

EC general counsel disputes group's
child sex abuse claims in AP story
By Staff
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NASHVILLE, Tenn. (BP)--The Southern Baptist Convention "deplores and condemns" child sexual abuse and provides resources for its member churches to battle it, an attorney with the SBC's Executive Committee said in a statement Feb. 22.

The statement by D. August Boto was in reference to an Associated Press story about a victims' group -- SNAP -- that is asking the denomination to launch an independent review board to look into cases concerning child sexual abuse. A SNAP coordinator, Christa Brown, was quoted in the story as saying Southern Baptist leaders "don't want to see this problem" as true. (SNAP is an acronym for Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests and other Clergy.)

Boto, though, in a 1,300-word statement, said the denomination is addressing the problem, and has long been doing so.

"Such criminal acts by those in ministerial positions are abhorrent -- they violate a myriad of biblical commands and principles and even the most basic standards of human decency -- and we believe such behavior should be prosecuted to the fullest," Boto wrote. "Our hearts are truly broken when we hear of such abuse and we will continue to encourage Southern Baptist churches to address this deplorable behavior."

Boto provided several examples of SBC action, including the fact that LifeWay Christian Resources of the SBC provides guidelines for screening preschool and children's workers and encourages churches to do background checks on all ministers and workers. State conventions, such as the Georgia Baptist Convention, also have resources in place.

The SBC's unique structure -- churches within the denomination are autonomous and voluntarily choose to participate -- could prevent "most of the specific requests" from SNAP from being implemented. But Boto said the requests that "are feasible" are being studied.

"We have repeatedly encouraged our churches to exercise due diligence in background research when considering a prospective minister or volunteer, but that due diligence cannot be mandated," Boto wrote. "... The Southern Baptist Convention structure leaves the responsibility for such matters in the hands of those most motivated and capable of addressing it -- the members of the local churches -- many of whom are parents and grandparents.

The SBC "strongly advises the immediate report of suspected child abuse, sexual or otherwise," Boto said.

In 2002, the messengers at the denomination's annual meeting approved a resolution calling for churches and civil authorities to hold accountable clergy members guilty of sexual abuse.

Following is the complete statement by Boto, who serves as general counsel and vice president for convention policy for the SBC Executive Committee:

"Every person on the Executive Committee thoroughly deplores and condemns the sexual abuse SNAP and its representative, Ms. Brown, have addressed in recent days. Such criminal acts by those in ministerial positions are abhorrent -- they violate a myriad of biblical commands and principles and even the most basic

standards of human decency -- and we believe such behavior should be prosecuted to the fullest. Our hearts are truly broken when we hear of such abuse and we will continue to encourage Southern Baptist churches to address this deplorable behavior.

"The repeated claims of Ms. Brown and SNAP to the media that we had been unresponsive are untrue. SNAP and Ms. Brown received written replies to every communication they have sent -- a total of five responses to date. Copies of these are available upon request. We have been informed that Ms. Brown and SNAP have recently determined they were in error, and did, in fact, receive our correspondence. SNAP has issued an apology for making those claims.

"In our responses to anyone inquiring about Convention action in cases of child abuse committed in affiliated churches, we have attempted to explain that the Southern Baptist Convention and its Executive Committee (indeed, each SBC entity, state convention, local association, and organization) has absolutely no authority over ANY Southern Baptist church. Article IV of the Convention's constitution (which may be found on the Convention's website -- SBC.net) is no new provision, and states a historical tenet long deemed tremendously important by all Southern Baptists -- local, Bible-believing churches should not be under any outside ecclesiastical authority. Every Southern Baptist church is autonomous and independent -- affiliation with the SBC is entirely voluntary -- each of the more than 43,000 churches in the U.S. has chosen to align voluntarily.

"Therefore, the SBC does not play an authoritative role over those churches. Representatives from those churches meet annually to make decisions regarding the work of the Executive Committee and the SBC entities -- not the other way around.

"Because of our structure, most of the specific requests Ms. Brown and SNAP have made are not possible -- there is no denominational jurisdiction over SBC churches. Those requests that are feasible are being studied.

"We have repeatedly ENCOURAGED our churches to exercise due diligence in background research when considering a prospective minister or volunteer, but that due diligence cannot be mandated.

"The SBC has made resources available to assist churches in performing background research and we will continue to encourage every SBC church to make full use of those resources in their hiring processes. (The resources listed below are not new -- some of them have been available for several years.)

"Our earnest prayer is that every Southern Baptist church will take the necessary steps to prevent such abuse -- it is a stewardship the Lord has placed before them and one which we pray they will embrace prayerfully and diligently.

