

FAQ - Concerning Allegations Against Sovereign Grace Churches

In recent months, questions have been raised about past accusations made against Sovereign Grace Churches (SGC) concerning child sexual abuse. The accusations stem from a civil lawsuit that was dismissed in 2013. We have investigated these allegations and want the facts to be known.

Let us say at the outset that we categorically deny the accusations of covering up abuse and protecting abusers made against our pastors. Further, we reject the characterization of the history of SGC as being involved in or indifferent to the evil of sexual abuse and its cover up. Our own years-long efforts, like the multiple investigations of law enforcement, have yielded no credible evidence of any instance of abuse by any SGC pastor. *We have not found a single instance of a Sovereign Grace pastor or staff member ever being charged with—much less convicted of—sexual abuse or covering up abuse in our 35+ year history.*

Like all sincere Christians and churches, *we take any sexual abuse allegation with the utmost seriousness.* Sexual abuse is a crime. It is a grievous sin that does terrible harm to its survivors and their families. SGC has spoken to this as a denomination in our *Statement on Child Sexual Abuse* document, stressing our ongoing commitment to report abuse to the proper authorities, to protect children from predation, and to care for survivors of abuse. Over the past ten years in particular, this commitment has found numerous concrete expressions among the churches of SGC (which we discuss in detail below in Question 10).

Despite these efforts, we understand that some have questions about past allegations against SGC—some of the most scandalous of which have been made publicly without providing credible evidence or based upon any criminal findings by authorities. We provide this FAQ to summarize these events, and we hope this information will answer the most common questions that people have asked us concerning these matters. (We have also addressed the question of a third-party investigation in our *Thoughts on the Call for an “Independent Investigation” of Sovereign Grace Churches* document.)

1. A civil lawsuit against Sovereign Grace Churches was filed in 2012. What was that lawsuit about?

- A civil lawsuit was filed on October 17, 2012 (and further amended on January 11 and May 14, 2013) accusing SGC, two of its churches, and 10 of the pastors of those churches of a criminal conspiracy to cover up sexual abuse.
- The underlying claims of abuse in the civil lawsuit dated as far back as the 1980s and were confined to two churches. There were 70 Sovereign Grace churches in 2012. No other Sovereign Grace churches were named in the civil lawsuit.
- The civil lawsuit was dismissed on May 22, 2013 based on statute of limitations grounds for nine of the plaintiffs.

- The statute of limitations had not expired for the other two plaintiffs, who were given the opportunity to refile but did not.
- This was a civil lawsuit, not a criminal trial of any abuser.
- This was not a criminal trial charging pastors with abuse or covering up abuse.
- This was a civil lawsuit seeking financial damages relating to an alleged criminal conspiracy to cover up abuse in two churches.
- Notwithstanding the grounds on which the suit was dismissed, the accusations of conspiracy have never been—before or since the lawsuit—supported by any judicial or investigative findings by law enforcement or any other party.
- Despite any lack of findings in the 2012 civil lawsuit or related investigations, the prevalence of abuse in today’s broader culture calls for heightened vigilance, and SGC pastors are committed, by both conviction and our polity, to report any and all instances of abuse to authorities.
- If anyone is aware of abuse in any SGC church, we urge them to report it to authorities.
- Question 3 below discusses the lawsuit in greater detail.

2. Have SGC pastors been involved in abuse?

No.

To the very best of our knowledge, not a single pastor or staff member in Sovereign Grace has ever been guilty of sexual abuse or covering up sexual abuse. We are certain that no Sovereign Grace pastor or staff member has ever been charged with, much less convicted of, sexual abuse or covering up sexual abuse, in our entire history.

- In the civil lawsuit mentioned above, two pastors were included in the allegations of abuse.
- These allegations had never been reported previously, and we are not aware of anyone who knew of these allegations prior to the civil lawsuit.
- These pastors immediately and publicly denied these accusations without qualification or reservation.
- These accusations were investigated by the police.
- None of these claims have ever been substantiated.
- No criminal charges have been filed.
- Put simply, we have no reason to believe, based on the biblical and legal standards of evidence, that these accusations are true.
- If anyone is aware of abuse in any SGC church, we urge them to report it to authorities.

