countries. Aderholt resigned before the board could meet about whether to fire him, documents show. He listed two top IMB personnel as references and became associate director and chief strategist of the South Carolina Baptist Convention.



Anne Marie Miller cries outside of an apartment where she says she was sexually abused by Mark Aderholt, who went on to become one of the top missionaries with the International Mission Board.

(Jon Shapley/Staff Photographer | Houston Chronicle)

The board released information about the reason for his resignation only after Miller publicized the allegations and went to police in 2018. Aderholt's attorney did not respond to requests for comment. Aderholt was subsequently charged in Tarrant County with sexual assault of a child under 17 and with two counts of indecency with a child by contact. The case is pending.

In April 2019 — 12 years after Miller first complained — the IMB made its first appeal for information from anyone who had known Aderholt as a missionary.

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Part 2: [Southern Baptist churches hired ministers accused of past sex offenses](#)

Part 3: [All too often, Southern Baptist youth pastors take advantage of children](#)

Anne Marie Miller stands outside of an apartment where she says she was abused by Mark Aderholt. She was 16 and he was 25.

(Jon Shapley/Staff Photographer | Houston Chronicle)

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Design by [Jordan Rubio](#) and [Jasmine Goldband](#)

Harboring abusers

Southern Baptist churches welcomed sex offenders

By [John Tedesco](#)

Abuse of Faith | Part 5

Photos by Jon Shapley and Jerry Lara

Published June 3, 2019

Fifth of six parts

Pastor Ruben Garcia was arrested nearly two years ago in Hays County, prosecuted on charges of sexually assaulting a teenage girl and prohibited by a judge from being alone with children.

But the preacher kept his job at a Southern Baptist church.

Garcia, 60, sang hymns and taught kids about the Lord at Betania Baptist Church in Austin, a church so small that Sunday services feel more like a family gathering.

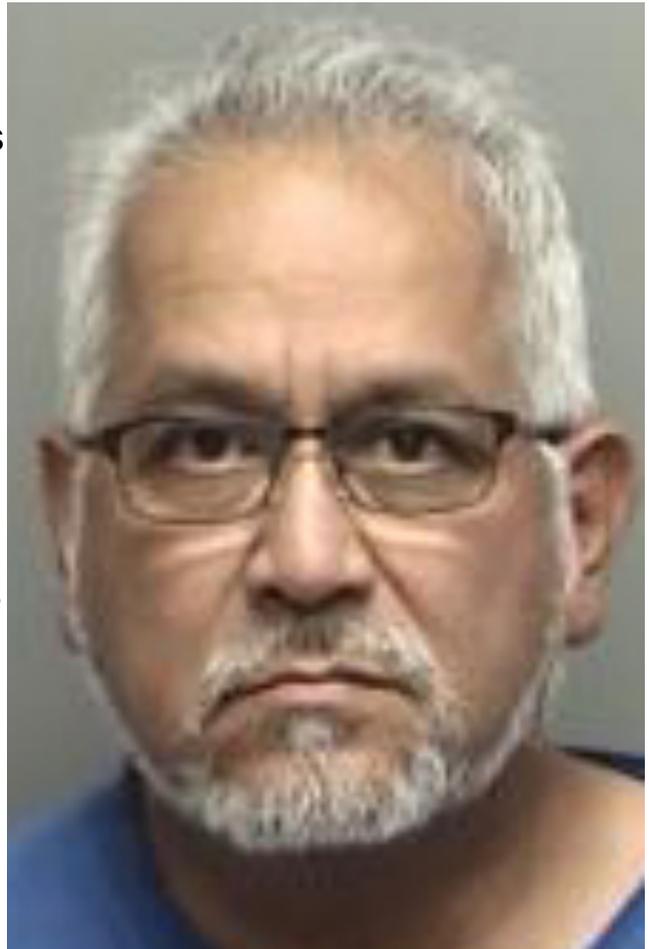
In February 2016, a teenage girl told police in the Austin suburb of Buda, where Garcia lives, that he put his hands down her pants and sexually assaulted her multiple times in the summers of 2013 and 2014, records show. Police arrested Garcia in June 2017, and he was later released on bond.

Then Garcia continued serving as co-pastor of his church, where few

members of the congregation questioned the appropriateness of their spiritual leader remaining in his post with sexual-assault charges pending against him.

