

Questions Church Leaders Should Consider Based on the SBC Sexual Abuse Report

The existence of sexual abuse in SBC-affiliated churches is not news. We have had hard evidence for some years that the problem is widespread and that predators often find churches to be soft targets. Secular journalists, abuse survivors and their advocates have done the hard work of confronting us with this reality.

The Sexual Abuse Report details the response of the SBC's Executive Committee (EC) to this reality since the early 2000s. The report shows that senior employees of the EC avoided addressing the issue, concealed information about it, demonstrated a lack of compassion and honesty in dealing with survivors, hid behind legal advice to wash their hands of responsibility, and worked to undermine an elected SBC president and other SBC leaders who were more proactively addressing the issue.

It is a shameful report. One positive thing you can say about it is that it was the convention's own polity that brought it about. The messengers at the 2021 SBC annual meeting forced the issue despite opposition and obfuscation from the EC president and senior staff. The report, and the process leading up to it, has already caused many personnel and policy changes at the EC and is beginning to work its way out into other positive changes in the SBC. Hopefully that will continue with appropriate urgency. The measures approved by the SBC messengers last month are a good sign.

The report is a chronicle of failed leadership and thus is useful to local church leaders who do not want to make the same mistakes. Based on the report, here are some questions church leaders and leadership teams should be asking.

1. Are we taking sexual abuse seriously?

Senior EC staff did not think sexual abuse in SBC churches was that big a deal. So they were annoyed when survivors and their advocates kept bringing it up. EC leadership saw it as an unnecessary distraction from more important matters. That attitude paved the way for many leadership failures.

Church leaders, you need to assess your attitude about sexual abuse. Are you taking this issue seriously? Do you see it as important enough to warrant significant time and leadership on your part? Are you acting as if your church is somehow immune or your members too

spiritually mature for such a thing to happen? If that is your default attitude, you are setting yourself up for many of the mistakes made by the EC.

2. Are we well-informed about the behaviors of sexual predators and those they abuse?

Sexual predators groom their potential victims and those around them, even whole congregations. Predators know how to develop trust. They often look very committed to the Lord and his church. They usually do not look creepy or scary. They know how to manipulate feelings and perceptions. They know how to use personal power dynamics to conform victims to their will. And when they move on to the next church, they tend to repeat their behavior.

Abuse survivors often have a sense of loyalty to their abusers, as illogical as that may seem. Survivors often maintain respect and submissiveness to their abusers even after the abuse has ended. Years may pass before an abuse survivor realizes what actually happened and tells someone about it.

The lesson is: Neither predators nor survivors fit into our neat behavioral stereotypes. Their actions or lack thereof may seem so counterintuitive that church leaders are dismissive when allegations arise. Such ignorance was a contributor to the failures at the EC.

Church leaders, do you have enough basic education about abuser and survivor behavior? What seems logical to you may not play out in reality. That could lead you to be dismissive when you should be paying attention.

A free resource for this kind of training is the “Darkness to Light” presentation available through your county’s Children’s Advocacy Center (CAC). The focus is recognizing and preventing child sexual abuse.

To find your local CAC in Texas: <https://www.cactx.org/find-a-local-center>

Comal County CAC: <http://www.comalcac.org/>, Contact - Shannon Dixon

For individual training online: <https://www.d2l.org/education/the-training/>

3. Are we prepared to communicate appropriately if sexual abuse allegations arise in our church?

The EC did their best to bury information about abuse, abusers and survivors. Their approach, encouraged by their outside attorneys, was “The less said, the better.”

Church leaders, “keeping it quiet” is a bad plan for responding to sexual abuse. Mistakes are often forgiven; cover-ups are not. So do you have a communication plan ready if, and more likely when, an allegation of sexual abuse arises in your congregation?

Your communication plan should include law enforcement as necessary (you can use the Texas Abuse Hotline at www.txabusehotline.org or contact your local law enforcement agency), your staff and lay leadership, and the congregation as a whole. It should explain what is alleged while honoring victim confidentiality. It should explain what actions the church is taking concerning the accused, who is investigating, what protections are in place for the vulnerable, and what ministry is being provided for the accuser and family. It should be regularly updated so that the church is kept apprised of what is happening.

When there is an information vacuum, people provide their own content (i.e., rumor and speculation) to fill the void. It is best to eliminate the vacuum as much as possible with thorough communication.

4. Are we using the best practices for preventing the sexual abuse of minors?

There are abundant resources for training and prevention in this area. Ministry Safe is the best-known para-church organization to offer such resources (<https://ministrysafecom/>).

