

Pastor renews call for database of clergy sex abuse

by [Bob Allen](#)

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ENID, Okla. (ABP) – An Oklahoma pastor says the Southern Baptist Convention should reconsider a database to help safeguard churches from clergy who are sexual predators.

Wade Burleson, pastor of Emmanuel Baptist Church in Enid, Okla., made a motion at the SBC annual meeting in 2007 calling for a database of Southern Baptist ministers who have been “credibly accused of, personally confessed to, or legally been convicted of sexual harassment or abuse.”

After study, leaders ruled the idea unfeasible, saying the convention lacked authority to investigate local churches, which are free to call their own ministers. Time Magazine ranked the decision as one of the top 10 under-reported news stories in 2008.

Burleson resurfaced the idea Aug. 10 in a blog posting about news of a former youth minister who recently confessed to inappropriate behavior with boys at two of his previous churches.

Burleson said that next to the victims, he feels most sorry for Morrison Heights Baptist Church in Clinton, Miss., caught in a scandal they did not cause. Burleson said he preached in the church when he was president of the Baptist General Convention of Oklahoma in 2004.

“I know the people of Morrison Heights,” he said. “They are some of the finest, kindest, warm-hearted individuals on earth.”

Burleson said if there had been a policy requiring churches to report abuse, Morrison Heights could have contacted the SBC to ask if their candidate was listed. Instead, sources say, John Langworthy was allowed to leave his former church and eventually move on to theirs. He got a part-time job teaching in a public school, listing his

former church as past employment but not including any names as a reference.

Langworthy managed to keep his secret for 21 years, until a former colleague at his old church contacted leaders at Morrison Heights about his past.

Burleson said he knows Langworthy's attorney, and that he would rather be working at the state capital or volunteering in the church than defending his former worship pastor. Burleson said he also is sure the church would have much preferred to hire a minister without a record of sexual abuse than receive phone calls from now-grown children asking if anything inappropriate ever happened on youth choir trips.

Burleson said he isn't sure how the SBC might enforce required reporting by churches, but there would need to be some penalty for non-compliance. In the past national and state Baptist bodies have expelled churches with women pastors and those that were welcoming and affirming of gays.

Christa Brown, a victims' advocate who first approached SBC leaders about a system to prevent clergy abuse in 2006, said asking churches to report is one possibility, but she believes a more common scenario would be reporting by victims or those with knowledge of abuse.

Brown advocates establishment of an office with trained professionals to receive and assess reports of abuse and keep a record of those found credible. If a church knowingly chose to keep a credibly accused abuser in their pulpit, they could conceivably face discipline by the denomination.

"Such denominational review processes are common for clergy abuse allegations in other major faith groups," Brown said. "If Southern Baptists provided such a process -- and if it were truly a safe and welcoming place staffed by trained professionals -- there would likely be many more clergy abuse survivors who would bring forward reports of abuse."

Brown said if victims try to report allegations to a local church they often are scorned for trying to destroy a beloved minister's career. They can go to the police, but typically allegations by adult survivors are too old to prosecute. Criminal background checks aren't enough, because 90 percent of active child molesters have never been convicted.

"Other safeguards are desperately needed," Brown said. "Even if denominational assessments can't put a predatory preacher in prison, they can at least assure that

he will not be able to use the power and trust of his ministerial position as a weapon."