Their support continued in 2018 after Garcia pleaded guilty to a lesser charge and avoided prison — but was prohibited from being around children as part of the terms of his sentence.

“All I have to say is that I love him,” said Edel Perez, a longtime church member.



Garcia is hardly the only Southern Baptist pastor to stay in the pulpit after being accused of a sex crime. The Houston Chronicle confirmed that since the 1990s, at least 30 SBC churches were aware that a pastor, employee or volunteer had faced allegations of sexual misconduct in the U.S. — yet the churches hired them anyway or allowed them to continue serving in their spiritual roles.

At two churches that harbored predators, employees faced criminal charges of failing to notify authorities about an allegation of sexual abuse involving a child. And in at least seven cases, Southern Baptist ministers who have been accused of sex crimes are still serving at a church.

These new revelations come as the Southern Baptist Convention, the

largest and most influential coalition of Baptist churches in the United States, is wrestling with a burgeoning sexual abuse crisis as it prepares for its upcoming national meeting in Birmingham, Ala.

An investigation published in February by the Chronicle and the San Antonio Express-News, "[Abuse of Faith](#)," sparked a national outcry. Among the findings: At least 10 SBC churches knowingly welcomed pastors, ministers and volunteers since 1998 who had faced accusations of sexual misconduct.

More than 350 readers contacted the newspapers to offer tips or share their own stories of abuse. Some said they were concerned about other Southern Baptist churches that employed sexual predators out of a misguided sense of forgiveness or failing to hold a beloved pastor accountable.

With the help of tips from those readers and by reviewing news stories and court records, the Chronicle found another 20 churches that knew an employee or volunteer had been accused of a sex crime but allowed them to keep serving at the church.

"Once they've committed a crime of that nature, they should not work in any capacity around children," said Rodney Pires, owner of Church Security 360 Degrees, an Atlanta firm that helps churches strengthen their hiring and security practices.

Pires said it's commendable for churches to offer people a second chance. But sexual abuse is a crime, he said, and putting abusers in a position of trust places other children at risk.

"The number one priority of the shepherd is the sheep," Pires said.

At least one church that knowingly employed an offender is [tied to SBC's leadership](#).

In the early 1990s, First Baptist Church in Rockwall welcomed back a former part-time church employee, Jason Leon Austin, as a volunteer assistant in the church's youth program, despite a prior conviction of indecency with a child in 1991 in Harris County and despite a separate complaint that he had molested another child inside the church, according to court documents and a deposition.

A lawsuit filed against the church in Rockwall by one of Austin's victims alleged that pastor Steve Swofford knew about the prior criminal conviction. Swofford is a past president of the Southern Baptist Convention of Texas and helped select the new president of the Southern Baptist Convention's executive committee, Ronnie Floyd.

Swofford declined to comment for this story. The lawsuit was dismissed because the statute of limitations had lapsed for complaints related to the alleged assaults.

SBC President J.D. Greear said he was "broken" by the findings in the newspapers' investigation and promised concrete reforms to prevent sexual abuse. Greear said any Southern Baptist church that knowingly employs a sex offender doesn't belong in the SBC.

"There can simply be no ambiguity about the church's responsibility to protect the abused and be a safe place for the vulnerable," Greear said in response to the newspapers' stories. "Abuse can never be tolerated, minimized, hidden, or 'handled internally.' Those in leadership who turn a blind eye toward abuse are complicit with it and must be held accountable."

But accountability is rare. Southern Baptist churches don't belong to a diocese or answer to a bishop. From tiny churches such as Betania to megachurches with thousands of members, every Southern Baptist church operates independently and ordains or hires its own pastors.

The result: SBC leaders have no idea how many churches employ sex offenders.

SEARCH OUR DATABASE: [Look at Southern Baptist church officials who were convicted or pleaded guilty](#)

In Austin, Garcia's church is still listed in the Southern Baptist Convention's directory, even though he continued to preach after his arrest.

Last year, Garcia reached an agreement with prosecutors in Hays County and pleaded guilty to a charge of enticing a child with intent to commit a felony. He was sentenced to 10 years deferred adjudication, a type of probation.