"The following links are a sampling of SBC-related Internet resources for preventing child abuse:

"10 Steps to Prevent Child Abuse in the Church

"How to Protect Your Church from Lawsuits

"4 Steps to Prevent Sexual Abuse in Your Church

"7 Ways to Protect Your Church Staff from Scandal

"Screening Procedures for Childhood Ministry

"Examples of resources offered by state conventions to their churches:

"Child Abuse Prevention and Reporting

"Child Abuse Prevention

"Suggested Steps in Preventing Child Abuse in the Church

"With respect to recent specific claims about the Southern Baptist Convention, see the following:

"1. The claim that an independent review panel is necessary -- Any such panel, to be effective, would need authority to investigate and act. Baptists would never authorize or recognize such a panel if it were composed of people outside their local church. Inside the local church, it is often the case that Baptists have formed deacon subcommittees, personnel committees, legal committees and other such bodies to authorize prevention policies and deal with specific instances of criminal, abhorrent or impermissible conduct. And with regard to criminal matters, the proper investigatory panel for Baptists should be law enforcement officials. The SBC strongly advises the immediate report of suspected child abuse, sexual or otherwise.

"2. The claim that a no-tolerance policy should be adopted -- While there may be some merit in local churches including a bold statement against child abuse in any employee policies they may adopt, stating the obvious would be more in the way of a public relations move than one of real substance. The SBC does not tolerate or condone crime of any kind. The suggestion that adoption of a no-tolerance policy would be helpful implies that the SBC approves ministers of local churches, or certifies ministers for service, which it does not.

"3. The assertion that the SBC should be able to track its ministers -- Churches choosing to affiliate with the Convention to cooperate in mission endeavors employ their own ministers, who may choose to inform the Convention of their whereabouts, though many do not. The ministers are not the Convention's. They are (or ought to be) the Lord's. The Convention, as already explained, has no basis upon which to require ministers to update their employment status or address. In a sense, the SBC is as capable of controlling or knowing the whereabouts of 'its' ministers as a university might be of 'its' alumni. Sexual predators are not well known for their propensity to publicly declare their intentions, identity, or location.

"4. The reported assertion (by Christa Brown) that 'kids are not safe in Southern Baptist churches' -- Statements such as this have implied that the Southern Baptist Convention is somehow irresponsible regarding child safety. The Southern Baptist Convention structure leaves the responsibility for such matters in the hands of those most motivated and capable of addressing it -- the members of the local churches -- many of whom are parents and grandparents.

"5. The assertion (by Christa Brown) that nothing is being done until the press becomes involved -- Examination of the cases reported discloses that in the vast majority of them, the news article is reporting about lawsuits and criminal actions that have already been filed as the result of a local church (or victim) having acted.

"6. The suggestion that a registry be employed by the denomination to blacklist perpetrators -- There is already an abundance of such registries. Any church desiring to qualify a potential employee or volunteer has access to them. The answer lies more in exercising the due diligence of qualification than it does in creating another list. SNAP appears to recognize this, in that, as yet, it has posted no such list.

"7. The report (by Christa Brown, as reported by Rose French for the AP) that in the last six months, SNAP has received reports of about 40 cases of sexual abuse by Southern Baptist ministers -- with some of the incidents dating back many years -- SNAP did not share that claim, nor the underlying information, in our meeting with them on Tuesday, February 20th. But statements such as this are misleading if they are not read carefully. In the last several hours since the release of the AP report, the statement has been misunderstood and improperly recast as '40 cases in the last six months.' The SBC's response to the challenge of moral failure and crime in church settings must be crafted on dependable information, and the public's perception of the SBC in the process should be also. If SNAP cares to catalog the information it is referring to, of course we will review it, but for it to be usable it should take a reliable form, bereft of generalization, innuendo and presumption. In our correspondence with SNAP, we asked for their data six months ago, but did not receive a reply. Nevertheless, published reports (taken from the Internet and available to anyone) concern us. Almost all of them involved either a civil lawsuit, an arrest and prosecution, or both. And, whatever the actual number, we know that every single instance of child abuse, occurring anywhere, is a deplorable tragedy. We know that children are especially precious in God's sight. For a child to be abused in a place where the child should be most safe is terribly troubling to us. We cannot overstate the depth of our grief for each victim. We cannot overstate our sense of condemnation of such behavior.

"8. The assertion that sexual abuse of children is more likely in a Baptist context because of Baptist polity -- It is ironic that SNAP, an organization most of whose members were abused in a hierarchical ecclesiastical framework (Catholic) now believe that victimization is more likely in a congregational one (Baptist, Bible church, etc.), and that hierarchical solutions may be best. They quote one ethicist for the proposition that the Baptist context may make victimization more possible, but when that quote is read closely, it becomes apparent that the problem being complained of is the exercise of unbridled authority. This can occur in ANY setting -- school, church, employment, or government. The Baptist context includes congregations exhibiting a full range of willingness and ability to correctly relate to their ministers. Some do it very well and some do not. And those which do not often suffer, and allow suffering by victims, as a result. Tragically, even some of the most vigilant

congregations have also fallen victim to an occurrence. We must improve wherever we can."

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