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Cloudy: High 68, Low 60



HC INVESTIGATION

ABUSE of FAITH

20 YEARS, 700 VICTIMS: SOUTHERN BAPTIST SEXUAL ABUSE SPREADS AS LEADERS RESIST REFORMS

First of three parts

By Robert Downen, Lise Olsen and John Tedesco
STAFF WRITERS

Thirty-five years later, Debbie Vasquez's voice trembled as she described her trauma to a group of Southern Baptist leaders.

She was 14, she said, when she was first molested by her pastor in Sanger, a tiny prairie town an hour north of Dallas. It was the first of many assaults that Vasquez said destroyed her teenage years and, at 18, left her pregnant by the Southern Baptist pastor, a married man more than a dozen years older.

In June 2008, she paid her way to Indianapolis, where she and others asked leaders of the Southern Baptist Convention and its 47,000 churches to track sexual predators and take action against congregations that harbored or

concealed abusers. Vasquez, by then in her 40s, implored them to consider prevention policies like those adopted by other faiths that include the Catholic Church.

"Listen to what God has to say," she said, according to audio of the meeting, which she recorded. "... All that evil needs is for good to do nothing. ... Please help me and others that will be hurt."

Days later, Southern Baptist leaders rejected nearly every proposed reform. The abusers haven't stopped. They've hurt hundreds more.

In the decade since Vasquez's appeal for help, more than 250 people who worked or volunteered in Southern Baptist churches have been charged

with sex crimes, an investigation by the Houston Chronicle and the San Antonio Express-News reveals.

It's not just a recent problem: In all, since 1998, roughly 380 Southern Baptist church leaders and volunteers have faced allegations of sexual misconduct, the newspapers found. That includes those who were convicted, credibly accused and successfully sued, and those who confessed or resigned. More of them worked in Texas than in any other state.

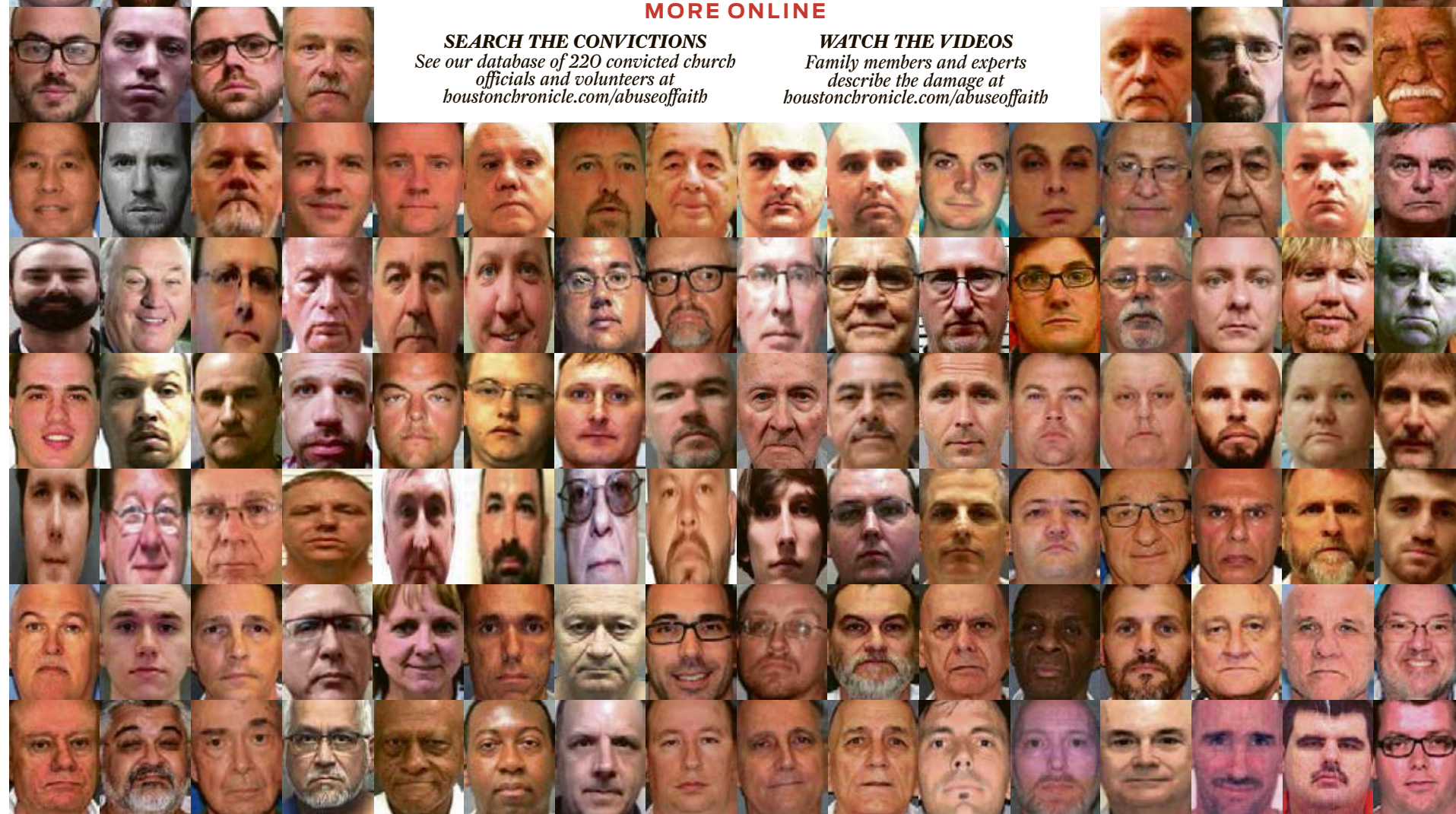
They left behind more than 700 victims, many of them shunned by their churches, left to themselves to rebuild their lives. Some were urged to forgive their abusers or to get abortions.

Abuse continues on A20

MORE ONLINE

SEARCH THE CONVICTIONS
See our database of 220 convicted church officials and volunteers at houstonchronicle.com/abuseoffaith

WATCH THE VIDEOS
Family members and experts describe the damage at houstonchronicle.com/abuseoffaith



This collection of mug shots includes many of the 220 people who worked or volunteered in Southern Baptist churches and, since 1998, were convicted of or pleaded guilty to sex crimes. Our database of the convictions is at houstonchronicle.com/abuseoffaith.