As part of the terms of the plea deal, Garcia didn't have to register as a sex offender, but he was barred from being near children without supervision, except for his grandchildren. He currently serves as the church's music minister.

"If you want a close relationship with Jesus Christ, study his word," Garcia told the congregation at Betania at a recent worship service. "You'll learn a lot more about him."

After the service, Garcia declined to speak with a reporter. His lawyer, Bob Phillips, also declined to discuss details of the allegations against Garcia. But he said his client agreed to step down from his duties

dealing directly with children.

"He's not doing that kind of stuff anymore," Phillips said of Garcia's previous youth ministry. "He is well aware of the dangers of being misconstrued if he were alone with an individual or several youths."

First Baptist Church of Rockwall, where several ex-members and families of former youth group members contended in civil suits that sexual abuse was covered up.

(Jon Shapley, Staff Photographer | Houston Chronicle)

No oversight

With a decentralized network of 47,000 churches in the U.S., the SBC is trying to figure out how to respond more quickly to churches that employ pastors accused of sexual abuse, said Roger "Sing" Oldham, a spokesman for the SBC's executive committee.

The SBC has no investigative powers of its own, Oldham said, and it never received a complaint about Betania Baptist Church.

"I didn't know about it until you raised the question with me," Oldham said.

The lack of oversight means churches might employ sex offenders for years without the SBC doing anything about it.

In Houston, registered sex offender Michael Lee Jones founded Cathedral of Faith church 20 years ago. His church had no problem joining the SBC — even though Jones pleaded guilty in 1998 to sexually assaulting a 16-year-old girl who was supposed to be taking counseling sessions with him. The pastor was sentenced to eight years of deferred

adjudication.

"Abuse can never be tolerated, minimized, hidden, or 'handled internally.' Those in leadership who turn a blind eye toward abuse are complicit with it and must be held accountable."

J.D. Greear, president of the Southern Baptist Convention

The girl said she had known Jones all her life.

"Pastor Jones took advantage of my trust and confidence in him as our congregation's pastor to cause me to have sexual intercourse with him," she said in a sworn affidavit.

Jones did not return messages. Cathedral of Faith church member Betty Cotton defended the pastor.

"You need to know the whole story," Cotton said.

What's the whole story?

"You figure it out," she answered. "I don't know anything more than you do. He's been forgiven, OK?"

In February, [Greear called for greater scrutiny](#) of Cathedral of Faith and nine other churches that were mentioned in the newspapers' investigation of sexual abuse at Southern Baptist churches.

Greear's inquiry had mixed results. Southern Baptist leaders in Houston raised questions about Jones' past criminal conviction, and his church [voluntarily withdrew from the SBC](#).

The church also lost its home at Aldine Independent School District, where the congregation rented space at Spence Elementary School for Sunday worship services.

"In light of the information regarding the leader of the church, there has been distraction and substantial disruption to the district operations," Deputy Superintendent Selina Chapa wrote in an [April 4 letter notifying the church](#) the school district was canceling the rental agreement.

Another church on Greear's list, Trinity Baptist Church in Ashburn, Ga., [dismissed a music minister](#) who a church official says admitted he molested young teens decades ago.

Trinity's pastor, Rodney Brown, told the SBC's news organization, Baptist Press, that the music minister was a friend who had [repented of his past sins](#) and was allowed to serve at the church. Brown later apologized for how he handled the situation.

"I have come to realize that I failed my duty as pastor in not taking action against an individual who had been accused of child abuse in the past at another church," Brown said in a statement.

"I now realize that what I first thought was an isolated incident was much more," Brown said. "I should have understood that earlier and not doing so was a great mistake on my part. I cannot apologize enough for my actions."



Pastor Erbey Valdez wipes tears while praying during Bible class at New Spirit Church in San Antonio. (Jerry Lara, Staff photographer | Express News)

Forgiving sin

Other churches on Greear's list denied any wrongdoing or blamed former pastors for poor hiring decisions.

Sovereign Grace Churches in Louisville, Ky., rejected calls for an independent review after it was accused in a lawsuit of covering up sexual abuse. The lawsuit was dismissed on procedural grounds.

At First Baptist Church of Bedford, pastor Billy Taylor said the hiring in 2015 of worship pastor Charles Adcock, who faced 29 counts of sexually assaulting a 14-year-old girl in Alabama, was an earnest but misguided attempt by a former pastor to help Adcock and his family.

