

Responding to Sexual Abuse: A Study of Southern Baptist Churches

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A thesis presented to the Honors College of Middle Tennessee State  
University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation from  
the University Honors College.

Fall 2020

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## **Acknowledgements**

To Dr. Woodward: Thank you for everything you have done for me throughout my college career. Your Constitutional Law classes made me a better reader, writer, student, and citizen. Having you as my thesis advisor was exactly what this project needed. Thank you for pushing me and for encouraging me, I will miss our chats in your office.

To Dr. Trowbridge: Thank you for being my second reader for this project. Your kind emails and words of encouragement were lifelines when I was feeling down. Thank you for going above and beyond.

To the pastors I interviewed: Thank you for being willing to discuss such a sensitive subject with a stranger. Your honesty and willingness to share are so appreciated.

To Mom and Dad: Thank you both for supporting me throughout my entire education journey and for your constant prayer and encouragement throughout this project. I love you!

To Jack: Thank you for praying for me, listening to me talk at length about my favorite academic articles, making me laugh when I was down, and for reminding me who I was each time I would get discouraged.

## **Abstract**

In 2019, the *Houston Chronicle* found that in the past twenty years, 700 people have reported being sexually abused by a member or leader of a Southern Baptist Church. This prompted leaders in the Southern Baptist Convention to urge its churches to create policies on reporting sexual abuse. Yet, due to its autonomous structure, the Convention cannot force its churches to adopt certain policies. This study examines if certain factors determine whether a Southern Baptist Church possesses a policy on responding to sexual abuse. Results demonstrate that larger churches are more likely to possess a response policy, because they have more resources, and their vulnerability to abuse is more obvious than that of smaller churches due to the higher number of attendees and volunteers. Additionally, the results found that churches are more likely to possess preventative policies rather than response policies, that the response policies churches do have usually only apply to minors, and that many local Southern Baptist Churches are not influenced by the convention in any tangible way.

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

The Southern Baptist Convention is the largest Protestant denomination in the world. Composed of 47,456 churches scattered across the United States, a total of 14,813,234 people are members of a church in the Southern Baptist Convention (Staff SBC.net). What is unique about the Southern Baptist denomination is that each Southern Baptist Church is an autonomous, self-governing body. The church has the power over its own practices, rather than a separate governing body having authority. This type of structure results in the Southern Baptist Convention having little-to-no direct control over their churches. There is a culture of the convention working for the churches, not the reverse (Harper and Whitfield 2018). This type of church structure is called Congregational, and it is a contrast from other types of structures such as Episcopal or Presbyterian (Takayama and Cannon 1979).<sup>1</sup> Southern Baptists are not the only denomination to possess this type of structure, but their large size makes them notable. While churches in other denominations are under the authority of a council or a bishop, Southern Baptist Churches must only fulfill four requirements to qualify as a Southern Baptist Church.

A cooperating Southern Baptist church is an autonomous Baptist congregation that . . . missionally and formally identifies itself as part of the Southern Baptist fellowship of churches; cooperatively affirms its willing cooperation with the Convention's purpose, processes, missions, and ministries; doctrinally embraces the biblical faith and practice by which Southern Baptists have historically identified themselves; and financially provides regular financial support for the Convention's work as part of the church's adopted budget (Staff SBC.net).

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<sup>1</sup> Episcopal structure describes a church that has bishops as its authority, while a Presbyterian structure has a synod of presbyters as its authority (Armentrout and Slocum 2000). These structures are different from the Congregational structure, which gives authority to the local church.

Because the Southern Baptist Convention has no power of enforcement and no way of monitoring what happens in their churches, Southern Baptist Churches are autonomous and free to make their own decisions without the Convention's approval. Church autonomy is one of the defining characteristics of a Southern Baptist Church. This autonomy allows local churches to make their own decisions and operate under the "Lordship of Christ" (The Baptist Faith and Message Study Committee 2000).

In 2019, the *Houston Chronicle* released their investigation into Southern Baptist Churches and found that over 700 people had come forward as being abused by a Southern Baptist leader or member. The Southern Baptist Convention has no power to command a church to handle abuse in a specific way. Due to the lack of guiding authority, churches often handle allegations of abuse internally (DeMuth 2019). The lack of coordination between Southern Baptist Churches and the lack of governance over the churches can allow accusations of abuse to go unheard. Many leaders or volunteers are able to continue preaching and teaching, despite admitting to abusing members at their previous church. According to sexual abuse survivor Susan Codone, the reason for rampant unreported abuse in Southern Baptist churches is "rooted in our culture of casual indifference to predatory sexual behavior (SBC Sexual Abuse Advisory Group 2019)." Centralizing power in the Southern Baptist Convention may not be the answer to the problem of unreported abuse, as denominations with centralized power, like the Catholic church, also have issues with the cover-up of abuse (Goodstein and Otterman 2018). Instead, the approach taken by the Southern Baptist Convention is to encourage each

individual church to have its own comprehensive policies and procedures for objectively handling accusations of abuse.

My research question is whether certain factors determine whether a Southern Baptist Church will possess a policy on responding to sexual abuse. After interviewing nine Southern Baptist pastors and analyzing the policies of twelve churches, I find that the size of the church impacts whether a Southern Baptist Church possesses a sexual abuse response policy. Larger churches are more likely to have a policy because they have more resources and their vulnerability to abuse is obvious. Since larger churches have more attendees and volunteers, it is less likely that leaders will be able to personally know and vet each person. I also find that while having a prior experience with a sexual abuse allegation can impact whether a church has a policy, it does not always cause a church to create policy. It is not as strong a factor as size is. Overall, this study shows that while the Southern Baptist Convention is trying to educate and encourage churches to create sexual abuse response policies, their efforts may not be working.

## CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

The topic of sexual abuse in churches has been addressed by scholars, but only in relatively narrow ways, with particular focus on Catholic and Orthodox Jewish communities. The Catholic Church and its cover-up of abuse is the subject of numerous articles. While the argument is framed in different ways, it is argued by some scholars that the Catholic Church prioritized its own reputation over the wellbeing of its congregants (Dunne 2004, 204; Gonsiorek 2013, 51) Scholars have also researched the Orthodox Jewish Communities and came to similar conclusions (Katzenstein and Fontes 2017). Overall, the general consensus is that hierarchical churches have preferred to handle abuse allegations internally to preserve the image of the church and its members. There is a gap in existing literature regarding non-hierarchical denominations and the creation of sexual abuse policies. Churches that are autonomous, such as Southern Baptist Churches, are rarely researched despite the fact that over 14 million people in the United States belong to a Southern Baptist Church. While the research conducted on hierarchical churches can apply to autonomous churches, there are key differences. These differences include a lack of systemic culture, a different reporting structure, and a lack of accountability. Additionally, there is a lack of existing literature on the factors that drive the creation of sexual abuse policies.

How the Catholic Church has responded to allegations of abuse has been thoroughly examined. Researcher Elizabeth A. Dunne compared how the Roman Catholic Church responded to allegations of abuse with different crisis management techniques that corporations employ (Dunne 2004, 490). She argues that before the abuse was brought to the public's attention, the Roman Catholic Church handled sexual abuse

allegations similar to how a “client-independent” corporation would respond to a crisis. A client-independent corporation supplies products or services which clients believe they are fundamentally dependent. These corporations act differently than client-dependent corporations that must earn favor with the public. The Roman Catholic Church employed scapegoating by positioning itself as an observer rather than perpetuator of the abuse. The organization placed all blame on the priests and the powers of evil while maintaining their own innocence. The Roman Catholic Church also used a defense known as defeasibility; they blamed the abuse on having a lack of knowledge or expertise on how to deal with the issue. Finally, the Church engaged in apologetics<sup>2</sup> rather than issuing an apology. They attempted to reframe the facts in order to make them look innocent. In the cases studied, these three tactics were paired with inaction. According to Dunne, the Catholic Church of the 1980s acted very similarly to a large, bureaucratic corporation during a publicity crisis. A similar argument was articulated by John C. Gonsiorek, who argues that the Catholic Church’s automatic response to abuse accusations was outrage and suppression (Gonsiorek 2013, 51). He concludes that when confronted with damaging information, institutions will protect themselves first. When institutions are investigating their own crimes, their natural reaction is to cover-up.

Scholars have argued that many churches are not prepared to handle abuse allegations on their own. In her article, Susan B. Ridgely shows that the Catholic Church chose to center the reporting process on the accused, rather than the wellbeing of the victim (Ridgely 2019, 9). Rather than addressing how children are affected by their

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<sup>2</sup> Dunne uses the word apologetics to mean speaking to defend oneself, as opposed to speaking to express remorse for a fault without offering a defense.

abuse, the process was centered around the abuser. When the Catholic Church was at the height of abuse allegations, children who were victims of the abuse were portrayed as being incapable of being internally traumatized. They were seen as too young and too naïve to be mentally and emotionally affected by abuse. This research furthers the idea that when institutions are left to investigate abuse allegations, victims are ignored, and trauma is underestimated. Additionally, churches can be susceptible to believing they are above traditional authorities. Carol M. Warner writes that the Catholic Church saw itself as sacred, separate from the secular state, and obligated to obey alternative authorities (Warner 2019, 2). This idea of the Church perceiving itself to be outside of the jurisdiction of governing authorities is common and contributes to victim suppression.