Inherent in the idea of “best practices” is an on-going effort. This is not a one-time thing. At least annually are you reviewing the latest best practices, updating your training and making necessary changes in your procedures? Are you updating background checks regularly and comprehensively? Are you budgeted adequately for an on-going effort of prevention? It is easy to grow complacent and let this slip. Do not be the church that ignores best practices for protecting kids. And do not be the church that *used to have* those practices. Stay current.

5. How will we respond when someone says they or their child has been sexually abused in our church?

The EC leadership viewed abuse survivors and survivor advocates as a distraction from more important matters and as a potential source of financial liability for the SBC. When the survivors and advocates kept pushing, the EC treated some of them as enemies and employed dishonesty, insults and even slander to silence them. The EC philosophy was, “Let’s make this go away.” They even cited biblical values like “focusing on evangelism” and “fiduciary responsibility” to justify the mistreatment.

Here is where you and your church have an ethical decision to make. Which is more important to you, shielding the church from negative publicity and potential liability or ministering to hurting people? If shielding the church is your priority, you will inevitably treat

abused people poorly. If ministering to hurting people is your priority, you may get that negative publicity. You may weaken your position where liability is concerned (but in most cases I think not). But in the long run you will look like the church of Jesus Christ instead of just some hypocritical organization with assets and a “brand” to protect.

If you want to make sure that ministry to hurting people is your church’s priority, I encourage you to take advantage of the Caring Well Initiative resources that are free from the SBC’s Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission (<https://www.caringwell.com/>). The Caring Well training and procedures will help you be prepared to put your priority into action when it is needed.

Warning: If you wait until an allegation arises to make your decision about how to respond, you are more likely to go the “institutional protection” route. So do not wait.

6. *Who* will respond when someone says they or their child has been sexually abused in our church?

I am convinced that one of the problems at the EC was that all of the senior leaders were men. Their outside attorneys were all men too. There were few if any female voices, and certainly no *empowered* female voices, involved in responding to abuse allegations and to the mostly female abuse survivors and advocates. Do you see how that might have added to the problem?

In SBC-affiliated churches it is usually men who are the leaders (i.e., pastors and deacons). I think it is a terrible mistake for only men to be involved in your church’s response to sexual abuse. So think about this: Who are the empowered female leaders who will be directly involved in your church’s preparation for and response to sexual abuse and abuse survivors? By “empowered” I mean they have equal authority and standing as the men on the team.

I am not making an egalitarian-versus-complementarian theological point here. I am simply saying that your church and the abuse survivors will be better served by a response team of equally empowered male and female leaders.

7. Are we prepared to overrule the advice of lawyers and insurers in order to do what is right?

The EC cited the advice of outside counsel in the way they responded, or did not respond, to abuse allegations and abuse survivors. The overriding goal was limiting any potential liability to the EC and other SBC entities. They called it their “fiduciary responsibility” and “preserving the base.” But what about their moral and ethical responsibilities as leaders of

an organization that is supposed to be about Jesus and the gospel? Did not Jesus say something about “as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it unto me”?

I am not against lawyers. I am certainly not against liability insurers. We have both at BBA. Your church should have both. But neither your attorney nor your insurer is the leader of your church. You are. And sometimes what your attorney wants you to do and what your insurer wants you to do will not be the right thing for your church to do. You have a higher priority. So talk about this as a church leadership team. Set your boundaries and priorities. Be prepared to overrule your lawyer and insurer when necessary.

8. How will we respond if someone points out our leadership shortcomings regarding sexual abuse?

When EC leaders were criticized by abuse survivors and advocates, they treated those survivors and advocates as adversaries. Instead of looking in the mirror and asking, “Do we need to do something different?”, EC leaders persisted in institutional protection mode. In one case they even referred to an abuse survivor as being influenced by the devil. It was an unhealthy response to legitimate criticism, criticism that could have led to positive changes at the EC.

There may be gaps in your church’s protection of the vulnerable. You may not be aware of those gaps or may not be addressing them adequately at the moment. If someone points it out, do not attack them or view them as a problem. Use it as helpful criticism. Learn from it and get better. Thank them, maybe even enlist them as part of the solution. Make an ally instead of an enemy.

Conclusion

Please take these questions to heart. Talk about them with other church leaders. Take action where necessary. Do not fall into the trap of thinking, “It can’t happen to us.” It can. There’s a good chance it will at some point. So be proactive and prepared. That really is your fiduciary responsibility to the Lord and his church.