Adcock had insisted he was innocent. Without admitting any guilt, he

pleaded to a single charge of second-degree sodomy in January 2016 and served 15 months. He is now a registered sex offender.

"It was a bad hiring practice at the time," said Taylor, who noted the pastor who hired Adcock no longer works at the church.

State and local Southern Baptist groups are also trying to prevent churches from employing ministers who were accused of sexual abuse. The Southern Baptists of Texas Convention removed a small San Antonio church from its membership in May after Baptist leaders found out the church's pastor, Erbey Valdez, is a registered sex offender.

Valdez was a married middle school principal in the West Texas town of Sonora when he was arrested in October 2009 on charges of having an improper sexual relationship with a 17-year-old high school student and taking sexually explicit photographs of her.

Valdez, who pleaded guilty to the charges but served no time in prison, said he and his wife reconciled and started a Christian counseling service for troubled couples. Last year, they founded New Spirit Church in a strip mall on Culebra Road near Fast Eddie's Billiards.



"I understand that some would say, 'I would never go to that church,'" Valdez said. "And that's OK." But he emphasized that his crime occurred before he became a church leader and he hasn't tried to hide from his past. The congregation knows what he did, he said, and they accept him anyway.

During a recent Sunday service, children gleefully gave roses to their mothers to celebrate Mother's Day and Valdez prayed over the group of women. The preacher cried during a Bible study group as he talked about the parable of the prodigal son, his own troubled past and the redemptive power of God.

"We feel like a family," said Francisco Vega, a deacon at the church. "We know how repentant he is. It comes from the heart."

The importance of forgiveness is a fundamental Christian belief. But forgiving a convicted sex offender doesn't mean putting him in a position of trust at a church, said Dee Parsons, a victims' advocate in Raleigh, N.C., who has blogged for years about sexual abuse cases in Southern Baptist churches.

"Yes, God can forgive anybody. We get that," Parsons said. "But pedophiles and rapists and sex offenders will target any organization that has young people in it. And they'll go to places where people are trusting and where they can manipulate people."

James Cantor, a Canadian psychologist and expert on pedophilia and sexual behavior, said it's important to remember that there are different types of sexual abusers. For people who suffer from pedophilia — a sexual attraction toward prepubescent children — there is no known cure.

“Nobody has ever shown a meaningful way to turn a pedophile into a non-pedophile,” Cantor said. But he emphasized that many of his patients don’t want to hurt children, and they make a deliberate effort to avoid situations where they’re alone with them.

Cantor said it’s a red flag if a pedophile claims to have changed and wants to work with children.

“Forgiving somebody does not mean taking every word they say at face value,” Cantor said.



Pastor Erbey Valdez prays during a worship service at New Spirit Church in San Antonio. In 2010, Valdez pleaded guilty to felony charges of having sex with a 17-year-old girl when he was a middle school principal in Sonora, Texas. As a registered sex offender, he founded New Spirit in October of last year. The Southern Baptists of Texas Convention removed the church from its membership in April. (Jerry Lara, Staff photographer | Express News)

Changing church culture

The problem of harboring predators goes beyond the churches singled out by Greear. Other churches have done the same thing without facing any repercussions from the SBC.

When Kevin Glenn served as pastor at the Southern Baptist Memorial Baptist Church in Columbia, Mo., nearly 20 years ago, he learned disturbing news about the church's popular organist, Tammy Irovic, who performed with the children's choir.

A visitor at the church recognized Irovic as a registered sex offender and told Glenn, who was relatively new to the church. Glenn discovered Irovic had been convicted in Lubbock in 1990 on a felony charge of indecency with a child.

Glenn said he met with other church leaders to discuss his concerns about Irovic serving in a church role. He was surprised by their response: They already knew about Irovic's status as a sex offender.

Irovic had repented and apologized, they said, and they had decided to give her a second chance.

Glenn said he worked out a compromise — Irovic would be allowed to remain as a church member, but she had to step down as organist. But



tensions flared again a year later when Irovic wanted to host youth group meetings at her house.

Glenn objected. Irovic's defenders sided with her. Irovic eventually left the church, but Glenn said he was reprimanded by the church's personnel committee, and he later resigned.