Texas teachers shoulder burden of skyrocketing health care costs

State contribution of \$75 a month flat since 2002

By Allie Morris
AUSTIN BUREAU

AUSTIN — Stephanie C. Quinn works year-round at New Braunfels ISD as a curriculum specialist, but after hours she consults for smaller districts as far away as the Panhandle and Gulf Coast. Her husband, an assistant principal, has started bartending at music festivals in Austin.

The couple needs the extra money to cover their soaring health insurance costs. Premiums for family coverage under the state-sponsored plan for Texas educators start at over \$1,000 a month — roughly



Sixth-grade teacher Stephanie Quinn works with Halle Huber at New Braunfels Middle School.

twice as much as a decade ago. To avoid that cost, Quinn and her husband split the family onto two insurance plans, but still face big bills.

"It's over \$1,000 a month out of my pocket every month just for medical stuff, sometimes up to \$1,500," said Quinn, who has four children, ages 6 to

17. "We're trying to offset that."

Texas educators, like Quinn, and local school districts are increasingly shouldering the burden of skyrocketing health care costs as the state has kept its own contribution flat over the past 16 years.

So as the Legislature pledges to boost pay for teachers — wages in Texas lag the national average by \$7,000 a year — many educators say that without a serious fix for health insurance, rising health care costs would quickly eat up any pay bump.

Premiums for TRS ActiveCare — insurance offered at roughly 90 percent of Texas school districts — have steadily risen since the plan started in 2002. In *Teachers continues on A14*

'I no longer dream of the free world'

Bill gives second look at inmates sentenced young

By Keri Blakinger
STAFF WRITER

The first time Michael Tracy skipped school, it was to help plan a robbery. He was 17, and reckless.

It did not go well. Wearing masks and looking for a Rolex, the Klein ISD student and two older friends strolled through the front door of a northern Harris County home and held the owner at gunpoint. No one got hurt, and they fled with only a fraction of what they'd expected.

But less than a week later, the long-haired kid found himself facing a very adult charge: aggravated

robbery, a first-degree felony. He took the case to trial, and lost.

Two months before his 18th birthday, he was sentenced to 60 years in prison. That was in 1994.

"I've been gone so long," he told the Houston Chronicle recently, "I no longer dream of the free world. I only dream of prison."

But now, Tracy and a few hundred other aging inmates like him have a new hope for reprieve with proposed legislation known as the Second Look bill. Filed in the Texas House by Rep. Joe Moody, D-El Paso, and in the Texas Senate by Sen. Jose Rodriguez, D-El Paso, the measure would make some prisoners who were sentenced as minors eligible to get out much sooner.

Bill continues on A26

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ABUSE OF FAITH

“So many people’s faith is murdered. I mean, their faith is slaughtered by these predators.”

— David Pittman, who says he was molested by his youth minister

ABUSE

From page A1

About 220 offenders have been convicted or took plea deals, and dozens of cases are pending. They were pastors. Ministers. Youth pastors. Sunday school teachers. Deacons. Church volunteers.

Nearly 100 are still held in prisons stretching from Sacramento County, Calif., to Hillsborough County, Fla., state and federal records show. Scores of others cut deals and served no time. More than 100 are registered sex offenders. Some still work in Southern Baptist churches today.

Journalists in the two newsrooms spent more than six months reviewing thousands of pages of court, prison and police records and conducting hundreds of interviews. They built a database of former leaders in Southern Baptist churches who have been convicted of sex crimes.

The investigation reveals that:

At least 35 church pastors, employees and volunteers who exhibited predatory behavior were still able to find jobs at churches during the past two decades. In some cases, church leaders apparently failed to alert law enforcement about complaints or to warn other congregations about allegations of misconduct.

Several past presidents and prominent leaders of the Southern Baptist Convention are among those criticized by victims for concealing or mishandling abuse complaints within their own churches or seminaries.

Some registered sex offenders returned to the pulpit. Others remain there, including a Houston preacher who sexually assaulted a teenager and now is the principal officer of a Houston nonprofit that works with student organizations, federal records show. Its name: Touching the Future Today Inc.

Many of the victims were adolescents who were molested, sent explicit photos or texts, exposed to pornography, photographed nude, or repeatedly raped by youth pastors. Some victims as young as 3 were molested or raped inside pastors’ studies and Sunday school classrooms. A few were adults — women and men who sought pastoral guidance and instead say they were seduced or sexually assaulted.

Heather Schneider was 14 when she was molested in a choir room at Houston’s Second Baptist Church, according to criminal and civil court records. Her mother, Gwen Casados, said church leaders waited months to fire the attacker, who later pleaded no contest. In response to her lawsuit, church leaders also denied responsibility.

Schneider slit her wrists the day after that attack in 1994, Casados said. She survived, but she died 14 years later from a drug overdose that her mother blames on the trauma.

“I never got her back,” Casados said.

Others took decades to come forward, and only after their lives had unraveled. David Pittman said he was 12 when a youth minister from his Georgia church first molested him in 1981. Two other former members of the man’s churches said in interviews that they also were abused by him. But by the time Pittman spoke out in 2006, it was too late to press criminal charges.

The minister still works at an SBC church.

Pittman won’t soon forgive those who have offered prayers but taken no action. He only recently stopped hating God.

“That is the greatest tragedy of all,” he said. “So many people’s faith is murdered. I mean, their faith is slaughtered by these predators.”

August “Augie” Boto, interim president of the SBC’s Executive Committee, helped draft the rejection of reform proposals in 2008. In an interview, he expressed “sorrow” about some of the newspapers’ findings but said the convention’s leadership can do only so much to stop sexual abuses.

“It would be sorrow if it were 200 or 600” cases, Boto said. “Sorrow. What we’re talking about is criminal. The fact that criminal activity occurs in a church context is always the basis of grief. But it’s going to happen. And that statement does not mean that we must be resigned to it.”



Donna McWilliam / Associated Press

In this 2007 photo, Debbie Vasquez holds a photograph of herself at age 14, when she says she was first molested by a pastor of her church in Sanger.