Other researchers have addressed how victims of abuse should hold the church accountable (Russel 2003, 885). It is accepted and recognized by researchers that the best option is to notify the authorities of the abuse allegations (SBC Sexual Abuse Advisory Group 2019). In their report on Preventing Child Abuse in Youth-Serving Organizations, the Center for Disease Control emphasizes the importance of reporting suspected abuse (CDC 2007). The first step a leader in the church should take once they are made aware of the abuse is to contact authorities, especially if they are in one of the twenty-eight states where church employees are mandatory reporters (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2019). Some pastors believe it is their job to screen the allegations to prevent false-accusations. However, they are not more qualified than police to determine whether a person is lying, especially when the accuser is underage (Tchividjian 2018). Having clear sexual abuse policies is important because they help church leaders navigate these sensitive and tragic situations. Additionally, formal policies aid in the prevention of

abuse. Research has shown that sexual abuse is situational. Sexual offenders may not act if it seems too risky or inconvenient. Having sexual abuse policies and procedures will help foster a culture of zero-tolerance for abuse, discouraging offenders from acting (Terry, 2008).

The Catholic Church is not the only organization researchers have studied related to issues of sexual abuse. David Katzenstein and Lisa Fontes studied the lack of reporting in Orthodox Jewish Communities (Katzenstein and Fontes 2017). They found that for sexual abuse to be reported, a responsible adult must be made aware of the abuse and that adult must make the decision to report the abuse. However, the researchers discovered that five themes prevent these two steps from occurring. Prohibitions against speaking ill of a fellow Jew, fear and intimidation, stigma and shame, reliance on rabbinical courts, and patriarchal gender roles all work to silence child sexual abuse victims. According to Katzenstein and Fontes, these five concepts are steeped in the culture of Orthodox Judaism, but these concepts are not unique to Judaism. Many of these concepts are common throughout different religions and denominations. In both the Catholic studies and this Orthodox Jewish Community study, both organizations preferred to handle the allegations internally, despite it negatively affecting the victims. The distrust of the justice system and culture of covering up abuse is an issue that transcends denomination.

There is little to no research on sexual abuse in non-hierarchical church denominations, due to the lack of reporting and tracking. However, researchers have researched informal church structures in non-hierarchical churches. These structures are important to study because they can influence how decisions are made, such as whether abuse will be reported. Researchers examined a Lutheran Church and how informal

power was distributed amongst the congregation (Balswick and Layne 1973). They found that three groups emerged: clique members, marginals, and isolates. They also found that these groups formed based on sex, age, marital status, and length of church membership. This study shows that an informal power structure does exist in local churches. This is relevant to the question at hand because informal power can be used to empower or silence abuse victims. It also shows the power of the local church. When discussing the differences in belief and action between Christian Evangelical intellectuals and the Christian Evangelical body, C. Christopher Smith argues that local churches are instrumental in bridging this gap (Smith 2018, 352). If local churches do not pay attention to the call to create policies on sexual abuse, the call goes unanswered and unheeded.

Overall, many scholars believe that both formally and informally, sexual abuse victims are very susceptible to being silenced in churches. While this is not a problem only in churches, religious organizations can make decisions to address and reduce the occurrence of this pervasive issue. There is little research on non-hierarchical churches, and very little research on how sexual abuse guidelines are created. Non-hierarchical churches do not have as all-encompassing cultures like the Catholic Church or the Jewish Orthodox communities have. The culture of Orthodox Judaism or Catholicism is much more pervasive than that of Protestant Christianity. An example of this is education. While Christian private schools exist and are numerous, the leaders in local churches are rarely connected to leaders in Christian schools, unlike Catholic schools or Jewish schools. Students at a local Christian school could attend several different unconnected churches, while the students at a Catholic school or Jewish school are all under the same hierarchical structure (Katzenstein and Fontes 2017). This culture could discourage

victims from reporting, as it would not only impact the people they attend church with, but the people at their school as well. Additionally, the reporting structure in hierarchical churches is different. In congregational churches, it is unclear who a victim should report to, as well as where the information should go. Congregational churches also do not have a supervising entity to hold them accountable. While the Southern Baptist Convention has the power to expel churches, they can only discipline churches if they are aware of the occurrence of abuse. However, there is no formal mechanism for this. My research seeks to bridge this gap. This research is important because the Southern Baptist Church is the largest protestant denomination in the world. This thesis will explore the policy-making process in Southern Baptist Churches and what contributes to the creation of sexual abuse policies. In the following section, I introduce my research method and how I will gather the needed information.

### **CHAPTER III: METHOD AND APPROACH**

In order to see if certain factors cause Southern Baptist Churches to possess sexual abuse response policies, I interviewed nine pastors who represent twelve Southern Baptist Churches. Interviews were the appropriate method for this question because it provided insight on the decisions those churches made, why those decisions were made, and who made them. During interviews, I asked these pastors about their church's demographics, their policies, and the policy creation process. Many Southern Baptist Churches are a part of a local association as well as the Southern Baptist Convention. These associations exist to facilitate cooperation among local churches and other nearby associations (Harper and Whitfield 2018). The sample of this study is an association of fifty to seventy-five<sup>3</sup> churches from many different towns in a southern state. The most populous of these towns has approximately 141,000 people, while the least populous town has approximately 550 people. This sample was chosen because it represents churches from rural and urban areas and includes large, medium, and smaller churches. Overall, the churches in this association are typical of most Southern Baptist Churches.

Every church in the local association was contacted through email, phone, or the church's website. Of the fifty to seventy-five churches listed on the association's website, seven seemed to no longer exist. None of the phone numbers worked and no website or email was found. Of the forty-seven churches contacted, seventeen responded and twelve agreed to be interviewed. These twelve churches vary in size, age, staff structure, and style. Of the twelve churches, the sizes range from 60 attendees to 5,000 attendees. For this study, size is determined by attendees rather than members, as most of the churches

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<sup>3</sup> The variance in number is to protect the anonymity of the association.

have many more members than actual active attendees. Overall, I interviewed the pastors of four churches with approximately 50-250 attendees, six churches with approximately 300-600 attendees, and 2 churches with more than 2,000 attendees. The attendance numbers being used are the average attendance before the COVID-19 pandemic impacted attendance numbers. In this study, there are more large churches represented than smaller churches. However, many small churches were contacted at least two times, but did not wish to participate. Despite this, the twelve churches do adequately represent the many different types of Southern Baptist Churches. Two of the churches represented have multiple smaller campuses that also belong to the local association. Because of the three smaller campuses belonging to two large churches, nine pastors were interviewed, but twelve churches are represented. Those twelve churches come from five different towns of varying sizes. The churches also differ in styles of worship and in the levels of modern and traditional services. Some church staff described their church as traditional and conservative, while others described their church as energetic and big. There are also differences in staff structure, the amount of staff, the age of the congregants, and the age of the church. The oldest church represented was established in the 1800s and the newest church represented was established in the early 2000s. Overall, these twelve churches provide an adequate representation of the many different kinds of Southern Baptist Churches.

Once a church staff member agreed to be interviewed, the interview was scheduled, and the participant received the informed consent document. The participants were either the pastor of the church or the staff member with the most insight on the policy creation process there. When I initially contacted each church, I asked to interview

the individual they believed would have the most knowledge on their church's policies. Some churches only had one staff member, while others had staff members who were designative administrative pastors or children and youth pastors who had more insight on the subject. Three interviews were conducted remotely and six were conducted in person following social distancing and other COVID-19 protocols. At the start of each in person interview, I noted if they left the door open or met with me in a common area.

The participant was asked about the demographics of their church, such as how many members they have, their average Sunday morning attendance, when the church was established, the average age of attendees, the staff structure of the church, and how long they have been employed at that church. These demographic questions were necessary because they provide important information about the church. When all the churches are compared to each other, the demographic information paired with their sexual abuse policies show all the ways those churches are different or similar. Then, the participant was asked about the sexual abuse response policies at their church and whether they possessed a policy. If they did, they were asked about the policy and the process of its creation. They were asked why they wrote the policy, if they consulted any resources, and who made key decisions. If they did not possess a policy, they were asked why and how they would handle a situation without a policy. Participants were also asked about their view of the Southern Baptist Convention's role in the issue and how church autonomy impacts the discussion. They were asked about the underreporting issues in the Convention and if the Convention has ever communicated with them about the issue of sexual abuse. Each interview lasted approximately 45-60 minutes. Each church that possessed policies also submitted their policies to be analyzed.

After each interview, I transcribed the recording and important information was inputted into a spreadsheet. During this process, I also assigned a pseudonym for each interviewee to protect their identity.<sup>4</sup> I then reviewed the policies to determine the level of detail and effort each church put into the policy. The churches were then compared with each other to determine if any patterns emerged. The data shows that large churches are more likely to possess sexual abuse response policies. It also shows that whether a church has had a prior experience with a sexual abuse allegation can impact whether a church possesses a policy. The data also shows three other patterns. It shows that churches are more likely to possess preventative policies rather than response policies, that the response policies churches do have usually only apply to minors, and that many local Southern Baptist Churches are not influenced by the convention in any tangible way.

