

Southern Baptist Minister List Included Convicted Sex Offenders

An online directory of Southern Baptist ministers included at least five names that are also included in a new database of convicted sex offenders with Southern Baptist ties compiled in an investigation by two Texas newspapers.

Religion News Service compared the two lists and found the apparent matches.

According to the database of about 220 Southern Baptist ministers and volunteers created by the *Houston Chronicle* and the *San Antonio Express-News*, the five men included one who is in prison, one who is on probation and three who have been released.

Asked about the findings, a spokesman for the Southern Baptist Convention's Executive Committee said Wednesday (Feb. 13) that his agency would look into the matter. The names, which were listed in the Minister Search database on Wednesday, had been removed by early Thursday.

The information in the database is provided by churches, said the spokesman, Roger "Sing" Oldham. The website for the list includes a disclaimer that SBC churches choose their own pastors and that pastors on the list are not approved by the convention.

Oldham expressed concerns that sex offenders were on the list.

"We grieve over any victim of sexual abuse," Oldham said in an emailed response to questions on Wednesday. "We have assigned a member of our staff to review the two lists and will remove those names from Minister Search under the presumption it will

not increase or compound the harm or grief of victims and is, in fact, something that victims desire.”

He added: “Names can be removed from a list, but the hurt victims deal with is more indelible.”

Oldham said the directory of ministers is based on the Annual Church Profile that the SBC requests from affiliated churches.

“If a church does not update its information in a given period of time, the information remains static until updated by the church where the minister served,” he said. “We are looking to initiate a mechanism to review the directory periodically to see if any (ministers) are there who have been convicted of a crime as we become aware of their conviction.”

The information was long published in the denomination’s Annual. It was included in each one from 1898 through 1976; from 1978 to 2000, it was published in the even-numbered years. In the last couple of decades, it was transferred online, Oldham said.

Oldham added that he was not aware of how often the list is used.

Although the link does not seem to be featured widely on Southern Baptist-related websites, New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary—one of six SBC seminaries —includes the Minister Search on its website’s list of “Helpful Links.”

Wade Burleson, a Southern Baptist pastor in Oklahoma, who has called for more than a decade for the Southern Baptists to have a database specifically of offenders, said he’s used the Minister Search site to check the location of a pastor who has written him.

Burleson said he was shocked to learn that five names listed on the SBC search site were also on the Texas papers’ database.

"It just shows you how out of date we are," he said of Southern Baptists. "Even the databases we have—we're not keeping them clean."

He's also concerned about what the mere existence of the site can mean to outsiders.

"You're communicating a message, whether you intend to or not, that you are reaffirming these men as Southern Baptist pastors even though they have a criminal record," he said.

Southern Baptist Theological Seminary President R. Albert Mohler Jr. went further.

He argued that the convention should get rid of its ministers directory—at least in its present form.

"I do not believe the existence of such a site is plausible in light of these developments," Mohler told RNS. "I do not believe that we can simply allow a bulletin board of available pastors and ministers without scrutiny."

Cheryl Summers, a domestic violence survivor and former Southern Baptist, said she considered the inclusion of former ministers who have been convicted on an SBC list an example of how the network of churches only chooses to act like it's a connected group of congregations some of the time.

"They act like a denomination when it's convenient for them to do so," said Summers, who helped organize a "For Such a Time as This Rally" outside the SBC's 2018 annual meeting in Dallas to urge training and a database to prevent future abuse by SBC members.

"And they need to act like a denomination as it relates to protecting the most vulnerable among us."

Benjamin Cole, who writes under "The Baptist Blogger," wrote on Monday about a pastor who, almost nine years after resigning from a pulpit and reaching a plea agreement about

indecent sexual conduct with a child, was still listed as the church's minister on the SBC's website.

"If the Southern Baptist Convention cannot maintain a database of churches with current information about the ministry leaders," he wrote, "and if the convention's database reports that a registered sex offender from a decade ago is still a member church's pastor, then how can we reasonably expect the SBC to maintain another database."

As the SBC grapples with next steps after the Texas newspapers' investigation, some are calling for an independent registry run by a third party that could include names of sex offenders.

Mohler, who told RNS Tuesday that he supports such a registry, said he thinks the SBC's Executive Committee was mistaken in 2008 when it turned down a proposal to create a database that would track clergy accused or convicted of sexual abuse.

"I don't think that was the right way for the SBC to respond then," he said. "It is certainly not the right way for the SBC to respond now."

Mohler broke ties in early 2018 with Sovereign Grace Churches after continuing cover-up accusations made it clear to him "that no adequate independent investigation had been done" into abuse allegations related to that ministry and its founder C.J. Mahaney, whom he had previously supported.

Later that year, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary President Paige Patterson was terminated after allegations arose of his mishandling rape allegations by students. In response, Mohler said, "any public accusation concerning such a pattern requires an independent, third-party investigation."

Burleson and Summers also said an independent approach to a database is necessary for Southern Baptists.

“My desire would be that the Southern Baptist Convention fund the establishment of a nonprofit corporation with a board of independent experts who take over the creation and sustenance of a database,” Burleson said, adding that it should help ensure that anyone who wants to work with children or youth in a church “has not had either a conviction or credible accusation of sexual predatory behavior.”