"I don't get it, man," said Glenn, who is now a pastor in New Mexico. "That one still bewilders me."

Messages left with Irovic's new church in Columbia weren't returned.

The new church isn't affiliated with the SBC. Irovic is a pianist there.

Sex offenders, but still trusted

Churches in the Southern Baptist Convention have knowingly employed sex offenders who worked in positions of trust since the 1990s. Experts say it's commendable that churches give people a second chance. But giving accused sexual abusers a church role as spiritual leaders puts children at risk. "Once they've committed a crime of that nature, they should not work in any capacity around children," said Rodney Pires, owner of Church Security 360 Degrees, an Atlanta firm that helps churches strengthen their hiring and security practices.

Created by [Jordan Rubio](#)

Failure to report

Southern Baptist churches are sometimes the first to learn of an allegation of sexual abuse against an employee. In many states, including Texas, adults are legally required to report suspected cases of child abuse to authorities. Failure to do so is a crime.

In Abilene, Amanda McKee, a day care supervisor at Wylie Baptist Church, was arrested last year after police charged her with failing to notify authorities after she had received multiple complaints about one of her employees, Benjamin Roberts.

Roberts was seen sitting with children on his lap and becoming visibly aroused, court records allege. Employees saw him go into the bathroom alone with boys. And parents raised concerns with McKee about Roberts' behavior.

"Several parents reported to McKee that they didn't want their child around Roberts because of the way he had been touching their children," according to a criminal complaint filed against McKee.

McKee told authorities she had problems with her memory and didn't remember the specific complaints. Roberts was charged with continuous sexual abuse of a child. McKee, his boss, was arrested and accused of failing to report the alleged abuse. Both cases are pending, and they no longer work at the day care.

Wade Burleson, a Southern Baptist pastor in Oklahoma who believes the SBC needs to do more to prevent sexual abuse, said changing the attitudes of some church members is just as important as adopting strong policies and reforms.

At the SBC's annual meeting in San Antonio in 2007, Burleson proposed creating a database that would keep track of church employees and volunteers accused of abuse. A year later, an SBC committee rejected Burleson's proposal, saying the independence of Southern Baptist churches prevented the SBC from mandating a database.

More recently, Burleson made another proposal to the SBC for a

database of offenders, which is being considered by a different SBC commission. It could unveil its findings in June, when thousands of Baptists from across the country will gather for the SBC's annual meeting.

Burleson said he's hopeful that the SBC will adopt his proposal. But he also believes the culture at some Southern Baptist churches needs to change. Forgiving sex offenders, he said, doesn't mean giving them unfettered access to children. Yet some people don't understand the risk.

"I've come across it within my own church," said Burleson.

Years ago, a member of his congregation had been arrested for indecent exposure, Burleson said. The man later asked to work with children in the church's youth ministry and didn't understand why Burleson told him no.

"He said, 'Wade, you preach about grace; you preach about forgiveness. Why can't I work with young people?' " Burleson recalled. The pastor said the church member had crossed a line that disqualified him from ministry at his church forever.

"Does it mean you can't be forgiven?" Burleson asked. "Of course not. You can be forgiven. But they will never, for life, be able to work with children."

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Part 2: [Southern Baptist churches hired ministers accused of past sex offenses](#)

Part 3: [All too often, Southern Baptist youth pastors take advantage of children](#)

Part 4: [Missionaries left trail of abuse, but leaders stayed quiet](#)

Betania Baptist Church in Austin retained Ruben Garcia as a pastor after he was arrested in June 2017 on charges of sexual assault of a child in Hays County.

(Jon Shapley/Staff Photographer | Houston Chronicle)

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Do you have information about sexual misconduct in Southern Baptist churches? Help us investigate by telling us your story. [Fill out our confidential questionnaire here.](#)

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[John Tedesco](#), a longtime investigative reporter for the San Antonio Express-News, has exposed shady telemarketers at the Texas Highway Patrol Museum, bribery scandals at San Antonio City Hall and the deaths of oil-and-gas workers on the Eagle Ford Shale. He joined the Chronicle projects team in January. Follow him on Twitter [@John_Tedesco](#) and reach him by email at john.tedesco@chron.com.