‘A porous sieve’

At the core of Southern Baptist doctrine is local church autonomy, the idea that each church is independent and self-governing. It’s one of the main reasons that Boto said most of the proposals a decade ago were viewed as flawed by the executive committee because the committee doesn’t have the authority to force churches to report sexual abuse to a central registry.

Because of that, Boto said, the committee “realized that lifting up a model that could not be enforced was an exercise in futility,” and so instead drafted a report that “accepted the existence of the problem rather than attempting to define its magnitude.”

SBC churches and organizations share resources and materials, and together they fund missionary trips and seminaries. Most pastors are ordained locally after they’ve convinced a small group of church elders that they’ve been called to service by God. There is no central database that tracks ordinations, or sexual abuse convictions or allegations.

All of that makes Southern Baptist churches highly susceptible to predators, says Christa Brown, an activist who wrote a book about being molested as a child by a pastor at her SBC church in Farmer’s Branch, a Dallas suburb.

“It’s a perfect profession for a con artist, because all he has to do is talk a good talk and convince people that he’s been called by God, and bingo, he gets to be a Southern Baptist minister,” said Brown, who lives in Colorado. “Then he can infiltrate the entirety of the SBC, move from church to church, from state to state, go to bigger churches and more prominent churches where he has more influence and power, and it all starts in some small church.”

“It’s a porous sieve of a denomination.”

To try to measure the problem, the newspapers collected and cross-checked news reports, prison records, court records, sex offender registries and other documents. Reporters also conducted hundreds of interviews with victims, church leaders, investigators and offenders.

Several factors make it likely that the abuse is even more widespread than can be documented: Victims of sexual assault come forward at a low rate; many cases

in churches are handled internally; and many Southern Baptist churches are in rural communities where media coverage is sparse.

It’s clear, however, that SBC leaders have long been aware of the problem. Bowing to pressure from activists, the Baptist General Convention of Texas, one of the largest SBC state organizations, in 2007 published a list of eight sex offenders who had served in Southern Baptist churches in Texas.

Around the same time, the Rev. Thomas Doyle wrote to SBC leaders, imploring them to act. A priest and former high-ranking lawyer for the Catholic Church, Doyle in the 1980s was one of the earliest to blow the whistle on child sexual abuse in the church. But Catholic leaders “lied about it ... covered it up and ignored the victims,” said Doyle, now retired and living in northern Virginia.

Doyle turned to activism because of his experiences, work that brought him closer to those abused in Southern Baptist churches. Their stories — and how the SBC handled them — felt hauntingly familiar, he said.

“I saw the same type of behavior going on with the Southern Baptists,” he said.

The responses were predictable, Doyle said. In one, Frank

Page, then the SBC president, wrote that they were “taking this issue seriously” but that local church autonomy presented “serious limitations.” In March, Page resigned as president and CEO of the SBC’s Executive Committee for “a morally inappropriate relationship in the recent past,” according to the executive committee.

Details have not been disclosed, but SBC officials said they had “no reason to suspect any legal impropriety.” Page declined to be interviewed.

Other leaders have acknowledged that Baptist churches are troubled by predators but that they could not interfere in local church affairs. Even so, the SBC has ended its affiliation with at least four churches in the past 10 years for affirming or endorsing homosexual behavior. The SBC governing documents ban gay or female pastors, but they do not outlaw convicted sex offenders from working in churches.

In one email to Debbie Vasquez, Augie Boto assured her that “no Baptist I know of is pretending that ‘the problem does not exist.’”

“There is no question that some Southern Baptist ministers have done criminal things, including sexual abuse of children,” he wrote in a May 2007 email. “It

The series

Sunday: 700 victims, no reforms

Tuesday: Disturbing pasts, but pastors still

Wednesday: Taking advantage of teens

is a sad and tragic truth. Hopefully, the harm emanating from such occurrences will cause the local churches to be more aggressively vigilant.”

Offenders return to preach

The SBC Executive Committee also wrote in 2008 that it “would certainly be justified” to end affiliations with churches that “intentionally employed a known sexual offender or knowingly placed one in a position of leadership over children or other vulnerable participants in its ministries.”

Current SBC President J.D. Greear reaffirmed that stance in an email to the Chronicle, writing that any church that “proves a pattern of sinful neglect — regarding abuse or any other matter — should absolutely be removed from fellowship from the broader denomination.”

“The Bible calls for pastors to be people of integrity, known for their self-control and kindness,” Greear wrote. “A convicted sex offender would certainly not meet those qualifications. Churches that ignore that are out of line with both Scripture and Baptist principles of cooperation.”

But the newspapers found at least 10 SBC churches that welcomed pastors, ministers and volunteers since 1998 who had previously faced charges of sexual misconduct. In some cases, they were registered sex offenders.

In Illinois, Leslie Mason returned to the pulpit a few years after he was convicted in 2003 on two counts of criminal sexual assault. Mason had been a rising star in local Southern Baptist circles until the charges were publicized by Michael Leathers, who was then editor of the state’s Baptist newspaper.

Letters from angry readers poured in. Among those upset by Leathers’ decision to publish the story was Glenn Akins, the interim executive director of the Illinois Baptist State Association.

“To have singled Les out in such a sensationalistic manner ignores many others who have done the same thing,” Akins wrote in a memo, a copy of which Leathers provided. “You could have asked nearly any staff member and gotten the names of several other prominent churches where the same sort of sexual misconduct has occurred recently in our state.”

Akins, now the assistant executive director of the Baptist General Association of Virginia, declined an interview request.

Leathers resigned after state Baptist convention leaders told him he might be fired and lose his severance pay, he said. Mason, meanwhile, admitted to investigators that he had relationships with four different girls, records show.

Mason received a seven-year prison sentence under a plea deal in which investigators dropped all but two of his charges. After his release, he returned to the pulpit of a different SBC church a few miles away.

“That just appalled me,” Leathers said. “They had to have known they put a convicted sex offender behind the pulpit. ... If a church calls a woman to pastor their church, there are a lot of

Abuse continues on A21



Jon Shapley / Staff photographer

Gwen Casados sits in her daughter’s room in Houston. Her daughter, Heather Schneider, was sexually abused inside Second Baptist Church in Houston in 1994 and later died of a drug overdose.

