

Texas Megachurch Issues Apology Years After Abuse Was Reported

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Church leadership failed miserably, and 14 young girls suffered years of abuse for it.

In Denton, Texas, and Little Rock, Arkansas, serial abuser Robert Shiflet, 51, assaulted 14 girls during the late 90s through the mid-2000s. His sexual abuse was rampant and unhindered even when reported to church leadership.

Recently, the elder board of Denton Bible Church (DBC) released a letter where they admitted to not protecting these young girls and also offered no support for them during this horrifying process.

The board of elders, headlined by Senior Pastor Tommy Nelson and chairman Curtis Elder, shared the findings from the investigation:

“In total, the investigators found credible accounts that at least 14 girls were victims of Shiflet’s abuse: 11 at Denton Bible and 3 at Fellowship Bible. The misconduct described in these accounts was characterized by everything from grooming behavior and sexual harassment to criminal sexual abuse, abuse of power and spiritual abuse,” the elders said. “Equally troubling, was the consistent accounts that Denton Bible did not shepherd and care for the victims after they showed great courage coming forward.”

It did not take an independent, 10-month-long investigation by lawyers and a third-party investigator to know all of this information however, the signs and witnesses were there years

before the abuse was reported to authorities but were ignored.

Shiflet, who was the middle school youth pastor, was reported by other youth workers because they saw him alone with young girls in his car, home and a hotel room. The youth workers who reported this behavior claim that they went directly to Nelson.

In light of this glaring red flag, the only action Nelson reportedly took was to instruct Shiflet's supervisor to not allow him to spend time alone with girls. There was no other discipline or correction for Shiflet.

Another complaint was filed to the wife of one of the other youth pastors by a college intern at the church. In this complaint she detailed being uncomfortable around Shiflet along with other warning signs about his predatory behavior. Again, nothing was done by church leadership.

In fact, Denton Bible Church denied a request by Shiflet for promotion to be the high school pastor. Their reason, "his pattern of being alone with girls."

This stunning failure of church leadership continued when Shiflet left DBC for a position with Fellowship Bible Church (FBC) in Little Rock, Arkansas. Pastor Nelson declined to share these glaring red flags with the church who had just hired Shiflet. Instead, he recommended him for the job.

It was not until 2005, when two of the victims reported this abuse to a counselor at DBC, that any action was taken against Shiflet. At that time, it was not required by law for the church to report this to authorities, and they did not do so of their own accord. This was recorded in the report the elders released:

"The girl connected the counselor with another girl who had been in Shiflet's youth group in Arkansas. That girl disclosed the sexual abuse Shiflet had committed against her over the

course of years. The friend to whom the counselor was introduced was afraid and embarrassed and expressed her desire that the information she shared in that meeting not be discussed with anyone.”

After revoking Shiflet’s ordination, DBC would go on to alert organizations about Shiflet. However, Nelson would continue to claim ignorance about the abuse that Shiflet inflicted on the girls in the past.

Finally, in 2019, these records of abuse were reported to authorities. This was due in part to a change in laws that required clergy who learned of abuse to report such actions to the appropriate authorities.

Shiflet was sentenced to 33 months in federal prison due to a miscalculation in the plea deal. He is set to be released in 2023, and will be under federal supervision for the remainder of his life, according to the sentencing.

To add to the failure of leadership in this case, the internal investigation brought to light the culture of protecting the church from criticism, instead of doing what was morally right.

“The investigators talked to many who described an ‘us vs. them’ mentality toward those outside of our active church membership. This mindset caused us not to really see or provide care for victims and families that were no longer part of our church community,” the board wrote. “The investigators also found that people within our church were afraid to raise concerns or even participate in the investigation, because of a feeling that it would be seen and treated as disloyalty.”

The elders contend the devastation they feel is due to the grave offenses they allowed to be carried out:

“We were and continue to be overwhelmed with grief for the harm our church allowed to happen to young women entrusted to

our care. We were taken aback by our failures to not only prevent the harm but to also assist victims in the healing process," the letter reads.

Yet it was not the church that allowed this to happen. It was the leadership and those in charge of the church who failed spectacularly at protecting some of the most vulnerable members of their church.

These girls, now women, deserved so much better and still require support and counseling for these abuses they had to suffer through. Their true healing comes from the love and forgiveness of Jesus Christ. But having the Christian leadership they trusted be the source of this pain and suffering makes this a truly challenging task for them. {eo}

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