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Design by [Jordan Rubio](#) and [Jasmine Goldband](#)

Silence, survival, speaking out

Survivors of Baptist sexual abuse come forward to help others

By [John Tedesco](#), [Lise Olsen](#), and [Robert Downen](#)

Abuse of Faith | Part 6

Multimedia by Marie D. De Jesús and Jon Shapley

Last of six parts

Published June 6, 2019

Dillon Price once lived in a world of secrets and silence. It nearly killed him.

The story so far

Current as of June 2019

An investigation by the Houston Chronicle and the San Antonio Express-News revealed in February that more than 700 people, most of them children, had been [sexually abused by Southern Baptist pastors, church employees or volunteers during the past two decades](#).

The newspapers also published a [database of about 220 Southern Baptist church pastors, leaders, employees and volunteers](#) who pleaded guilty or were convicted of sex crimes. That database has now been expanded to more than 260 with the help of tips from victims and others who read the stories.

The secrets started when Price met Dan Haby Jr., a magnetic Southern Baptist preacher in Fort Worth. Price was just a teenager, but he bonded with Haby. He thought they shared a love of God.

Price and other boys spent so much time with Haby that they started staying the night at his house on weekends. Price slept on a couch the first few nights.

Then Haby suggested he sleep on a

The series, "[Abuse of Faith](#)," sparked a national outcry. More than 350 readers contacted the newspapers to offer tips or share their own stories of abuse. Our reporting resumes with this series of stories prior to the Southern Baptist Convention's annual conference.

If you're a victim of sexual abuse:

■ The National Sexual Assault Online Hotline at (800) 656-HOPE provides counselors who can offer expert assistance.

■ The Oklahoma Coalition Against Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault offers resources for victims in every state on its website: www.ocadvsa.org/national-resources.

■ The Faith Trust Institute provides assistance to survivors in cases of clergy sexual abuse: www.faitrustinstitute.org.

If someone you know is a victim of sexual abuse:

■ Listen to them. Don't minimize what they went through. Don't ask shaming questions, such as "Why didn't you run away?" Sexual abuse is not their fault.

■ If the victim is a child, adults in Texas are legally required to report suspected cases of child abuse to authorities. You can call police or notify the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services by calling [\(800\) 252-5400](tel:8002525400).

struggles to weed out predators in its 47,000 churches in the United States.

Price and his mother were among 350 people who contacted the Houston Chronicle with their stories of abuse and of predatory behavior

mattress in his bedroom to be more comfortable. One night, Haby locked the door.

Price didn't know what to do when Haby — a man he looked up to — began molesting him. Haby claimed the acts helped "relieve stress" and made him a better pastor.

Price kept quiet about the recurring abuse for years, even after he left Haby's church and tried to move on with his life. But he couldn't escape what had happened. He became suicidal.

"Silence is the worst thing," said Price. "At the time, I didn't know anything but silence."

Price hopes the story of how he finally broke his silence and reported Haby to police can help other survivors of sexual abuse as the Southern Baptist Convention

by officials based primarily in Southern Baptist churches after the February publication of "[Abuse of Faith](#)," an investigation by the Chronicle and the San Antonio Express-News.

The series revealed that roughly 380 church pastors, employees and volunteers have been credibly accused of sexual misconduct, sued or convicted in criminal cases during the past two decades. They left behind more than 700 victims.

Survivors shared information about other criminal cases as well as abuse that went unpunished. With the help of readers, the Chronicle has identified additional cases that raise the number of those credibly accused to more than 400 — and added 45 criminal cases involving Southern Baptist church leaders and volunteers to our [searchable, online database](#). It now includes convictions or plea deals involving more than 260 offenders.

Many survivors who contacted the Chronicle said they had felt alone until they read the articles.

Kingsley Brown reached out after spotting her father and abuser — a charismatic former Waco pastor named William Frank Brown - in a photo collage of offenders convicted of sex crimes.

"In these types of situations, a lot of people want to blame the church and turn away from the church and blame the Lord, and it is so easy for that to happen," she said. "Our whole purpose is that this is an issue that needs to be addressed — it's OK for you to come forward."

Dillon Price was routinely molested by the pastor of his church in Fort Worth, Texas. He remained silent about the abuse for years, and at one point became suicidal. He recently decided to speak out so as to help

other victims.

