

Time ranks SBC rejection of sex-offender database as 'under-reported' story

Contributed by Bob Allen
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A ranking of under-reported stories in Time's "Top 10 Everything of 2008" special feature placed the story at No. 6, behind a mix-up that accidentally sent U.S. nuclear-warhead fuses to Taiwan, the Congolese civil war, violence in Sri Lanka, and new guidelines for insurance coverage for mental health and regulation of food from animals that are genetically altered.

"Facing calls to curb child sex abuse within its churches, in June the Southern Baptist Convention -- the largest U.S. religious body after the Catholic Church -- urged local hiring committees to conduct federal background checks but rejected a proposal to create a central database of staff and clergy who have been either convicted of or indicted on charges of molesting minors," the magazine noted.

"The SBC decided against such a database in part because its principle of local autonomy means it cannot compel individual churches to report any information. And while the headlines regarding churches and pedophilia remain largely focused on Catholic parishes, the lack of hierarchical structure and systematized record-keeping in most Protestant churches makes it harder not only for church leaders to impose standards, but for interested parties to track allegations of abuse."

Christa Brown, Baptist outreach leader for the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, agreed the story was under-reported.

"It's such an extremely important story," she said. "The largest Protestant denomination in the land -- a denomination that claims 16.2 million members -- refused to even attempt to implement the sorts of proactive measures for routing out predators that other major faith groups have."

Brown, a survivor of clergy sex abuse, worked two years to draw attention to the problem of unreported sexual abuse in Southern Baptist churches before seeing denominational leaders recommend against her suggestion of a national database.

Last month Brown and SNAP National Director David Clohessy wrote SBC President Johnny Hunt asking for a meeting about establishing a system to report abusive clergy.

"As president of the Southern Baptist Convention, you now have the opportunity to show genuine leadership on the issue of clergy sex abuse and cover-ups," the letter said. "This may be one of the greatest leadership challenges in the history of Southern Baptists."

The SNAP leaders said Southern Baptists' local-church autonomy makes it all-the-more imperative that congregations have enough information to make responsible decisions about whom they call as ministers.

"The only way people in the pews will find out about clergy child molesters is if victims feel safe in reporting them," they said. "And victims are never going to feel safe if they have to report abuse by going to the church of the accused minister."

"Telling clergy victims to 'go to the church' is like telling them to go to the den of the wolf who savaged them," the letter said. "It is cruel to the victim and unproductive toward the end of protecting others."

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Bob Allen is senior writer for Associated Baptist Press.