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<sup>4</sup> One of the individuals interviewed has been given two pseudonyms to protect their identity.

## **CHAPTER IV: A HISTORY OF THE SOUTHERN BAPTIST CONVENTION AND ITS RESPONSE TO SEXUAL ABUSE**

The Southern Baptist Convention's main doctrinal document is the Baptist Faith and Message 2000. This document outlines Southern Baptist's beliefs on eighteen topics. Some of these beliefs are that the Bible is inerrant and divinely inspired by God, man is created in the Image of God, salvation is given to all who accept Jesus Christ as their Savior, once a person is saved they cannot lose their salvation, the office of pastor is limited to men only, and marriage is between one man and one woman. Southern Baptists believe that salvation through faith in Jesus Christ is freely given and not earned by works and that God has given humanity free will (The Baptist Faith and Message Study Committee 2000). According to the Pew Research Center, Southern Baptists tend to express higher levels of religious commitment than the general United States public, are more conservative than the United States public as well as other evangelicals, and are more likely to vote Republican (Fahmy 2019).

Southern Baptists also have a substantial focus on missions. The Southern Baptist Convention runs the International Mission Board and the North American Mission Board. These cooperative programs are funded by the churches in the Convention, allowing them to pool their resources to fund mission work. In the 2018-2019 fiscal year, Southern Baptist Churches gave \$462,299,010.12 to be used for missions. As of 2020, there are 3,615 missionaries working overseas and 3,057 working domestically ("Fast Facts" 2020).

In 1814, Baptist Churches across the United States joined to form the General Missionary Commission of the Baptist Denomination. By 1845, Baptists in the North and South would be divided over the issues of slavery. Baptists living in the North wanted the

Commission to take a moral stance against slavery, while Baptists in the South wanted to make it a non-issue. In 1843, the Commission refused to recognize slaveholders as missionaries, prompting Southern churches to begin to look for a new organization (Carter 2014). In May of 1845 in Augusta, Georgia, the Southern Baptist Convention was established. Then in 1859 the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary was founded in Greenville, South Carolina before moving to its current location of Louisville, Kentucky in 1877. Only a few decades later, in 1892, the Convention created its own publisher, the Baptist Sunday School Board. This publisher is still operating today as Lifeway Christian Resources. After the Civil War, the Convention also established the Foreign and Home Mission Boards, which are now the International Mission Board and the North American Mission Board (Mullin 2014). Overall, the Southern Baptist Convention is an influential entity that is a part of many Christians' lives.

While the Convention's view on race and slavery was a large part of its founding, it has worked to remedy its past decisions. In 1954, the Convention officially endorsed the Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) that ruled the segregation of schools as unconstitutional. Then the Convention voted to adopt a Resolution on Racial Reconciliation in 1995 (Mullin). This resolution recognized the role of slavery in the founding of the Convention as well as the Convention's inaction during the Jim Crow Era and its exclusion of African Americans from worship, membership, and leadership. The resolution denounces racism as a sin, affirms that it is unbiblical, apologizes for the Convention's previous actions, and commits the Convention to working to rid it of any existing racism. In 2012, the Convention elected its first African American President Fred Luter Jr. (Carter 2014). The Convention's work on race

relations continues as the current Southern Baptist Convention President J.D. Greear is attempting to change the Southern Baptist Convention's name due to its association with the institution's legacy racism. While individual churches would be free to continue to call themselves Southern Baptists, Greear is trying to change the name to Great Commission Baptists (Bailey 2020).

While the Southern Baptist Convention has drastically changed its view of race, its official stance on women's roles in church has stayed the same. The Southern Baptist Convention endorses a complementarian worldview. Complementarianism is the belief that God created men and women as complementary expressions of the image of God. While both sexes bear God's image by themselves, they do so in a distinct way. Complementarians believe that women and men were created with equal value, but they are not interchangeable.

Men are not superior to women. Women are not the 'second sex.' Men have a responsibility to exercise headship in their homes and church family, and Christ revolutionized the definition of what that means. Authority is not the right to rule—it's the responsibility to serve (Kassian 2012).

A different view on women's roles in the church is egalitarianism. Egalitarians believe that women and men are interchangeable and can have the same roles, specifically, that women can hold the position of pastoring a church (Kassian 2012). While some in the organization are calling for the ordination of women, the Southern Baptist Convention is still overwhelmingly complementarian. Recently, the Convention established the SBC Women's Leadership Network. This Network is designed to encourage women in leadership roles in Southern Baptist Churches (Burgess 2019). As a member of the network, Donna Gaines explains the goal of the SBC Women's Leadership Network:

We're really wanting to emphasize that now and embrace all women who are serving in various capacities . . . We just want legitimate avenues of service, believing that men and women are created equally in the image of God, but with differing roles according to the word of God, so we want to explore all the avenues available to women as God has ordained it in his word.

Overall, the Southern Baptist Convention believes that women should not be pastors of churches, but they do encourage women to be leaders in other areas. While their official stance on women's roles in church has not changed, recently the Convention has been focusing on encouraging women specifically. They believe that women and men flourish when they are living within the context of God's design for them.

Race and women's roles are not the only topics with which the Southern Baptist Convention has grappled. For years the Convention has had to determine how to respond to the accusations of sexual abuse. In 2007, a group of sexual abuse victims asked for a registry of Southern Baptist leaders who had been convicted or credibly accused of sex crimes. This request was denied by the Convention, who argued that because Southern Baptist churches are autonomous, the Convention could not enforce a registry system (Downen, Olsen, and Tedesco 2019). In 2007, the largest state convention, the Baptist General Convention of Texas, published a list of eight sex offenders who had served in Southern Baptist Churches. That same year, Rev. Thomas Doyle, one of the earliest whistleblowers on sexual abuse on the Catholic Church, wrote to the Southern Baptist Convention. He argued that he saw similar behaviors occurring in Southern Baptist Churches and urged the Convention to act. The Convention President at the time, Frank Page, explained that church autonomy made any sort of substantive action difficult (Downen, Olsen, and Tedesco 2019). The two prevailing arguments in Southern Baptist Churches were that church autonomy doctrine made any reform impossible and that

abuse is a sin to forgive rather than a crime to prosecute. In 2008, Debbie Vasquez attended the Convention's annual meeting and asked leaders in the Convention to adopt policies and track sex offenders. Those leaders rejected almost every proposed reform (Downen, Olsen, Tedesco, 2019). Abuse continued to occur, and victims continued to be suppressed. Sex offenders continued to lead churches and credibly accused pastors continued to move between churches when their actions were brought to light. In 2017, the #MeToo Movement swept across the world, creating discussions on sexual abuse and sexual harassment. The #MeToo Movement was also catalyst for examining sexual abuse in churches. Churches began to have conversations about sexual and domestic violence and the Southern Baptist Convention began examining its own record (Bethancourt 2019).

While victims and advocates have been working to uncover abuse in Southern Baptist Churches for decades, it is only in the past two years that the Southern Baptist Convention began to respond in substantial ways. In 2018, former Southern Baptist Convention President Paige Patterson was forced into an early retirement from his position as President of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. The firing was the result of his mishandling of rape allegations during his time at his previous role as President of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, as well as during his time at Southwestern. In both cases, Patterson heavily discouraged rape victims from reporting the assaults to authorities and made the female victims describe their sexual assaults in detail to rooms full of men (Shellnutt 2018). In June of 2018, current Southern Baptist Convention President J.D. Greear was elected. A month after his election, Greear and the Southern Baptist Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission (ERLC) announced the

creation of a Sexual Abuse Presidential Study Group. The group consisted of outside experts and Southern Baptist leaders and was created to advise Greear on issues related to sexual abuse, sexual assault, and domestic violence. According to the official press release, the purpose of the study group was to determine how Southern Baptists can quickly and compassionately respond to abuse, while also working to prevent it. The group also studied how Southern Baptists were currently handling abuse, as well as how to create resources to guide churches on ministering to victims (Roach 2018). According to the ERLC, the study group was established because of the #MeToo movement and the realization that no organization is immune to the problem of sexual abuse (Bethancourt 2019).

The necessity of the study group was affirmed by many Southern Baptist leaders. In September 2018, Lifeway Christian Resources published a study on #MeToo and Protestant churches. They found that one in eight Protestant pastors said a church staffer had sexually harassed a member of their congregation at some point in their church's history (Smietana 2018). They also found that one in six pastors say a church member has been harassed in a church setting. Additionally, two-thirds of pastors said that they knew of domestic or sexual violence victims in their congregation. Overall, the study found that the #MeToo Movement started important conversations about abuse in protestant churches.