ABUSE OF FAITH

“Well, they are bad, and they should look bad. Because they have ignored this issue.”

— the Rev. Thomas Doyle, an early Catholic whistleblower who has urged SBC leaders to act on sexual abuse

ABUSE

From page A20

Southern Baptist organizations that, sadly, would disassociate with them immediately. Why wouldn't they do the same for convicted sex offenders?"

Mason has since preached at multiple SBC churches in central Illinois. He said in an interview that those churches "absolutely know about my past," and said churches and other institutions need "to be better at handling" sexual abuse.

Mason said that "nobody is above reproach in all things" and that church leaders — particularly those who work with children — "desperately need accountability."

In Houston, Michael Lee Jones started a Southern Baptist church in the Greenspoint area, Cathedral of Faith, after his 1998 conviction for having sex with a teenage female congregant at a different SBC church nearby. Jones, also leader of a nonprofit called Touching the Future Today, was included on the list of convicted ministers released by the Baptist General Convention of Texas a decade ago.

In December, Cathedral of Faith celebrated its 20th anniversary at a downtown Houston hotel, according to the church's website. A flyer for the event touted sermons from Jones, another pastor and Joseph S. Ratliff, the longtime pastor of Houston's Brentwood Baptist Church.

Ratliff was sued in 2003 for sexual misconduct with a man he was counseling. The lawsuit was settled and dismissed by agreement of the parties, according to Harris County court records and interviews. The settlement is subject to a confidentiality agreement. Ratliff has been sued two other times, one involving another person who had come in for counseling; the other involved his handling of allegations against another church official, Harris County records show. The disposition of those two cases was not available.

Jones, Ratliff and Ratliff's attorney did not respond to requests for comment.

'A known problem'

Wade Burlison, a former president of Oklahoma's Southern Baptist convention, says it has long been clear that Southern Baptist churches face a crisis. In 2007 and 2018, he asked SBC leaders to study sexual abuse in churches and bring prevention measures to a vote at the SBC's annual meeting.

Leaders pushed back both times, he said. Some cited local church autonomy; others feared lawsuits if the reforms didn't prevent abuse.

Burlison couldn't help but wonder if there have been "ulterior motives" at play.

"There's a known problem, but it's too messy to deal with," he said in a recent interview. "It's not that we can't do it as much as we don't want to do it. ... To me, that's a problem. You must want to do it, to do it."

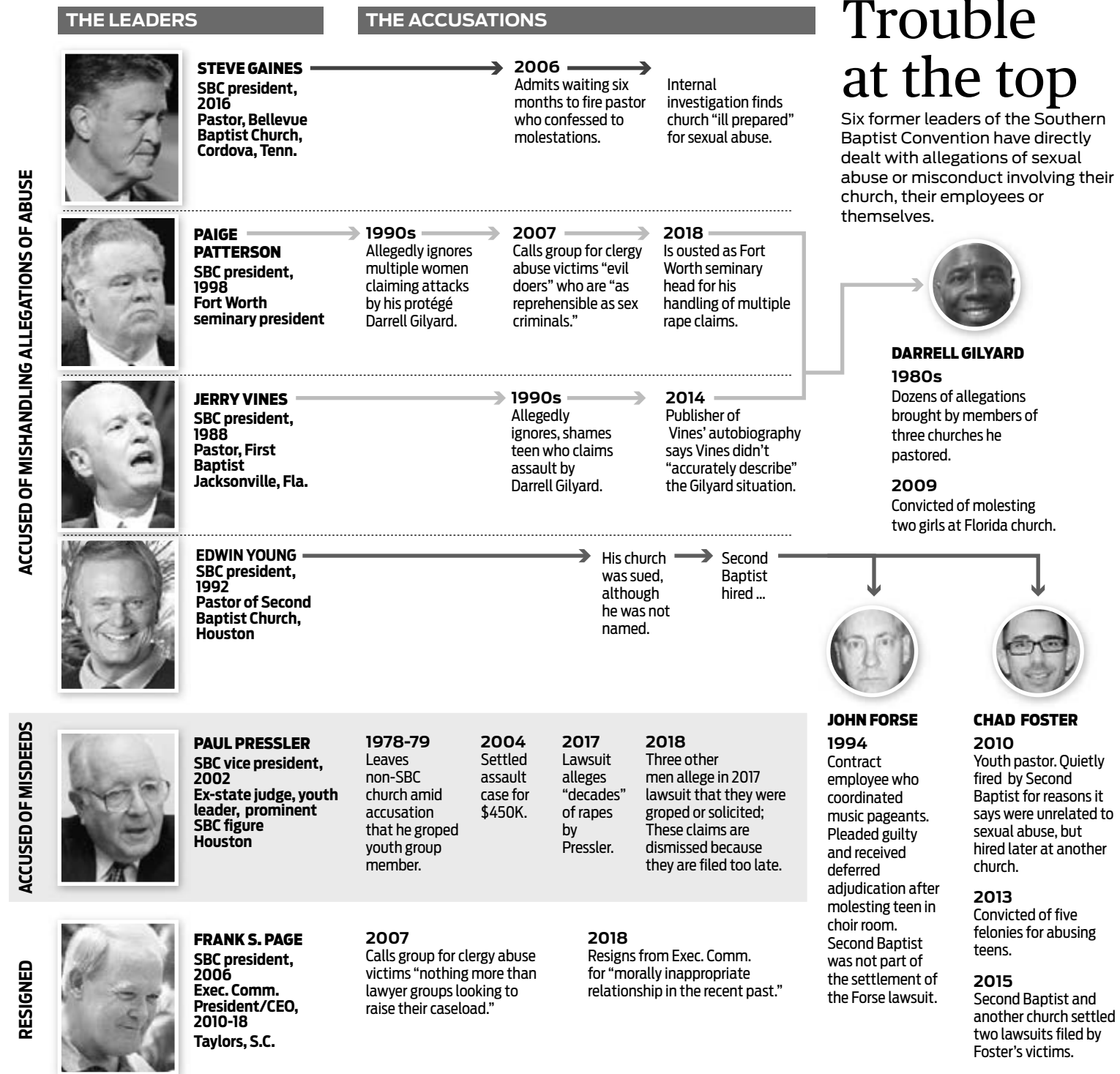
Doyle, the Catholic whistleblower, was similarly suspicious, if more blunt: "I understand the fear, because it's going to make the leadership look bad," he said. "Well, they are bad, and they should look bad. Because they have ignored this issue. They have demonized the victims."