Media: Marie D. De Jesús/Houston Chronicle

Breaking taboos

Kingsley Brown was only 14 in March 2009 when a counselor called her to the school office, where Child Protective Service workers were waiting. Outwardly, Kingsley was a success — a popular A student. But she carried a secret: Her father began molesting her when she was 10 and continued to do so for two years. Though Kingsley followed his command to never tell anyone, her sister had eventually guessed.

At the time, her father was lead pastor of Bellmead Baptist Church, a Waco congregation with 1,300 members.

She broke down in the circle of school and state officials, wondering if revealing her father's abuse now held the power to ruin their entire family. She felt intense shame, guilt and confusion as she repeated the story of serial incest to police and prosecutors.

Her father was immediately removed from the home. He was indicted, and he later confessed — and Waco newspapers ran the story on their front pages.

Brown was not alone as an incest survivor of a Southern Baptist preacher or leader, though she didn't know it then. The Chronicle's database includes about two dozen cases of incest involving church leaders. Nearly all of the cases are similar to Brown's, in which pastors and other trusted church figures were prosecuted for molesting or raping their own children or other relatives.

For Brown's family, the initial consequences were devastating. Her

father went to prison. Both parents lost their jobs. Her mother, Connie, had been serving as an associate pastor alongside her father but could not stay because of the scandal and couldn't become pastor of the church because churches can be expelled from the SBC for employing female pastors. The Browns divorced.

In 2009, William Brown pleaded guilty and was sentenced to serve 50 years in prison on four counts of aggravated sexual assault of a child. Kingsley later cut off all contact with her father for her own mental health.

In the aftermath, church leaders, many of whom did not know that Brown's daughter was his victim, failed to provide comfort or support to the family, Connie Brown says. Both Kingsley and her mother are no longer Southern Baptists but say they never lost their faith. Kingsley Brown works as a faith-based speaker and part-time model in Atlanta. Her mother founded a nonprofit and still preaches.

"There's a lot of damage that you have to pick up from what occurs after abuse like that, so it's important to be able to speak on restoration and healing," Kingsley said.

They both talked to the Chronicle in hopes of inspiring others with a positive message: Incest and abuse do not have to destroy you. They say breaking taboos by sharing that experience with authorities, with trusted friends, with God and with the right counselors can be a path to a better future.

"We know the freedom that comes on the other side, and we are anxious to help other people through it," Connie Brown told the Chronicle.

This Texas woman says she was only 12 when her pastor's son invited her in for a Coke and then raped her.

Media: Jon Shapley/Houston Chronicle

Abuse goes unpunished

Other survivors of abuse wrote about predators who remain in the pulpit. Several expressed in interviews how hard it has been to see the people who hurt or raped them go unpunished and continue preaching. They shared stories of abuse that occurred years or even decades ago.

One Texas woman wrote about how she was only 12 when a popular young preacher's son saw her walking by his house on a hot day and invited her inside for a Coke. He raped her on the floor of his house. He explained it was "something he'd helped some of my friends with" — special treatment he gave only certain girls. Her family belonged to his father's Texas-based Southern Baptist church. She never told anyone.

Years later, as a successful business executive, she began speaking to teenagers about her struggle to overcome the pain and shame of sexual abuse. She asked not to be identified in this story because she fears going public would identify her abuser, who was never prosecuted, and upset her elderly father. But she still wonders if her popular attacker later harmed others when he became a church leader himself.

Other survivors filed civil lawsuits that exposed pastors who abused their counseling roles to seduce and abuse adult women. These women didn't want to reopen old wounds by speaking publicly, but they emphasized that pastors who abuse adults remain more likely to get away with misconduct or crimes than child abusers. Very few cases the

Chronicle tracked involving abuse of adults resulted in criminal charges.

Several victims who have become strong advocates for change in Southern Baptist churches are among those who say they were denied justice — including best friends Kenny Stubblefield and Brooks Hansen, whose alleged abuser was never punished because they came forward too late for prosecution. The statute of limitations had expired in Tennessee, where they grew up.



Photo: Courtesy Kenny Stubblefield

Image 1 of 9

Kenny Stubblefield, of Memphis, and other childhood friends say they were abused as boys by their youth pastor in Tennessee. As an adult, he's become an advocate for reform in Southern Baptist churches.