In February of 2019, *The Houston Chronicle* published their investigations into the deep cover-up of abuse in Southern Baptist Churches. The article revealed that individual churches were knowingly employing sex offenders, churches were covering up abuse, and protectionism was valued over justice. When the article was published, Greear

and many other prominent Southern Baptists began to respond. On his blog, Greear wrote the following:

It's time for pervasive change. God demands it. Survivors deserve it. We must change how we prepare before abuse (prevention), respond during disclosure (full cooperation with legal authorities), and act after instances of abuse (holistic care). I will pursue every possible avenue to bring the vast spiritual, financial, and organizational resources of the Southern Baptist Convention to bear on stopping predators in our midst. There can be no ambiguity about the church's responsibility to protect the abused and be a safe place for the vulnerable. The safety of the victims matters more than the reputation of Southern Baptists (Greear, Pappalardo 2019).

Beth Moore, one of the most prominent Southern Baptist voices and arguably the most prominent Southern Baptist female voice, tweeted "We know how you feel. We didn't want to know about sexual abuse either (Moore 2019)." Attached to the tweet is a photo of Moore, at the age Moore herself was abused. Southern Baptist women began replying to the tweet with their own stories and photos.

President of the ERLC Russell Moore, no relation to Beth Moore, published an opinion piece in the *Dallas Morning News*. In it, Moore rejected the argument that abusers must be forgiven in place of being brought to justice, arguing that using God's forgiveness to cover up crimes shows a deep and dangerous misunderstanding of the Gospel (Moore, Russell 2019). Greear and Brad Hambrick, the Pastor of Counseling at Greear's church, acknowledged that the 700 victims uncovered by the *Houston Chronicle* are not the only victims that exist. They wrote a blog post for the victims that had not come forward and offered them resources and words of encouragement. The blog post assured victims that they did nothing wrong, that it is understandable to be afraid, and then provided the phone numbers of the National Hotline for Domestic Violence, the National Child Abuse Hotline, and the Rape, Abuse, & Incest National Network. The

post also provided reporting instructions and other practical steps (Greear and Hambrick 2019). Trevin Wax, vice president of Theology and Communications at Lifeway Christian Resources, a large resource and literature provider for Southern Baptist Churches, urged congregations to look at the report and to not use the congregational structure as an excuse for the lack of reform. Malcom Yarnell, director of the Center for Theological Research and Professor of Systematic Theology at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, also rejected the argument that the Southern Baptist Convention cannot act due to the doctrine of church autonomy, writing that “‘Autonomy’ ought not be taken as an excuse to neglect the churches’ moral responsibility. The churches are equally responsible to Jesus as Lord. The churches must thus identify and rebuke any and all activities that harm any of his ‘little ones,’ including in other churches.” (Wax 2019). Every prominent figure in the Southern Baptist Convention’s immediate response called for reform and change. They urged pastors and congregants to read the reports and pray for the victims, but also to act.

Greear and the Southern Baptist Convention did not wait to act. Days after the *Houston Chronicle* article was published, the Convention’s executive committee approved changes to the bylaws that would allow churches that covered-up abuse to be expelled from the Convention. Then, the Convention targeted ten churches for scrutiny and review. These churches were targeted for employing pastors or volunteers who were accused of committing sexual abuse (Olsen, Tedesco, Downen 2019). Greear then announced ten calls to action for Southern Baptists. Greear called on each Southern Baptist church to enter a season of sorrow and repentance, get resources on how to handle

abuse, require background checks, reexam their ordination process, explore the idea of creating a database, and more (Bethancourt 2019).

In June of 2019, the Sexual Abuse Presidential Advisory Study Group, renamed the Sexual Abuse Advisory Group, released the *Caring Well Report*. The report is broken down into three sections: Share, Care, and Prepare. The Share section explains the prevalence of abuse and educates its readers on just how destructive and pervasive the abuse has been. The Care section prepares churches for caring for abuse survivors and provides appropriate responses for abuse accusations. The Prepare section informs churches on how to prevent abuse from occurring. Overall, the report emphasizes the need for policies on sexual abuse accusations and implores Southern Baptist Churches to report abuse to authorities. Days after the *Caring Well Report* was released, the Southern Baptist Convention's annual meeting began. Each year, every Southern Baptist Church in the country sends messengers to represent their church at the Southern Baptist Convention Annual Meeting. In 2019, the topic of sexual abuse was prevalent throughout the conversations and presentations. The theme was Gospel Above All, and Greear placed sexual abuse as a Gospel issue (Meyer 2019). The night before the annual meeting, Russel Moore, Beth Moore, Greear, and other prominent Southern Baptist voices led a panel on sexual abuse in the Southern Baptist Convention. The panel once again dispelled the argument that autonomy prevented action (Strode 2019).

At the Annual Meeting, the messengers voted to change the Southern Baptist Convention's by-laws to make clear that churches could be expelled if sexual abuse is not taken seriously, a panel was created to inquire into churches that could be mishandling abuse allegations, and they announced the Caring Well Challenge. According to the

ERLC, The Caring Well Challenge is a year-long, eight-step process of “listening, learning, assessing, and launching needed initiatives to ensure that your church is safe for survivors and safe from abuse (Bethancourt, Greear 2019).” In February 2020, the Convention expelled Ranchland Baptist Church in Midland, Texas for knowingly employing a sex offender as a pastor. This is the first time a Southern Baptist Church has been expelled from the Convention because of sexual abuse (Dias 2020).

The Southern Baptist Convention has a resource for churches called Caring Well. Caring Well is comprised of the Caring Well Challenge, Caring Well Report, and other resources for preventing sexual abuse and empowering victims in churches. The Convention holds that two factors have contributed to the cover up of sexual abuse: the failure to train leaders and volunteers on how to appropriately handle accusations of abuse and the use of church autonomy doctrine to avoid acting (SBC Sexual Abuse Advisory Group 2019, 17). The Convention encourages churches to take the Caring Well Challenge. This advises churches to put together Caring Well teams, provide training for the team, and equip all leaders and volunteers with resources. Then, the Caring Well team is to review the existing policies and procedures at the church and make any needed changes. Finally, they are to share what they found with the congregation and reflect. The Caring Well Challenge is focused on creating policies and procedures and starting a conversation throughout the whole church. This initiative is a church’s first step in bettering how it handles sexual abuse prevention and accusations.

The Southern Baptist Convention heavily emphasizes the importance of having policies. The Convention recommends having policies for the prevention of abuse and for disclosures of abuse. To prevent abuse, churches should train their staff and volunteers on

how to prevent abuse, to understand the signs of grooming, and should provide safety training for their youth. Then, churches should establish a team to create a safety policy. A good safety policy, according to the Caring Well Report, requires at least two adults to be in attendance when a child is present, ensures respect for the children's privacy, requires open doors/glass windows on doors, prohibits sexual jokes and behaviors, and gives guidelines for transportation. Finally, the Caring Well Report gives guidelines for choosing staffers and volunteers. They recommend written applications, interviews, references, and background checks. They are very careful to note that a clear background check does not guarantee anything, because the lack of reporting means that many abusers can pass background checks.

As for policies regarding the disclosures of abuse, the Southern Baptist Convention encourages churches to contact the authorities when abuse is disclosed. While the law mandates that specific abuse must be disclosed, the Convention encourages churches to see themselves as mandatory reporters of all abuse and warns against using the church as an investigative body. When children are involved, churches must contact authorities. If an adult has disclosed sexual violence, the victim has the choice in the matter, but reporting is encouraged. The Convention also encourages the creation of a team of both men and women to walk alongside the abused and care for them after the reporting process. Finally, they encourage churches to possess a policy on dealing with those accused of abuse. They encourage churches to receive disclosures of abuse as credible until outside authorities prove otherwise. Overall, The Southern Baptist Convention recommends a five point plan for responding to an allegation of abuse: Develop a caregiving team to support the victim, know the legal requirements for

reporting, get to know local Child Advocacy Centers and other agencies that work with survivors of abuse, implement a policy for how to deal with the accused perpetrator (especially when minors are involved), and develop an after-care ministry for survivors of abuse or connect them with local resources. The Convention strongly encourages churches to have written policies before they are needed (Sexual Abuse Advisory Group 2019, 39-50).

While the Southern Baptist Convention has changed its stance on how to handle the sexual abuse crisis, what is unknown is how local churches are responding. While the Convention has created numerous resources for churches and strongly urges them to follow the guidelines they have created, there is no power of enforcement. The Southern Baptist Convention did expel a church, but only because the pastor was a known sexual offender and the church was reported on by the *Houston Chronicle*. Due to the lack of reporting and lack of communication between churches, many abusers are never registered as sexual offenders, allowing them to serve at any church they wish without causing alarm. Additionally, many churches are small and are located in rural towns that will never get investigated by reporters. While the Southern Baptist Convention is emphasizing the importance of policies and reporting abuse to authorities, it is unclear if local churches are heeding this call to action. In order to see how Southern Baptist Churches are responding to allegations of abuse, I interviewed nine pastors representing twelve Southern Baptist Churches of varying sizes, ages, demographics, and styles.