Several Southern Baptist leaders and their churches have been criticized for ignoring the abused or covering for alleged predators, including at Houston's Second Baptist, where former SBC President Ed Young has been pastor since 1978. Young built the church into one of the largest and most important in the SBC; today, it counts more than 60,000 members who attend at multiple campuses.

Before she was molested in the choir room at Second Baptist in 1994, Heather Schneider filled a black notebook with poems. The seventh-grader, with long white-blond hair and sparkling green eyes, had begun to work as a model. She soon attracted attention from John Forse, who coordinated church pageants and programs at Second Baptist.

He also used his position to recruit girls for private acting lessons, according to Harris County court documents.

A day after she was attacked, Schneider told her mother, Casados, that Forse had touched her inappropriately and tried to force her to do "horrendous things."



Trouble at the top

Six former leaders of the Southern Baptist Convention have directly dealt with allegations of sexual abuse or misconduct involving their church, their employees or themselves.



DARRELL GILYARD

1980s
Dozens of allegations brought by members of three churches he pastored.

2009
Convicted of molesting two girls at Florida church.



JOHN FORSE

1994
Contract employee who coordinated music pageants. Pleaded guilty and received deferred adjudication after molesting teen in choir room. Second Baptist was not part of the settlement of the Forse lawsuit.



CHAD FOSTER

2010
Youth pastor. Quietly fired by Second Baptist for reasons it says were unrelated to sexual abuse, but hired later at another church.

2013
Convicted of five felonies for abusing teens.

2015
Second Baptist and another church settled two lawsuits filed by Foster's victims.

Casados called police.

Casados, who was raised a Baptist, said she received a call from Young, who initially offered to do whatever he could to help her daughter. But after she told Young she already had called police, he hung up "and we never heard from him again," she said in an interview.

It took months — and the threat of criminal charges — before Forse left his position at the church, according to statements made by Forse's attorney at the time and Schneider's responses to questions in a related civil lawsuit.

In August 1994, Forse received deferred adjudication and 10 years' probation after pleading no contest to two counts of indecency with a child by contact. He remains a registered sex offender and was later convicted of a pornography charge. He is listed in the sex offender registry in 2019 as transient; he could not be reached for comment.

Church officials declined interview requests. In a statement to the Chronicle, Second Baptist said that it takes "allegations of sexual misconduct or abuse very seriously and constantly strives to provide and maintain a safe, Christian environment for all employees, church members and guests."

The church declined to release its employment policies but described Forse as a "short-term contract worker" when he was accused of sex abuse. "After Second Baptist became aware of the allegations made against Forse his contract was terminated," the statement says. "Upon notification, Second Baptist Church cooperated fully with law enforcement in this matter."

Schneider's parents filed a civil lawsuit against the church, Forse and a modeling agency. The case against the church was dismissed; its lawyers argued that Forse was not acting as a church employee. Second Baptist was not part of an eventual settlement.

In 1992, before Schneider was molested, a lawyer for the Southern Baptist Convention wrote in a court filing that the SBC did not distribute instructions to its member churches on handling sexual abuse claims. He said Second Baptist had no written procedures on the topic.

The lawyer, Neil Martin, was writing in response to a lawsuit that accused First Baptist Church of Conroe of continuing to employ Riley Edward Cox Jr. as a youth pastor after a family said that he had molested their child. In a court filing, Cox admitted to molesting three boys in the late

Tell us your story

Do you have information about sexual misconduct in Southern Baptist churches? Help us investigate by telling us your story. Go to houstonchronicle.com/abuseoffaith to fill out our confidential questionnaire.

1980s.

Young, SBC president at the time of the lawsuit, was asked to outline the organization's policies on child sexual abuse as part of the lawsuit. He declined to testify, citing "local church autonomy" and saying in an affidavit that he had "no educational training in the area of sexual abuse or the investigation of sexual abuse claims."

Young also said he feared testifying could jeopardize his blossoming TV ministry.

Leaders of Second Baptist have been similarly reluctant to release or discuss their policies on sexual abuse in response to two other civil lawsuits related to sexual assault claims filed in the last five years, court records show. Those suits accuse the church of ignoring or concealing abuses committed by youth pastor Chad Foster, who was later convicted.

Another civil lawsuit asserted that Second Baptist helped conceal alleged rapes by Paul Pressler, a former Texas state judge and former SBC vice president. In that suit, brought by a member of Pressler's youth group, three other men have said in affidavits that Pressler groped them or tried to pressure them into sex. Second Baptist, however, has been dismissed from the suit, and the plaintiff's sexual abuse claims against Pressler have been dismissed because the statute of limitations had expired.

Pressler has been a prominent member of Second Baptist for much of his adult life.

In its statement to the Chronicle, Second Baptist said "our policy and practice have been and will continue to be that any complaint of sexual misconduct will be heard, investigated and handled in a lawful and appropriate way. Reports of sexual abuse are immediately reported to law enforcement officials as required by law."

'Break her down'

Another defendant in the lawsuit against Pressler: Paige Patterson, a former SBC president who, with Pressler, pushed the convention in the 1980s and 1990s to adopt literal interpretations of the Bible.

In May of last year, Patterson

was ousted as president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth after he said he wanted to meet alone with a female student who said she was raped so he could "break her down," according to a statement from seminary trustees.

But his handling of sexual abuse dates back decades. Several women have said that Patterson ignored their claims that his protégé, Darrell Gilyard, assaulted them at Texas churches in the 1980s; some of those allegations were detailed in a 1991 Dallas Morning News article.

The Gilyard case bothered Debbie Vasquez. She feared other victims had been ignored or left to handle their trauma alone.