Stubblefield still remembers every inch of that basement in Memphis: the shag carpet. The fridge full of Michelob's. The big-screen TV with porn playing. The waterbed, where at 16 he slept at the insistence of his youth pastor. The black window curtains, and the way the sunrise bled through them as he sat, paralyzed with fear, in the early morning hours after he said he was molested in November 1996.

For the next year, he lived “in the shadows,” he said in a recent interview. At the time, he thought: “I am by myself. ... I am alone. Nobody will protect me.”

Then his best friend, Brooks Hansen, told him about his own night in their youth pastor’s basement. Hansen’s older brother had a similar story.

All three eventually went to the church’s lead pastor, Scott Payne, who said he would act. The youth pastor was back at the church months later, the men said. Stubblefield said they were told to stay quiet, because that “was what the faithful did.”

“The abuse was horrendous,” Stubblefield said. “But the most damaging, life-altering part of the entire process was when the people I trusted — that I thought I could trust, that had my back, that were supposed to protect me — absolutely re-victimized me. It was like a gunshot wound in my gut.”

Despite knowing Tennessee’s statute of limitations had expired, the men filed a police report in 2016 after learning their alleged attacker still worked with schoolchildren at a Memphis library. The alleged attacker was investigated by police, who took no action. The city of Memphis said in a statement that the district attorney had declined to prosecute “due to the statute of limitations” but said that the employee, Chris Carwile, was “no longer employed by the City of Memphis.”

Neither Carwile nor Payne could be reached for comment. Payne previously has denied telling Stubblefield and Hansen to stay quiet and has said he believed the families were satisfied when he fired Carwile from the church.

Former Southern Baptist Pastor Doug Myers was sent to prison after he sexually abused boys in Florida and Maryland. One survivor asks why the Southern Baptist Convention didn't do more to stop him.

Media: Jon Shapley/Houston Chronicle

Stand Up, Speak Out

In Fort Worth, it took Dillon Price a decade to break his silence and talk openly about what his pastor did to him.

The decision was incredibly difficult. By then, Price had attended seminary and earned a college degree. He was no longer under Haby's direct control.

But Price's family knew Haby. They liked him. Many of his friends admired the pastor. Price knew there could be a backlash: "You might lose friends, you might lose people around you that don't believe you for whatever reason," Price said.

Haby, now a registered sex offender, did not respond to a written request for comment.

Price, now 34, said he came to realize that secrets and silence were part of the tools Haby used to abuse him. He felt like staying silent was allowing Haby to control his life. And he was worried Haby might be abusing others.

Price finally told his family the truth. Most of his relatives were shocked and angry, but nearly all believed him. One of Price's uncles sided with Haby and to this day won't speak to Price.

Price reported Haby to police in 2014 — about 14 years after Haby

began molesting him. Price said that when a Fort Worth police detective called and told him that Haby had been arrested, he felt free for the first time in years.

Two more men stepped forward and said Haby had abused them in their youth. Haby initially fought the charges, and the case went to trial. Haby reached a plea deal with prosecutors that allowed him to avoid prison time, but he had to admit his crimes and become a registered sex offender.

Price went from suffering in silence to [writing a book](#) about recovering from his abuse. He now attends a new church in Fort Worth. He has become a teacher, father and a coach and founded a ministry called Stand Up, Speak Out to talk openly about what happened to him. He especially wanted to increase support for male victims of clergy abuse, who tend to feel particularly isolated, he said.

"It's just so crazy that we don't have these conversations," Price said.

Talking about sexual abuse is awkward and painful, he acknowledged, but talking about it helps churches learn how to prevent it.

If more people understood predatory behavior, he said, they would have asked why Haby was routinely spending so much time alone with Price when he was just a 15-year-old boy.

That's not normal, Price said. But no one in his family or in his church knew enough about the problem to voice any suspicions.

"Whether it's in a church, whether it's in school, no matter what organization we're talking about, as long as there's conversations not happening, predators are finding their foothold," Price said. "And

they're going to continue to weasel their way in there.

"Because that's what they do."

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Dillon Price is a teacher, an author and a sexual abuse survivor. For several years, Price's pastor was the perpetrator of the abuse when he was a teenager.

(Marie D. De Jesús, Staff Photographer | Houston Chronicle)

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