## **CHAPTER V: THE IMPORTANCE OF SEXUAL ABUSE RESPONSE POLICIES**

This research project is focused on the sexual abuse response policies of Southern Baptist Churches. Sexual abuse response policies provide a plan for churches to follow as they navigate a sexual abuse accusation against a congregant or staff member made by another congregant, staff member, or an outside party. While often only applying to child victims, sexual abuse response policies can apply to all ages. Sexual abuse policies can be divided into two types, prevention and response. Prevention policies are the rules churches create to stop abuse from occurring. These include rules for how to take children to the bathroom, who can volunteer in children's and youth ministry, and how many adults should be in a room with children. Response policies provide the steps for responding to abuse that has occurred, such as when abuse should be reported, who reports the abuse, and who in the church should be notified. Both are extremely important to combatting sexual abuse. However, it is more common for a church to have preventative policies rather than response policies. In my research, all of the churches had some sort of preventive policies even if they did not have any sort of response policy. Additionally, the preventative policies were much more developed if response policies did exist. Response policies are important because they provide clear guidelines for a church to follow during a very emotional and tragic situation. While preventative policies are very important, they should exist with a response policy to ensure that churches do not dismiss claims of abuse. According to the Center for Disease Control, organizations that work with children should possess a reporting policy (CDC 2007). In his article for *Currents in Theology and Missions*, executive director of Godly Response to Abuse in

the Christian Environment Basyle J. Tchividjian explained the importance of response policies.

A proper and informed response to child sexual abuse disclosures within a congregation should be outlined in a written abuse response protocol that is developed by the church with the assistance of child protection experts. This will provide a much-needed roadmap to church leaders who will often find themselves tempted to make uninformed off-the-cuff decisions when responding to dire circumstances. Such a decision-making process can have devastating consequences. This may be okay when you're deciding on the color of the church carpet, but not when it involves responding to disclosures of child sexual abuse. Having a response protocol is a tremendous tool for ensuring that the decisions made by church leaders who learn of abuse are informed and consistently applied in a manner that best serves all parties. (Tchividjian 2018, 4).

Sexual abuse response policies protect the victim, the church, and the accused. If the process of reporting to the authorities is clearly written down beforehand, the victim knows that their accusation will be taken seriously. They also know what the process will entail and who would be consulted. Policies also provide protection against accusations being suppressed or dismissed. According to the Caring Well Report, abusers that have been at churches for a long time accrue the most victims and the youngest victims. Studies show that 90% of child victims know their abusers, and three out of four adult women know their assailants (SBC Sexual Abuse Advisory Group 2019). Statistically, abusers are not always the seemingly strange person that just started visiting, they are members of the church that are known and trusted. Policies help prevent accusations against beloved members or staff members from going unheard. For churches, it provides a clear action plan for responding to an allegation. If a church has an official response plan, the leadership then has clear guidelines to follow during a tragic and emotional process. If they write the policy before the situation occurs, they have the ability to consult outside resources and take the time to craft a well written policy rather than make

decisions as they go. A response policy also helps the accused by providing an objective process rather than one based on who is involved. It prevents churches from becoming the investigative authorities and bypassing the justice system. A sexual abuse response policy prevents church leaders from making decisions based on emotion and subjectivity and gives churches the ability to craft just plans for handling tragic situations.

During my research, I interviewed someone who made an accusation of abuse against the pastor of a Southern Baptist Church. This person, Employee 1, was subjected to what she describes as verbal abuse and harassment for ten years. When she told key members of the church's leadership about the inappropriate conduct, she was told that everything would be fine, and her accusations were dismissed. The church had no policies for how to respond to an accusation and the accusations were disregarded. If there was a well written policy, the church leaders that were notified would have known their next steps. Instead, the misconduct continued. When she quit her job at the church due to the inappropriate conduct she had faced, she met with the Personnel Committee of the church for an exit interview. Personnel Committees are common in Southern Baptist Churches and are usually the points of contact for any staff related issues. She describes the meeting as hostile and aggressive. Furthermore, Employee 1 explained that despite having witnesses to the inappropriate behavior, she felt that many did not believe her. She felt like it was her against the committee. The pastor admitted to the allegations and left the church, despite key members of leadership asking him to stay. He is now the pastor at a nearby Southern Baptist Church. My research found that there are at least two pastors of churches in a nearby town that were credibly accused of sexual abuse, left the church where they were accused, and began pastoring new churches soon after. This was also a

theme found in the investigation done by the *Houston Chronicle*, as they confirmed that since the 1990s, at least thirty churches knowingly employed someone who had been accused of a sex crime (Tedesco, Downen, Olsen 2019). Clear and well written response policies can prevent people from fleeing to other churches after being accused of abuse to avoid the judicial process. If the church that employed Employee 1 had clear policies on how to respond to an allegation of abuse, the leaders she reported to would know the steps they were supposed to take. While policies do not guarantee that accusations are not dismissed, it provides a safeguard against that. Policies also provide a safeguard against abusers being free to go from church to church. If churches take the time to report abuse, then it will show up on a background check for any future churches to see. Policies provide a plan for the church to follow to hopefully ensure that accusations are taken seriously and handled justly, which is beneficial for all parties involved.

## **CHAPTER VI: DATA ANALYSIS**

Of all twelve churches, nine possessed some sort of policy on responding to sexual abuse. The Southern Baptist Convention recommends that churches develop a caregiving team to support the victim, know the legal requirements for reporting, know local Child Advocacy Centers and other agencies that work with survivors of abuse, implement a policy for how to deal with the accused perpetrator (especially when minors are involved) and develop an after-care ministry for survivors of abuse as well as connect them with local resources. While none of the churches had all five requirements, they did have some sort of policy explaining the reporting process.

### **CHURCHES WITH POLICIES**

The most detailed response policy was from a church with several hundred attendees. The response policy was broken down into two categories: responding to adult to minor abuse and responding to minor to minor abuse, with children 18 and younger being considered minors. Both categories were broken down further into how the staff and volunteers will respond and how the pastoral staff will respond. This policy explains step by step how information will be gathered to determine if the authorities should be notified. It explains how the reporter should report, how the person receiving the report will respond, and at what point the authorities will be notified. It also provides instructions to volunteers for how to interrupt suspicious or inappropriate behavior. This policy explains exactly who in the church will be told of the incident and all the steps the church will take.

The second most detailed policy is from a church with over 1,000 attendees. This policy applies to their main, large campus and their two smaller campuses. The policy

explains whom to report to and how to report. The volunteer who is reporting should verbally report to supervisory staff. That person would then notify the pastoral staff. The pastoral staff will then notify the appropriate civil authorities. The policy also states that the leadership will take “appropriate action on behalf of the church” when a report of abuse occurs. The other three policies were similar to each other. They explain that the accused will be asked to stay away from church functions during the investigation, that all suspicions of abuse will be reported to authorities, and that a pastoral visit is available if desired. One policy states that an internal investigation will be conducted, but the details are not listed. While there are some variances, every policy explained that any accusation of abuse would be reported, parents would be notified of any suspicious behavior, the accused would be asked to step down from their leadership role until the investigation was over, and any person found guilty of abuse or misconduct would not be allowed to serve.

### **REASONS FOR CREATING A POLICY**

The information about the specific policies was acquired by studying the policies from each church. All other information was acquired from the interviews with the staff members who led the process of writing that policy. The interviews revealed four patterns. The first, is that large churches with multiple staff members are more likely to possess a sexual abuse response policy due to their large staff and obvious vulnerability. Their ability to delegate tasks, the higher number of resources, and their higher likelihood of having an issue due to the attendance numbers makes it easier for policies to be written. The second pattern I found is that a prior experience with an allegation of sexual abuse can cause a church to create a policy and can influence the policy itself. However,

this experience does not guarantee that a policy will be written. The last two patterns that emerged are that Southern Baptist churches are more likely to possess preventative policies rather than response policies, most policies only apply to children under 18, and that the Southern Baptist Convention's efforts to educate churches have not greatly impacted the local churches.

Three of the nine churches that possessed policies are medium sized churches, but they are the smaller campuses of two very large churches and have the same policies as those large churches. Those three churches have the resources of larger churches, despite having medium sized congregations. With one exception, all of the churches that possessed a response policy had at least 400 attendees. When asked why they had a policy, each of those large churches referenced today's culture and their insurance company. When referring to the culture, each pastor explained that the size of their church and the prevalence of child abuse in our culture made them realize that they needed to protect their children.

All types of child abuse, whether physical, sexual, emotional, was growing in numbers. Or at least we were becoming more aware of it as a culture. We felt the need to put something in place where we could protect children on all different levels, but also to give guidance to our staff to make sure they felt comfortable in that cultural environment. That they felt protected and that they were doing things in the best, utmost way possible to keep kids safe. And so they could feel comfortable coming to serve in this church thinking we're doing the best thing we can to protect children (Pastor 4).

The large churches also explained that their insurance companies highly recommended that they possess a protection of minors policy that included a statement on how to respond to an allegation of abuse. Smaller churches mentioned that they had heard of insurance companies encouraging other churches to possess policies but did not mention that theirs had encouraged them. While smaller churches without a response

policy may not be a liability in the eyes of insurance companies, larger churches definitely are. Vulnerability to abuse is more obvious in larger churches.