When Vasquez became pregnant, she said, leaders of her church forced her to stand in front of the congregation and ask for forgiveness without saying who had fathered the child.

She said church members were generally supportive but were never told the child was their pastor's. Church leadership shunned her, asked her to get an abortion and, when she said no, threatened her and her child, she said. She moved abroad soon after.

Vasquez sued her former pastor and his church in 2006. In a deposition, the pastor, Dale "Dickie" Amyx, admitted to having sex with her when she was a teenager, though he maintained that it was consensual. He acknowledged paternity of her child but was never charged with any crime. Amyx was listed as the church's pastor as late as 2016, state Baptist records show. He could not be reached for comment.

Amyx denies that he threatened or physically assaulted Vasquez. He and his employer at the time of the lawsuit — an SBC church Vasquez never attended — argued that Vasquez exaggerated her story in an attempt to get publicity for her fight for reforms, court records show.

Amyx wrote an apology letter that Vasquez provided to the newspapers; her lawsuit was eventually dismissed, but she continued pressing SBC leaders, including Patterson, to act. In one series of emails, she asked Patterson why leaders didn't intervene in cases such as Gilyard's.

Patterson responded forcefully, writing in 2008 that he "forced Gilyard to resign his church" and "called pastors all over the USA and since that day (Gilyard) has never preached for any Southern Baptist organization."

In fact, Gilyard preached after his Texas ouster at various churches, including Jackson-

ville's First Baptist Church, which was led by former SBC President Jerry Vines. It was there that Tiffany Thigpen said she met Gilyard, who she said later "viciously" attacked her.

Thigpen, who was 18 at the time, said that Vines tried to shame her into silence after she disclosed the abuse to him. "How embarrassing this will be for you," she recalled Vines telling her. As far as Thigpen knows, police were never notified.

Gilyard was convicted in 2009 of lewd and lascivious molestation of two other teenage girls, both under 16, while pastoring a Florida church. He found work at an SBC church after his three-year prison sentence, prompting the local Southern Baptist association to end its affiliation.

Neither Vasquez nor Thigpen has forgiven SBC leaders for their inaction.

Vasquez: "They made excuses and did nothing."

Thigpen said of Vines in a recent interview: "You left this little sheep to get hurt and then you protected yourself. And I hope when you lay your head on your pillow you think of every girl (Gilyard) hurt and life he ruined. And I hope you can't sleep."

Patterson and Vines did not respond to requests for comment. Heath Lambert, now senior pastor at First Baptist in Jacksonville, said in a statement that "we decry any act of violence or abuse."

'Lethal' abuse

Defensive responses from church leaders rank among the worst things the abused can endure, says Harvey Rosenstock, a Houston psychiatrist who has worked for decades with victims and perpetrators of clergy sexual abuse. They can rewire a developing brain to forever associate faith or authority with trauma or betrayal, he says.

"If someone is identified as a man of God, then there are no holds barred," he said. "Your defense system is completely paralyzed. This man is speaking with the voice of God. ... So a person who is not only an authority figure, but God's servant, is telling you this is between us, this is a special relationship, this has been sanctioned by the Lord. That allows a young victim to have almost zero defenses. Totally vulnerable."

Rosenstock is among a growing number of expert clinicians who advocate for changes in statute of limitations laws in sexual abuse cases. They cite decades of neuroscience to show that those abused as children — particularly by cler-

Abuse continues on A22

ABUSE OF FAITH

Boto: Churches 'soft targets' for predators

Reporters Robert Downen and John Tedesco recently interviewed two officials of the Southern Baptist Convention about the findings of our investigation into sexual abuse. August "Augie" Boto, general counsel and interim president of the SBC's executive committee, and Roger "Sing" Oldham, vice president for communications and relations, answered questions for 90 minutes. Below are excerpts from the conversation.

Q: Since the SBC does not keep stats, we went out and tried to quantify this problem. We found roughly 200 SBC ministers and volunteers and youth pastors who had been criminally convicted. We're going to be posting those records online in a searchable database in order for people to use it as a resource ...

Boto: Good.

Q: What's that?

Boto: Good.

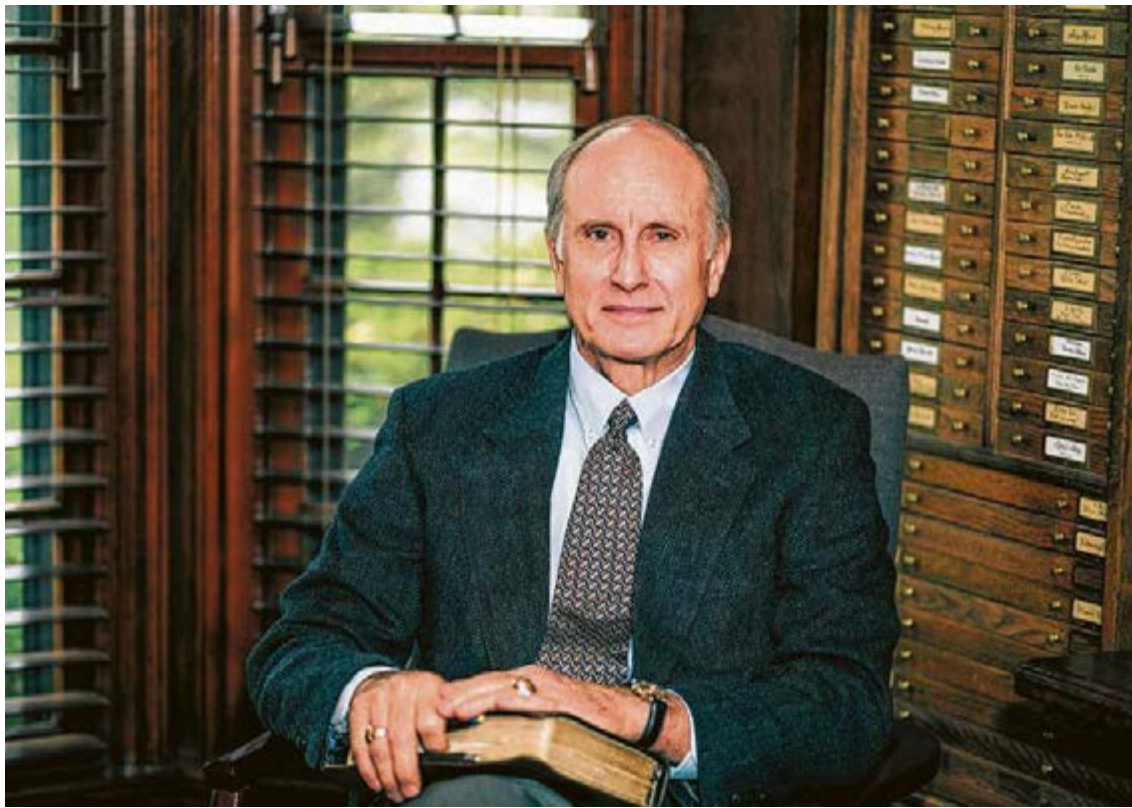
Q: I guess I have to ask ... that's not quite the response I expected. Why do you think that's good?

