

Matt Chandler Responds to NYT Report That His Megachurch Mishandled Sexual Abuse Allegations

Matt Chandler, pastor of a Texas megachurch whose former youth minister has been charged with sexual molestation, addressed the scandal before a group of Southern Baptists and said his “imperfect church” takes abuse allegations seriously.

The church’s handling of the alleged abuse, which Chandler said occurred at a church camp more than six years ago, was the subject of a New York Times story this week. Chandler addressed the matter on Tuesday (June 11) during a meeting of Baptist21, a group that held a luncheon between sessions on the first day of the Southern Baptist Convention’s annual two-day meeting.

Chandler, pastor of the Village Church, listed some of the actions his church took after hearing from a church family in early 2018 that their daughter was molested.

“In September of 2018, we had a meeting with all of the parents (of children) that we could find that were at that camp six years ago,” said Chandler, adding that the police detective investigating the allegations was present at the meeting.

“I was dealing with it, not just as a pastor but as a dad,” Chandler said. “My oldest daughter was a cabin away from where this incident – this alleged incident – took place. We called a meeting with all the parents that we knew and could find.”

In January, Matt Tonne, a former associate children’s pastor, was indicted by a Dallas County grand jury on a charge of

indecency with a child involving sexual contact.

Chandler said that Tonne, who was a family friend, had been fired from the church in 2018 because he had been repeatedly drunk, a violation of church rules. At the time, Chandler told the gathering in Birmingham, Tonne had not been charged with abuse. As soon as church officials became aware, Chandler said, they shared that information on the church website and with the congregation.

He noted that the church had been criticized for not releasing the name of the alleged perpetrator sooner than it did. Chandler said he was following the advice of law enforcement in not naming Tonne.

"The detective asked us not to mention his name for fear that it might obstruct the investigation," Chandler said.

Chandler noted that the church posted information about the indictment when it was made public. Tonne has denied the allegations against him.

The family, according to The New York Times, questioned some of the church's handling of announcements about Tonne. Chandler said an elder from the campus of the megachurch where the family attended was in touch with the family regularly and that communication continued as recently as last week.

"We just did the best we knew how to care for them," Chandler said. "These issues are far more complex than one would imagine."

But he said he is still trying to learn from the experience.

"I'm still in introspective mode about what I might have done differently, about how we might have approached this differently," he said.

Chandler also admitted that the church has been accused of failing to care for a victim of abuse in the past. In 2015, he

and other church leaders apologized to a former church member named Karen Hinkley, whose former husband had been fired as a missionary for allegedly viewing child pornography. When Hinkley sought to annul her marriage, church leaders threatened her with church discipline – an action they later referred to as un-Christian.

Just as he did last year when he addressed the issue of churches handling abuse at the Baptist21 group's meeting, Chandler continued to say it was important for churches to get outside counsel, as his church did.

"We're just not experts in this," he said. "I was not trained in any of this."

The Village Church, based in Flower Mound, Texas, is part of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Ari Isaacman Bevacqua, director of communications for The New York Times, told RNS that the paper stands by its story.

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