In 2018, our insurance company made us aware of the fact that if we wanted coverage and protection from any accusation or any damage or liability regarding sexual abuse, then we need to have a policy in place. And so we ended up putting our policy in place. . . we worked with the insurance company and said ‘this is what we want to do. We used an attorney, and these are the policies that we are going to put into place.’ The insurance company said this is great, this is fine, this is adequate. We didn't put the policy in place just to shield ourselves, but we knew, based on what was happening in the Southern Baptist Convention and in the Roman Catholic Church, all of that. We knew what was going on, we knew that we needed to be proactive in establishing these things [policies] (Pastor 1).

In smaller churches, the people caring for the children are all well-known and everyone seems to know everyone. When I asked a church of approximately 60 attendees why they did not possess any sexual abuse response policies, the pastor explained that the childcare workers all belong to the same family and are all very well known in the church (Pastor 8). When I asked the pastor of a slightly larger church the same question, they gave the same answer (Pastor 2). The volunteers are all familiar, so any sort of response policy from the church’s perspective seems unnecessary. In larger churches, it is difficult for the staff and congregants to personally know every single person serving. Additionally, if a church has 500 volunteers, there is a higher risk of having an issue than if a church has 3 volunteers. Larger churches do not need a prior experience to see that they are vulnerable to sexual abuse.

Another reason that larger churches are more likely to possess a response policy is that they have more time, money, and staff to devote to writing a policy. Almost all of the larger churches had a designated Administrative Pastor that led or facilitated the policy-making process. Large churches with large staffs are able to delegate the task of creating a policy, making it easier for that task to be accomplished. Smaller churches with only one

or two staff members have the responsibility of writing sermons, getting Sunday School teachers, making hospital visits, planning activities, etc. Larger churches have those responsibilities too, and for more people, but they have much larger staffs to delegate those tasks to. When I asked a pastor of a larger church how his church was able to balance ensuring that policy is written and updated with all that comes with running the church, he explained that it was because they have multiple staff members.

We rely on one another to be a team. We have lots of discussion, we have staff meetings, and we have to rely on one another to keep each other informed of what is happening and what needs to be adjusted. . .So we rely a lot on one another to make sure that we're maintaining good policy and if things need to be updated. And that's very helpful, that's the beauty of having a staff that's united and works as a team and works together (Pastor 4).

Another pastor of a larger church explained that the youth pastor came up with the idea of writing a policy and took the time to write it (Pastor 9). Because that church had multiple staff members, they were able to take the time to write a policy. On the other side, when I asked the only full-time staff member of a smaller church why his church did not have a policy, he explained that he just had not been able to get to it yet, even though he knew his church should have one (Pastor 2). Additionally, when I asked a pastor of a medium sized church with approximately 200 attendees why his church did not have a policy, he said the same thing, a lack of time (Pastor 3). The staff members of large churches have lots of responsibilities. Caring for their congregants, writing sermons, teaching, studying, visiting, recruiting volunteers, and more. However, because they have the ability to delegate these tasks amongst many staff members, combined with their vulnerability to abuse being difficult for church leaders to ignore, large churches are more likely to possess sexual abuse response policies.

While the size of a church is the largest factor that influences whether a Southern Baptist Church possesses a policy on responding to sexual abuse, it is not the only one. Whether a church has had a prior sexual abuse allegation can influence if a church has a policy, as well as the content of the policy itself. Of all the churches in this study, the church with the most in-depth policy is a larger church that has had a prior experience with an allegation of abuse. Their protection of minors policy is extensive and explains step by step how to interrupt any suspicious behavior you are witnessing, who to report to, what that person will do with information, how the pastoral leadership will respond, and at what point the authorities will be notified. They also have procedures for minor to minor abuse and adult to adult abuse. The pastor representing that church explained that they also have procedures within the staff to ensure that the private lives of the pastors are in line with Biblical principles.

We also with our pastors have accountability, where we come together and say ‘what is your private life like? Have you seen anything on the computer or your phone that is not God honoring? How’s your relationship with your wife? Have you done anything that would bring dishonor to God?’ So, we have those things in place and accountability with our pastors, the expectation there (Pastor 1).

The pastor believes that these practices are helpful in lessening the risk of a pastor being abusive. If the other employees are aware of certain signs, they can help stop abuse before it occurs or aid an investigation if abuse does occur. The pastor of this church says that their prior experience with an allegation of abuse makes them more aware of these signs. The pastor also mentioned that their size and the urging from their insurance company contributed largely to their extensive policies. This shows that that their prior experience with a sexual abuse allegation was not the only reason they have a policy on responding to

sexual abuse. However, the experience did cause them to put more thought and effort into the process.

We had a significant moral failure from our senior pastor. The days that followed were stunning. So that was probably one thing that gave us the impetus to create a more detailed policy and give thought to that. 'Cause he did abuse power, he did abuse his position. Not only with one woman but with another woman who, if she had come forward, and made her accusations, he would probably be arrested. But she chose not to, unfortunately. So, things like that have really caused us to give some thought about that [creating policies] (Pastor 1).

The data showed that large churches create policy regardless of if they have had a prior experience. However, a prior experience can influence the depth of the policy.

A prior experience with abuse can also cause a smaller church to write policy.

Abuse occurring in a church reveals to that church that they are vulnerable. One church of approximately 200 attendees did not possess a sexual abuse response policy, but they did possess a very specific policy on sex offenders attending that church. That policy was created as a reaction to a confessed abuser attending their church. The pastor explained that once they were made aware of the situation, they called for a meeting with the deacons of the church, hired a lawyer, and wrote a policy with all of the rules that the abuser must follow to attend that church (Pastor 3). They crafted a very detailed, in-depth policy for their situation, despite not having many full-time pastoral staff members. The pastor explained that it was a lengthy and challenging process, but they believed that not having a policy was not a valid option, something had to be put in writing. This response shows that experience can prompt policy under the right circumstances.

However, a prior experience alone does not guarantee that a church will possess a sexual abuse response policy. The pastor from the church previously discussed was firmly set in his belief that a policy must be created for their situation (Pastor 3). When he met

with the deacons of the church to discuss the situation, he explained that they would be approving the policy they had created, that not having a policy was not an option. If the pastoral leadership at a church is focused on creating a policy in response to a situation, then there is a much higher chance that church will have a policy. However, if there is no movement from the church's leadership, then the chance of a policy being created greatly decreases. Often, a prior experience alone does not cause a church to create a policy.

When I asked that pastor how his church would handle an accusation of sexual abuse against a staff member, he replied "Well I can certainly say that it wouldn't be swept under the rug" (Pastor 3). However, within the past seven years that same church faced an accusation of sexual abuse against a previous employee and those accusations were suppressed. According to the person who made the accusation, the accusations were initially dismissed without a report or investigation and after the accused admitted to the abuse, the issue was never disclosed to the congregation. This occurred before Pastor 3 began working at that church, and it shows that when a church does not possess a policy, their response to abuse depends heavily on who holds power in the church. Despite experiencing an accusation of sexual abuse, this church does not possess a policy. The lack of policy could be attributed to a lack of focus on policy after the allegation was made. That allegation of sexual abuse left that church fractured and without key leadership. Because there was not an abundance of staff or resources, that church focused on other things besides creating a policy. They were preoccupied with finding someone to preach on Sunday morning, not on meeting to discuss policies. However, they now have more staff and a lead pastor, which could explain why they were so committed to writing a policy for their current situation. While a prior experience with a sexual abuse allegation

can cause a church to create a policy, other factors such as a strong staff leadership must be present.

There was only one small church that possessed a sexual abuse response policy. This church has approximately 150 attendees and two full time staff members. The leader of the policy creation process was the children's and youth director (Pastor 5). When asked why she created the policy, she explained that she took the children and youth of that church to a summer camp that required all adults attending to complete a sexual abuse prevention training. She adopted the same policy and training for her church. The director was the only woman I was referred to for an interview. She explained that she also wrote the policies at her previous church after going through the summer camp training and adopted them for the church she works at currently. Because this staff member was given these materials through the camp, they are now adopted at the church. This staff member was the only person interviewed who said that educational resources caused a policy to be written. However, many pastors of smaller churches explained that they believe the convention should focus on educating smaller churches on why they should possess policies. This church is an example showing that educating churches and providing resources can lead to churches adopting a policy.

### **CHURCHES WITHOUT POLICIES**

The three churches that did not possess a sexual abuse response policy were all medium to small churches. The largest church without a policy had approximately 200 attendees and the smallest had approximately 60 attendees. When I asked the pastors of the three smaller churches why they did not have a sexual abuse response policy, the most common response was a lack of time. Some pastors explained that it was on their list of

things to do, but the need had not presented itself and other tasks were more pressing. One pastor explained that he was the only staff member at his church of 150, and that he intends to write a policy, but other pressing needs had to be attended to and that embarking on the policy creation process would be a big project.

“When you bring up. . .we should have policies and procedures,’ ‘let’s check our constitution and bylaws so that we are following a fixed document that protects us. Ours is 40 years old, let’s update it.’ That’s a much harder thing for congregants of a smaller church to understand. Because a majority of members are more involved in a smaller church than a bigger church. There are a lot less people in a bigger church that care about that sort of stuff. So, it’s a delicate balancing act. . .How to do that? Slowly. You’re pushing a train uphill (Pastor 2).”

