

Bob Jones University president apologizes to sexual assault survivors on campus

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WASHINGTON (RNS) An outside watchdog group hired to investigate sex abuse claims at Bob Jones University issued its 300-page report on Thursday (December 11), concluding that the conservative Christian school responded poorly to many students who were survivors of sexual assault or abuse.

Bob Jones, with about 3,000 students at its campus in Greenville, S.C., tapped Lynchburg, Va.-based GRACE (Godly Response to Abuse in the Christian Environment) in November 2012 to investigate claims about sexual assault. During its two-year investigation, GRACE interviewed 50 individuals who self-identified as victims of sexual abuse.

Some of those students claimed they were victims on campus; others said they were dealing with child sexual abuse but received a poor reception from campus officials as they struggled with their past.

The school's teachings on sin, forgiveness, discipline and justice shaped how Bob Jones University responded to sexual assault, the report argues.

"As a result of the school's poor responses, many of these students were deeply hurt and experienced further trauma," a press release from GRACE states.

The school has carved out a significant space within fundamentalism after its leadership parted ways with evangelist Billy Graham, an icon of more mainstream American evangelicalism. The school also received national attention when then-presidential candidate George W. Bush visited in 2000, prompting the school to drop its ban on interracial dating, which it had unsuccessfully tried to defend before the U.S. Supreme Court in 1983.

The school decided in 2011 to hire GRACE to investigate claims of mishandling of sexual abuse after national media reports surfaced. Earlier this year, the school fired, and then rehired, GRACE to investigate allegations. A representative for the university said both parties agreed not to discuss concerns during that time.

Bob Jones highlighted findings from the report:

- BJU officials were not adequately prepared or trained to counsel victims appropriately.
- Staff were seen by some victims as insensitive to their suffering.
- Some victims reported that the school's counseling was inadequate, insensitive, and counterproductive.
- Some felt staff tended to blame victims for the abuse or sexual assault.
- Counseling sometimes overlapped with disciplinary actions.
- Several victims reported that their abuse was not reported to legal authorities by campus counselors.

Some individuals reported hearing themes in chapel, classrooms and counseling sessions that would blame a woman's style of dress for triggering an assault, or label victims as "damaged goods." They reported feeling as though the school saw "all sexual sin as equal." Like many Christian institutions, the school prohibits sex outside of marriage.

"The lack of distinction between sexual abuse and consensual sexual sin has caused some victims of sexual offenses to feel impure and shamed even though they did not choose the sexual act perpetrated upon them," the report states. "Several individuals raised the complaint that BJU counselors had encouraged abuse victims to confess and repent of any 'pleasure' experienced during the sexual abuse."

The report suggested that BJU counselors may not be referring abuse victims for appropriate medical evaluation, treating symptoms such as post-traumatic flashbacks and nightmares as "spiritual problems."

The school's teaching on sin also contributed to how students were counseled, the report suggests.

"According to the counseling principles espoused by BJU's counselors, the occurrence of sexual abuse or sexual assault brings 'a trial' upon a victim, to which the victim may choose to respond righteously or sinfully," the report states. "A righteous response to a trial is one that is most like Christ. An unrighteous response

requires a victim to confess sin and conform his or her ‘mindset and choices to accurately mirror his position and identity in Christ.’”

The report also suggested that counselors’ teaching on forgiveness shaped how they told students to respond.

“Victims also reported that these messages often pressured abuse victims to forgive quickly, to avoid bitterness, and/or to confront their abuser,” the report states. “For many, this pressure blamed them for not forgiving their perpetrators, minimized their sorrow, ignored their cries for justice, and intensified their trauma symptoms.”

The report suggested that the school’s leaders lacked a sufficient understanding of justice. Abusers will deceive and manipulate people to achieve their end, the report says.

“In the Christian environment, this often means using Christian ideas and theology to manipulate others to avoid responsibility,” the report states. “Leaders in the Christian environment must diligently uphold a fully biblical standard of repentance for the sake of protecting victims and holding perpetrators accountable for their atrocious actions.”

The school’s counseling is too closely connected with discipline, a hallmark of the school since its founding, the report states. Students also reported breaches of confidentiality during counseling.

Ahead of the report’s official release, the school’s president apologized and promised a change in culture.

“On behalf of Bob Jones University, I would like to sincerely and humbly apologize to those who felt they did not receive from us genuine love, compassion, understanding, and support after suffering sexual abuse or assault,” Bob Jones President Steve Pettit said in a statement.

“I promise the victims who felt we failed them that the GRACE report is an extremely high priority that has our immediate and full attention.”

The university has been historically a family-run operation. Bob Jones Sr., Bob Jones Jr., Bob Jones III, and Stephen Jones—Bob Jones III’s son—have all served as past presidents. A year ago, Stephen Jones resigned due to health concerns and was replaced by Pettit, the first non-Jones family member to lead the school.

The investigation was led by GRACE's executive director, Boz Tchividjian, a grandson of Billy Graham and a former child abuse prosecutor, setting up a conflicted relationship given the tensions between the famed evangelist and the Jones family. Graham briefly attended Bob Jones, but the evangelist distanced himself from the school's more strident fundamentalism.

The school still sees itself as fundamentalist, though it describes itself in its promotional materials more broadly as nondenominational Christian.

Tchividjian, who blogs for Religion News Service, also teaches at Liberty University School of Law, writing and speaking on why evangelicals struggle to report sex abuse claims.

"Though much in this report will understandably cause readers to grieve, GRACE is encouraged by the willingness of Bob Jones University to take the unprecedented step to voluntarily request this independent investigation and to make these difficult findings public," Tchividjian said in a statement.

"Such institutional transparency is too rare and will hopefully set a positive precedent for Christendom and the watching world."

Campus rape has captured nationwide attention as stories of alleged rape surfaced at the University of Virginia and Columbia University. A number of schools, including Harvard, Princeton, Florida State, and Ohio State, are under federal investigation for their response to sexual assault.

"We are all awakening to the depth and breadth of this societal problem," Pettit said. "Colleges and universities across the country are reassessing how they handle cases of sexual abuse and assault. We want to be part of that solution. To do that, we must first take the mote out of our own eye and address our own failings. The GRACE report helps in that effort by helping us identify areas of concern."

Pettit will appoint a committee to review the report findings and recommendations during the next 90 days. He said the school has taken steps to respond to sex abuse. Every faculty and staff must promptly notify law enforcement officials of child sexual abuse. School staff encourage adult victims of sexual assault to report their experience to the police.

School officials will also “make clear that the biblical lesson of forgiveness does not imply that the victim is in any way responsible for the sexual assault or abuse they experienced.”

The school, Pettit said, will provide staff with more training and access to professional counselors with expertise in sexual abuse.