3. Has Sovereign Grace conspired to cover up sexual abuse as claimed in the civil lawsuit?

No.

Some of the details from the civil lawsuit are relevant here:

- The civil lawsuit was brought by 11 plaintiffs suing two churches, 10 pastors from those churches, and Sovereign Grace Ministries.

1. Of these 11 plaintiffs, the claims of five involved cases of abuse *that had been reported and addressed by authorities* years earlier.

- No pastor or staff member was accused of abuse relating to these five claims.

- The abuse was reported to authorities.

- Despite accusations to the contrary, there was no effort by the pastors to prevent reporting or to cover up abuse.

2. Another five of the plaintiffs made allegations of abuse that were purported to have occurred years earlier. SGC first became aware of these allegations when the civil lawsuit was amended in 2013. As grievous as it is to read these allegations, we have found no evidence to substantiate these claims, and we strongly believe them to be false based on any objective or good-faith standard of evidence. Further, no criminal charges have been filed pertaining to any of these allegations.

- The most heinous of these allegations involved an event that, if true, would have involved a large group of perpetrators, between 15-20 victims, and many witnesses in a concerted instance of child sexual abuse in a single location. The allegation of this event was made by a single plaintiff.

- This plaintiff's claim of abuse from the 1980s was first reported to police in February of 2013 and then added to the civil lawsuit in May of 2013 to further support the claim of a conspiracy.

- This was investigated by law enforcement and the church involved.

- No charges have ever been filed.

- Despite the dozens of people who would have been involved in such an alleged event, we are not aware of a single corroborating witness to this event, nor has any such witness come forward.

- If there were any witnesses, or if there was any credible evidence at all, we would obviously want to know that and would report it immediately.

c. The final plaintiff claimed abuse by Nathaniel Morales, now a convicted pedophile, who had been arrested by police prior to the civil suit in July of 2011, based on reports by other victims sometime after 2007. We will explain more about his case below in Question 4.

- No pastor violated any law or requirement regarding the reporting of abuse pertaining to the claims in the civil lawsuit.
- The charge of conspiracy was a legal tactic used by the attorney for the plaintiffs in the civil lawsuit, and no credible evidence for this accusation has been found by law enforcement, any church investigation, or any other party.
- The very thought of conspiring to cover up criminal activity is utterly abhorrent to us, and had we ever become aware of any effort to hide abuse or protect an abuser, we would have reported it to authorities immediately.

4. What about Nathaniel Morales?

Nathaniel Morales was a former member of Covenant Life Church around 30 years ago. He volunteered with the youth group, but was never employed by the church in any capacity. He is also a convicted pedophile who abused victims while a member of Covenant Life Church around that time frame. Details of his case are grievous to recount, but they are important to understand.

- Morales was convicted in May 2014 of molesting three teenage boys in the late 1980s and early 1990s.
- Morales was not, and never has been, a pastor or staff member of a Sovereign Grace church. He gained access to victims as a volunteer in the youth ministry and as a teacher in a local private school unaffiliated with Covenant Life Church.
- According to court testimony, in the spring of 1992 a father of one of the victims (who was by then an adult) informed a pastor about Morales. The pastor and the father confronted Morales. Morales denied the charge, and then left the church and the area (he was never a part of another SGC church after leaving Covenant Life Church). Neither the adult victim nor his father wanted Morales to be reported.
- The pastor was not required by Maryland law to report this incident.
- Mark Mitchell, as a pastor of Covenant Life Church, publicly reported the following on March 31, 2016: *“There were only two instances [i.e., victims of abuse by Morales] that specific pastors were aware of. One family member went to one pastor and in that context they interacted with Nate Morales and the pastor followed up with the family member to say ‘Would you like to take this further?’ In other words, would you like to go to the police? The family member said no, he did not. The other instance was one where a pastor did not have first-hand knowledge of the information of the details—it was second or third hand . . . where the victim didn’t discuss the details of what took place until many, many years later.”*
- Although we believe the care of these pastors was well-intended (and again, Maryland state laws on reporting did not require them to report these incidents), and we

understand how different our culture's understanding of child predators and sexual abuse is now versus what it was 30 years ago, it is clear in hindsight that not immediately reporting the claims to law enforcement was a grave error in judgment. As we write today, we believe the abuse should have been reported regardless of the circumstances, the applicable law and reporting requirements, or the adult victim's (understandable) wishes.