Boto: Because your posting of it is going to heighten awareness. It's going to harden the targets. I told you at the outset of this phone call that my perception of your doing a report is probably more positive than you would suspect. ... I think sometimes people presuppose that our initial reaction to a report of Southern Baptist failure anywhere is embarrassment. I can assure you that is not my initial reaction. My initial reaction is anger.

Oldham: But not at you.

Boto: No, not at you. My initial reaction is anger that it happened. Just within the last few months, I was in a car that was broken into and my briefcase was stolen. My initial reaction was not embarrassment that I didn't watch the car close enough or that I left the briefcase on the seat. That was not my initial reaction. My initial reaction was anger that the predator did what he did. Taking advantage of the vulnerable is what criminals do. And when that happens, our job is to voice it. Not to hide it.

What I'm saying is, that's why I appreciate your compilation and you're lifting it up again anew



Courtesy the Executive Committee of the SBC

August "Augie" Boto, interim president of the Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee, said the newspapers' investigation is helpful. But that doesn't mean the SBC can, or will, act.

and afresh. Why? Because not only Baptist churches but all churches are considered by sexual predators to be soft targets. There are reasons for that. We can discuss them. And they may be softer than some other targets. But we harden those targets by making people aware of the malevolence that exists. So you understand my reaction now?

Q: Sure ... The team we had developing this, it took us some time. We're only a small team. Why could the Southern Baptist Convention not have a similar thing – doesn't even have to be public – (that) churches could consult when hiring?

Boto: Look at our sexual abuse prevention resource page. We do have that thing. (The public sex offender) registry is listed right there. How does that differ from what you're compiling?

Q: But this is focused on Baptist, though.

Boto: Why would you do that when predators leave one church construct and go to another field that is more productive? We had independent Baptist pastors moving into the Southern Baptist

realm. Why would I limit it to Baptists? I want my fellow churches to be as aware as possible. Why would I ever limit the list to Baptists?

Q: But you're linking to a federal (sex offender registry). It's a different thing, isn't it?

Boto: Why is it deficient? You tell me.

Q: Because people can get taken off of a sex offender registry. People can negotiate pleas.

Boto: John and Rob, I think you brought up a good point. But let me say this. The idea of another registry – ours or created by another nonprofit outside the Southern Baptist convention – that is an idea that I can support. Even if it were to include coverage of people who are reported to be or suspected to be sexual predators. I can support the idea.

Q: Pastor (Wade) Burleson has had a lot of time to think about how this thing would work. He said that he would like to see ... what you just said. An independent nonprofit (would) handle this.

Boto: So would I. I agree with Pastor Burleson on that point. But I don't think it's going to

happen. And the reason I don't is because I don't think a database so constructed is viable.

Q: Can you elaborate? Are you referring to some of the issues raised in the 2008 executive committee report?

Boto: Yes. Yes. Now, you can indict me for that belief, but my belief does not control Southern Baptists. Southern Baptist churches are of their own opinion about these things.

Q: I mentioned to you the roughly 200 convictions we found. ... Beyond the convictions, we're also including things like arrests, cases where a pastor confessed or resigned after an allegation was made, successfully sued. Since '98, we're looking at roughly 400 cases of pastors accused of sexual misconduct. Ministers. Church employees. Volunteers.

Oldham: One instance is one too many. Four hundred is 400 too many.

Q: Does that number surprise you? What's your reaction to that?

Boto: Sorrow. It would be sorrow if it were 200 or 600. Sorrow. What we're talking about

is criminal. The fact that criminal activity occurs in a church context is always the basis of grief. But it's going to happen. And that statement does not mean that we must be resigned to it.

Let's be mature. Crime is crime and needs to be dealt with like crime. Because that's what it is. And so, reports to law enforcement should be immediate. Can I be vulnerable with you just for a second? Believers of all kinds sometimes lead themselves to the conclusion that mercy should pre-empt justice. The Bible says that those two things are not mutually exclusive. They co-exist in the very character of God. I'm afraid sometimes people opt for mercy to the exclusion of justice, when in fact justice is corrective. Justice is God's technique for dealing with sin. So I'm all for mercy. But it should not be precluded by justice. In fact, it should not precede justice.

Q: Some readers might wonder if the SBC cannot do more to try to prevent this. What would your response be?

Boto: I understand that. And let me say this. How pretentious it would be of me or any Baptist to say, we're perfect, we can't do any better. We're doing the most we can do. I just wrote an article that I was motivated to write for our news journal in the last edition because I strongly suspected that we aren't doing all we can do. Especially with regard to vetting potential employees. When I talk about background checks, I'm not talking about criminal history checks. As you and John have both voiced, a criminal history check is limited. A background check should be much broader. It should not limit inquiry to only those references listed on a curriculum vitae. It should go around those references.

Q: Look for gaps?

Boto: Oh my word, yes. It should look for spotty explanations. It should look for all sorts of things because there's a vulnerability in any gathering of folks who are by inclination trusting.

Guys, you are not my opponent. You are not the opponent of the Southern Baptist Convention in your reporting. You're helping us. I'm all for shining the light of day upon crime.

ABUSE

From page A21

gy – can develop a sort of Stockholm syndrome that prevents them for decades from recognizing themselves as victims.