Another pastor explained that the need has not presented itself, so they have not written any policies (Pastor 8). Everyone in his church of sixty people knows everyone, and the same couple of families have always taken care of the children, so they have not had a need for a response policy. One pastor explained that in his experience, churches do not write policies unless there is a need. He believes that until sexual abuse is a problem in a church, that church will most likely not have a policy for dealing with it.

Until the issue rears its head, there’s so many other things that you’re having to deal with in a church and most people, I think, kinda live wanting to be oblivious to the reality that this exists. And I think that throughout history a lot of people would just prefer you to just sweep those kind of things quietly under the rug...And so until the church is confronted with it, I think they believe that it’s never going to happen to them (Pastor 3).

All of the churches expressed that protecting their children was a high priority, but that written down policies were not a pressing need due to their size and circumstances.

When I asked these churches what they would do if an allegation was made at their church, I received mixed responses. If a child was the victim, every church said they would immediately report the abuse to the authorities. Some mentioned that they would

seek to see if it was credible before reporting, but they were unsure what that process would look like. One church explained that they would interview both parties to ensure credibility. One church said they would have the victim meet with the Deacons or the personnel committee, another church said they would strongly advocate against that. In Southern Baptist Churches, the deacons are always men. While abuse can and does happen to men and women, women are more likely to suffer abuse (SBC Sexual Abuse Advisory Group). When asked how they would combat this imbalance, many pastors reacted as if they have never thought of that before. All churches said they were against having the church be the investigative body, yet some then explained they would take steps to investigate the allegation before the authorities were involved. This could be as simple as talking to the accused and the accuser to get more information, or it could mean trying to replace the authorities altogether. Without a clear policy, either could occur.

While these are many reasons why a church does not have a sexual abuse response policy, the need for a policy is still there. Since there are no clear, objective guidelines, the reporting process could become very subjective and even more painful for all involved. It can be difficult for a church to determine how to handle an allegation of abuse as the process is occurring, especially those involved are beloved by the church. This also raises partiality issues. Some churches were unsure what they would have the accused do while the investigation was conducted. They all said they would remove the accused from any leadership positions, but some were unsure if the accused could attend church functions or if they should be asked to stay home from everything until the investigation was over. It is understandable that the pastors I was interviewing were not completely sure how they would handle a hypothetical allegation, but it shows the

problems with not having a clear policy. Handling a sexual abuse allegation is a difficult, and emotional situation. Having to make decisions in the middle of an allegation runs the risk of protecting the accused over the victim, sweeping the issue under the rug to avoid consequences, and retraumatizing the victim.

## **CHAPTER VII: ADDITIONAL FINDINGS**

Throughout the interview process three additional patterns emerged surrounding the topic of sexual abuse in Southern Baptist Churches. While these patterns do not concern my research question, they do provide important insight on the topic of how Southern Baptist Churches respond to sexual abuse. The first pattern that I saw was that all of the churches had some sort of policy or practice to prevent sexual abuse. Even the smallest church had some sort of practice implemented to prevent sexual abuse. Additionally, none of the churches had a response policy for attendees or employees 18 and older. The sexual abuse policies were located in the protection of minors policies, meaning that they only applied to children younger than 18. Finally, most of the pastors said that their churches were not greatly impacted by the Southern Baptist Convention and the Convention's efforts to educate churches on preventing and responding to sexual abuse had not affected their churches.

All of the churches I studied had some sort of preventative policy or procedure, even if they did not have a response policy. When asked about their sexual abuse policies, every church mentioned that they follow the Billy Graham rule. Named after the late, revered Southern Baptist pastor and evangelist, a person that follows the Billy Graham rule never meets alone with a person of the opposite sex to whom they are not married (Taylor 2017). Whether the church had advanced sexual abuse policies or no policies at all, each pastor either had another person in the room, participated in the interview next to an open door, or asked to participate in the interview over the phone to avoid meeting alone with me. Outside of religious communities, the Billy Graham rule is widely criticized. When current Vice President of the United States Mike Pence

mentioned that he follows the Billy Graham rule, many criticized the practice as sexist (Exum, 2017). However, in ministry it is one of the most widely used safeguards against abuse. This rule should protect both parties. It should protect the pastor or leader from false accusations and it should protect the layperson from abuse. Another rule mentioned was The Rule of Three. The Rule of Three refers to the rule of never letting an adult be alone with a child that is not their own. For example, there must be two Sunday School teachers in a room at all times. The difference between this rule and the Billy Graham rule is that this rule usually applies to children, while the Billy Graham rule usually applies to interactions with adults. Every church I interviewed had these rules, if nothing else. These prevention procedures are extremely important but are not the only way a church can be prepared. The Southern Baptist Convention is pushing for churches to also possess sexual abuse response policies. Adequate response policies are a safeguard against accusations of abuse being suppressed. Policies also guide churches on how to ensure protectionism, fear, and partiality does not cloud their judgement (Tchividjian 2018). Where to find sample response policies is located in Appendix B. Although all twelve churches mentioned some sort of abuse prevention policy, three of the churches did not have a policy on how to respond to sexual abuse.

Four of the churches in this study have some sort of weekday preschool program or daycare. While none of the pastors mentioned their church's preschool program during the interviews, the existence of a preschool at the church does place extra expectations on the church. While the specific requirements depend on state laws, preschools can lose their licenses if suspected abuse is not reported, if children are improperly supervised, and if sex offenders are able to be work with the children, among numerous other rules.

These policies must exist for a daycare to legally operate, meaning that churches who operate daycares must also follow these guidelines (Administration for Children and Families). This could potentially cause a church to adopt these policies in all of their childcare services, not just for the daycare. When I asked each pastor why they possessed their sexual abuse prevention and response policies, none of them referenced the church's daycare. However, that does not rule it out as a factor.

Another pattern that emerged is that sexual abuse response policies only apply to children under 18 years old. All of the response policies these churches possessed were located in their protection of minors policies. Additionally, sexual abuse training (as opposed to policies) only occurred for those serving with children 18 and under. When asked about sexual abuse policies for sexual abuse between adults or sexual abuse committed by a staff member, the results varied. Some churches had provisions in their Constitution and Bylaws on how to remove a pastor for moral failures, which could include sexual abuse. Some pastors said they assumed that the reporting policy would apply to adults as well, but they were not sure. The most common response was that they would hope someone would speak up, but that they had nothing in writing. Even churches with robust policies and procedures were surprised when they realized they did not have a policy for adults. When I would ask the pastor if their church had a policy applying to adults, many would look through the policy and be surprised when they realized there was nothing there. The emphasis around protecting children is warranted, as children are more vulnerable than adults and there is a distinction in the law between those older than 18 and those younger than 18. However, a lack of reporting policies for attendees 18 and older could pose issues. While a 19-year-old is legally an adult, the gap in church policies could

leave them vulnerable. A 19-year-old is not a child in the eyes of the law and is not covered by a church's protection of minors policy. However, abuse is traumatic regardless of the age of the victim. Employee 1 was 19 when she was verbally abused by her pastor. She explained that because all of the policies and training were for children under 18, she believed that this meant it was her own situation to handle.

I was 19, so I wasn't a child. So, because of that, because of how we only do [policies] for children, which we should, I'm not saying we shouldn't, but it should be across the board. I was 19, but I was still technically a kid. I guess because I wasn't considered a child anymore it made me think 'okay, well I'm a big girl so I need to handle this on my own' (Employee 1).

The Southern Baptist Convention recommends policies for all sexual abuse, not just child sexual abuse. They remind churches that child abuse must be reported, but also encourage churches to counsel and encourage adult victims to report. During interviews, a pastor explained to me that he wished there was a focus on how to counsel abuse victims in adulthood, as that is what is more common in his experience (Pastor 4). Overall, the Southern Baptist Convention encourages churches to have a plan for counseling and responding to adult abuse victims, instead of cutting off the policies at 18 years old.

Between the Caring Well Report, the Caring Well Challenge, the Becoming a Church that Cares Well for the Abused Curriculum, the talks at the 2019 Annual Meeting, and all of the other resources that the Southern Baptist Church has created, the Convention has focused heavily on educating and communicating with churches. However, most of the churches interviewed had not been in contact with the Southern Baptist Convention about this topic. In fact, almost every church said that the Convention had little to no

effect on the happenings in their church. The one church that believes they are affected by the Convention explains that it is a ripple effect.

Everything that happens in SBC life affects the church. And if you look in our sign it says [Name of Church] Baptist Church, you head to our website and it says we are in a partnership with, we are autonomous, but we are connected with and have similar like-minded beliefs as the Southern Baptist Convention. So, all of those conversations affect what we do and how we view ourselves as well. And so, if there is a ripple effect that goes through the Convention across the country, then it causes us to take heed and look at ‘okay, what are we doing and what do we need to do, change, or adapt to make sure we’re doing things to the best of our ability?’ (Pastor 4).