Such was the case for most of David Pittman's life.

"Cocaine, heroin, methamphetamine – whatever would quiet my mind and diminish what I was feeling, because I wanted to be numb," he said. "I didn't want to feel any of it."

An athletic child with an incarcerated father, Pittman said he had dreamed about joining the youth group at his church near Atlanta since he was baptized there at age 8.

There, he could play any sport he wanted, and at 12 he found in the youth pastor a much-sought father figure. The grooming started almost immediately, he said: front-seat rides in the youth pastor's Camaro; trips to see the Doobie Brothers and Kansas in concert; and, eventually, sleepovers during which Pittman said he was first molested.

Pittman said the assaults continued until he turned 15 and the youth pastor quietly moved to a new church nearby.

"For the longest time, I wouldn't even admit to myself that it happened," he said.

Three decades later, in 2006,

Pittman learned that his alleged abuser was working as a youth minister in Georgia. Though Georgia's statute of limitations had by then elapsed, Pittman and others came forward with allegations.

Like Pittman, Ray Harrell grew up without a male figure in his life. His father left early, he said, and his mother later "threw herself" into the church.

Eventually the youth minister started babysitting Harrell, then a preteen. Harrell still remembers the minister's stuffed monkey, which was used to "break the ice," he said.

"This is a youth minister and the only male influence in my life and so I never thought anything about it," Harrell said in an interview. "And when the abuse started ... I knew it was wrong, but this is somebody I was supposed to believe in, to look up to, who was in the church."

Pittman reached out to the church's lead pastor and chairman of the church's deacons.

The deacon said in an interview that he confronted the youth minister and "asked him if there had ever been anything in his past and he acknowledged that there had been." The minister also told the deacon that he had gotten "discreet" counseling, the deacon said.

The youth minister resigned, after which the deacon and oth-

ers began looking through a Myspace account that he had while employed at the church. On it, the deacon found messages "that the police should have," he said.

The deacon said he provided the Georgia State Baptist Convention with evidence that the youth minister should be barred from working in churches.

The youth minister who Pittman and Harrell say abused them still works at an SBC church in Georgia. The church's lead pastor declined to say if he was ever made aware of the allegations, though Pittman provided emails that show he reached out to the pastor repeatedly.

The youth minister did not return phone calls. Reached by e-mail, he declined to be interviewed. The newspapers are not identifying him because he has not been charged.

Anne Marie Miller says she, too, has been denied justice. In July, Mark Aderholt, a former employee of the South Carolina Baptist Convention and a former missionary, was charged in Tarrant County with sexually assaulting Miller in the late 1990s, when she was a teenager. Texas eliminated its statute of limitations for most sex crimes against children in 2007.

In 2007, Miller told the SBC's International Mission Board about Aderholt after he was hired there, prompting an internal in-

vestigation that officials said supported her story. Aderholt resigned and worked at SBC churches in Arkansas before moving to South Carolina, where he worked for the state's Baptist convention.

Miller, meanwhile, was told to "let it go" when she asked mission board officials about the investigation.

"Forgiveness is up to you alone," general counsel Derek Gaubatz wrote in one 2007 email. "It involves a decision by you to forgive the other person of the wrongs done to you, just as Christ has forgiven you."

After Aderholt's arrest, a mission board spokeswoman said it did not notify his future SBC employers about the allegations in 2007 because of local church autonomy. The board also said that Miller at the time did not want to talk with police. She says that was because she was still traumatized.

The charges against Aderholt are pending.

Miller, 38, lives in the Fort Worth area. She says she has received support from Greear, the new SBC president. But she's skeptical that the SBC will act decisively.

"I was really, really hopeful that it was a turning point, but I've been disappointed that there hasn't been any meaningful action other than forming committees and assigning budgets,

which is just good old Baptist red tape," Miller said. "That's just what you do – you form a committee, and you put some money towards it and no change actually happens."

The election last year of Greear, the 45-year-old pastor of The Summit Church in Durham, N.C., was seen as a signal that the SBC was moving away from more rigid conservative leaders such as Patterson. Greear has launched a group that is studying sexual abuse at the request of Burleson and others.

Unlike in 2008, Burleson last year directed his request for a sex offender registry to the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, which does moral advocacy on behalf of the Southern Baptist Convention. For the first time, the study of his proposal has been funded.

But Greear said in an email that he is limited by local church autonomy.

"Change has to begin at the ground level with churches and organizations," he wrote. "Our churches must start standing together with a commitment to take this issue much more seriously than ever before."

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Coming Tuesday: Predators return to the pulpit.

How we did this story

In 2007, victims of sexual abuse by Southern Baptist pastors requested creation of a registry containing the names of current and former leaders of Southern Baptist churches who had been convicted of sex crimes or who had been credibly accused. That didn't happen. The last time any such list was made public was by the Baptist General Convention of Texas. It contained the names of eight sex criminals.

In 2018, as advocates again pressed SBC officials for such a registry, Houston Chronicle reporters began to search news archives, websites and databases nationwide to compile an archive of allegations of sexual abuse, sexual assault and other serious

misconduct involving Southern Baptist pastors and other church officials. We found complaints made against hundreds of pastors, church officials and volunteers at Southern Baptist churches nationwide.

We focused our search on the 10 years preceding the victims' first call for a registry and on the 10-plus years since. And we concentrated on individuals who had a documented connection to a church listed in an SBC directory published by a state or national association.

We verified details in hundreds of accounts of abuse by examining federal and state court databases, prison records and official documents from more than 20 states and by searching sex offender registries nationwide. In Texas, we visited more than a dozen county courthouses. We interviewed district attorneys and police in more than 40 Texas counties. We filed

dozens of public records requests in Texas and nationwide.

Ultimately, we compiled information on 380 credibly accused officials in Southern Baptist churches, including pastors, deacons, Sunday school teachers and volunteers.

We verified that about 220 had been convicted of sex crimes or received deferred adjudication in plea deals and sent letters to all of them soliciting their responses to summaries we compiled. We received written responses from more than 30 and interviewed three in Texas prisons. Of the 220, more than 90 remain in prison and another 100 are still registered sex offenders.

Find our database at houstonchronicle.com/abuseoffaith