However, that church was the only one that described that sort of relationship. Every other church explained that while the Convention’s efforts to educate churches are appreciated, it did not affect them. A church that had a response policy said that the Convention’s resources confirmed that their policies were what was needed but did not inspire any action. One pastor explained that while they were proud members of the Southern Baptist Convention, that would immediately cease if the Southern Baptist Convention began to profess views that were against scripture (Pastor 6). Another pastor said that he believes most of their attendees do not even know that their church is a part of the Convention (Pastor 7). The interviews showed that the Southern Baptist Convention does not have power over the churches and that while what happens in the Convention can trickle down to the churches, that only occurs if the church is actively participating in the Convention’s events and opportunities.

As far as whether the Convention has communicated with the churches, that seemed to depend on the size of the church. Some churches explained that they had received mass emails, some mentioned they have not received any communication. One pastor of a large church said he had participated in a conference call with Greear and many

other pastors (Pastor 6). Another pastor of a large church said that some members of their church had attended a conference run by the Southern Baptist Convention and those members relayed that information back to the church staff (Pastor 4). Overall, the larger churches had more interactions with the Convention than the smaller churches. The smaller churches had not been directly contacted by the Convention. While they had all interacted with their local association, the local association has not provided any resources either. My research found that most of the churches were not impacted by the current events in the Southern Baptist Convention.

## **CHAPTER VIII: A REFLECTION ON THIS THESIS**

This was my first time conducting any sort of research, as well as my first-time conducting interviews. The two biggest challenges I faced were getting churches to agree to being interviewed and getting over my own nervousness during the interviews. One of the most important lessons I learned during this process was that I needed to get over my fear of being a nuisance. I believe that this thesis warranted sending multiple emails and asking for an hour of a pastor's time, so it forced me to get over being afraid to ask for that. I initially contacted all the churches through email. Then, I called the churches that did not have a working email. Then, after a few weeks of waiting, I emailed the churches that had not responded again. I was worried that I was being a nuisance, especially because I was contacting the churches during the COVID-19 pandemic. I was worried that with pastors already being busy trying to decide how to safely resume services, my request for an interview would be very unwelcome. However, all of the pastors I interviewed were very welcoming and accommodating. This made me realize that while I was taking up an hour of their time, the benefits of the interview outweighed the costs. This topic and the information I gained are important enough to warrant sending multiple emails, even if I was nervous. Each pastor I interviewed was very kind, accommodating, and willing to answer every question I asked. It was encouraging to see that every pastor was willing to sacrifice some of their time to answer my questions. Overall, the interview process was a learning experience for which I am very thankful.

## CHAPTER IX: CONCLUSION

The goal of this thesis was to determine if certain factors cause a Southern Baptist Church to possess a sexual abuse response policy. Through interviews and policy analysis, I found that larger churches with large staffs are more likely to possess a policy on responding to sexual abuse. This is because larger churches have more staff members and resources to devote to writing policy and because their vulnerability to abuse is more obvious. They have more attendees and volunteers to protect and it is less likely that each volunteer is personally known and vetted by the leadership. These components make the church's vulnerability to abuse more obvious than smaller churches where everyone knows everyone. The Southern Baptist Convention is heavily encouraging their churches to examine if they are prepared to handle an accusation of sexual abuse and has recommended certain measures for each church to take. These measures include having a clear sexual abuse response policy. This research shows that the Southern Baptist Convention's efforts alone are not likely to cause a church to create sexual abuse response policies. Although the Convention has put effort into educating churches on the importance of sexual abuse policies, those efforts have not greatly influenced churches at this point. While some pastors mentioned that they are influenced by the Convention's actions in general, none of them credited the Convention for why their church does or does not possess a policy. Overall, the Southern Baptist Convention's efforts to educate churches on sexual abuse has not greatly influenced a majority of the local churches in this study.

Some pastors wished that the Convention would do more to educate churches, while others believed that it should be on the individual churches to educate their staffs

and congregants. However, many churches did mention that educating churches on preventing and responding to sexual abuse is a worthwhile pursuit. Educating pastors, leaders, volunteers, and attendees on the importance of sexual abuse policies could lead them to see why those policies are worth having. Some pastors suggested going through the local associations, while others suggested that it should be the state convention. One pastor suggested that a survey could be sent out for churches to evaluate their own policies. Although churches may not currently be answering the Southern Baptist Convention's calls to actions, that does not mean the Convention's efforts to educate are worthless. Many pastors I interviewed believe that educating churches could lead to them creating policies, even if it is a slow process.

Throughout all nine interviews, each pastor expressed a genuine desire to protect their congregants. They all communicated that they wanted to do everything in their power to protect each person that walked through their church's doors. Whether it was the pastor of a very large church who was working in a modern, nicely decorated office or the bi-vocational pastor who was calling me from his car, every pastor displayed a commitment to protecting their congregation. When the pastor of a church was explaining why their church did not possess a policy on responding to sexual abuse, it was never because of a lack of caring for their congregation. Instead, it was because there were tasks that have just been more immediate. Or, the same small group of people have been working in the church nursery for years and everyone in the church knows them personally.

While it may be easy for church leaders to believe that they do not need a policy, or that other things are much more pressing, churches cannot afford to wait. When

discussing her experience reporting an accusation of abuse in her church, Employee 1 described the danger of not having policies: “I think what everyone thinks is right, is not. I think [name of church] thought they did the right thing, I really do think they thought they did the right thing, but it was the wrong thing. I don't know how to get people to understand what the right process is.” While it may be tempting for church leaders to assume that they would handle a sexual abuse allegation well, that assumption could end up causing harm to victims and to their church. 1 Peter 5:2 instructs believers to “be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, watching over them-not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve...” (1 Peter 5:2, New International Version). Churches must be willing to shepherd their congregants that are victims of abuse by creating policies that provide them with a clear path to justice.

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## APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL FORM

**IRB**  
**INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD**  
 Office of Research Compliance,  
 010A Sam Ingram Building,  
 2269 Middle Tennessee Blvd  
 Murfreesboro, TN 37129



### IRBN001 - EXPEDITED PROTOCOL APPROVAL NOTICE

Tuesday, June 23, 2020

Principal Investigator **Ashlin Murphy\*** (Student)  
 Faculty Advisor Jennifer Woodward  
 Co-Investigators David Trowbridge  
 Investigator Email(s) *amm2dn@mtmail.mtsu.edu; jenniferwoodward@mtsu.edu; david.trowbridge@mtsu.edu*  
 Department Political Science and Honors College\*  
 Protocol Title **Responses to Sexual Abuse-Accusations: A Study of Southern Baptist Churches**  
 Protocol ID **20-2194**

Dear Investigator(s),

The above identified research proposal has been reviewed by the MTSU Institutional Review Board (IRB) through the **EXPEDITED** mechanism under 45 CFR 46.110 and 21 CFR 56.110 within the category (7) *Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior*. A summary of the IRB action and other particulars in regard to this protocol application is tabulated below:

IRB Action	<b>APPROVED for ONE YEAR</b>		
Date of Expiration	<b>6/30/2021</b>	Date of Approval	6/23/20
Sample Size	100 (ONE HUNDRED)		
Participant Pool	Target Population: Primary Classification: <b>Healthy Adults (18 years or older)</b> Specific Classification: <b>Church Administration</b>		
Exceptions	1. Dual data collection methods approved. 2. Participant signature in consent forms is waived. 3. Data collection by virtual methods (like Zoom) is permitted. 4. Abbreviated informed consent administered virtually after the participants have received the approved full-length informed consent template. 5. Video and voice recording are permitted.		
Restrictions	1. <b>Mandatory ACTIVE Informed Consent (No Names).</b> 2. <b>Identifiable data/artifacts, such as, audio/video data, photographs, handwriting samples, personal address, driving records, social security number, and etc., MUST be used for the proposed research purpose only. The data or artifacts collected or information obtained must be destroyed once the data analysis has been completed.</b> 3. <b>Mandatory Final report (refer last page).</b>		
Approved Templates	MTSU Templates: Signature & Virtual Informed consent templates and Recruitment Email script Non-MTSU Templates: Abbreviated verbal consent script & recruitment script		
Comments	COVID-19: Refer to the Post-Approval Action section for important instruction		

## **APPENDIX B: SAMPLE RESPONSE POLICIES**

The two resources mentioned by pastors the most were Brotherhood Mutual and Ministry Safe. Brotherhood Mutual is an insurance company that serves churches, universities, schools, and more. Their website has free resources available for churches, including sample sexual abuse response policies. Their *Child Protection in a Ministry Environment: Guidelines for Ministry Workers* guide contains lots of helpful information. While the document could not be added to this thesis due to copyright reasons, it can be found on their website, [BrotherhoodMutual.com](http://BrotherhoodMutual.com), under Child Safety in the Resources tab. The other resource mentioned was Ministry Safe, an organization that provides churches with resources, audits, legal counsel, and independent investigations. Their website also has a free sample policy for responding to sexual abuse, which can be found at [ministrysafe.com/caringwell/](http://ministrysafe.com/caringwell/).