- These circumstances do not minimize the deep regret we feel that Morales was able to be a member in one of our churches undetected. We grieve over, and are genuinely sorry for, the harm that was inflicted on victims in his church and others he may have assaulted.

5. What role did C.J. Mahaney play in the events related to Morales?

- Although C.J. was the senior pastor of Covenant Life Church, he has stated that he has no recollection of hearing of Morales's crimes in the early 1990s.
- C.J. has also stated that, if he had received that report at the time, he likely would have deferred to the desires of the adult victim and his parents, in the same way the pastors involved apparently did.
- No pastor involved violated any law or reporting requirement in the way they handled the Morales situation. Nonetheless, C.J. has also repeatedly stressed that he would never take that same approach today.
- Grant Layman, who was a pastor at Covenant Life Church and testified in the Morales trial, is C.J.'s brother-in-law. Despite assumptions by some that their relationship meant CJ must have had more knowledge about the Morales situation, C.J. stands by his statements with respect to Morales.
- C.J. has never been accused of abuse and he has emphatically denied from the beginning that he ever conspired to cover up abuse by Morales.
- In all of our investigation of these events, C.J. has been eager to participate and forthcoming in his statements. He has given us access to all of his emails, files, and records. The credible testimony of those who have known and labored with him for years testify to his truthfulness. The fruit from his life and ministry bear witness to his integrity and his love for Christ, his family, and those he pastors.
- In sum, by any biblical or secular standard of justice, the accusation that C.J. conspired to cover up abuse, or is guilty of perpetuating abuse, is both false and unjust.

6. Did a Sovereign Grace church become aware of Morales more recently and fail to report him to authorities?

This involves a local church situation that occurred in 2007 which SGC only learned about sometime after the civil suit was filed in 2012. Nonetheless, it is important to address here given its gravity and the speculation that has arisen about SGC's role in this situation.

- According to court testimony, in 2007 a father of one of Morales's victims informed a pastor in Covenant Life Church that Morales was a pastor in Nevada (not in an SGC church).
- According to court testimony, a pastor of Covenant Life Church confronted Morales via phone, who acknowledged abuse but couldn't remember any details. Morales was not reported to authorities at that time. (Morales was eventually reported and is now serving a prison sentence for his crimes).
- We know that Covenant Life Church, which left Sovereign Grace in December of 2012, addressed this matter in the independent investigation they commissioned and reported the findings to its membership in 2014.
- We have requested access to that report on multiple occasions but have not been granted it, so our knowledge of this situation is limited.
- Although Covenant Life Church was affiliated with Sovereign Grace in 2007, to our knowledge there is no evidence that the pastors of Covenant Life consulted, or even informed, any SGC leader, including C.J. Mahaney, about this situation.
- C.J. left the pastoral team of Covenant Life Church in 2004 when he transitioned to serve with SGC full-time. He was therefore not part of the pastoral team and has stated that he has no recollection of being consulted about this situation or knowing anything about it at all.
- To our knowledge, there is no evidence connecting C.J. to this situation in any way.

7. Was the lawsuit against Sovereign Grace dismissed because of a legal technicality?

This accusation has been made but is very misleading. Again, details of the lawsuit are important.

- The civil lawsuit was dismissed on May 22, 2013 based on statute of limitations grounds for nine of the plaintiffs.
- Statutes of limitations had not expired for the other two plaintiffs, who could have refiled the civil lawsuit but did not do so.
- It is important to note that the civil statute of limitations did not protect perpetrators of abuse or conspiracy to cover-up abuse from criminal charges. *No abuser or conspirator escaped justice because of the dismissal of the lawsuit.* If law enforcement had found there to be substance to the accusations of abuse or conspiracy against SGC pastors, those individuals would have been subject to criminal prosecution irrespective of the civil lawsuit.
- Since the filing of this lawsuit in October of 2012, no state or local law enforcement entity has filed criminal charges against SGC, SGC pastors, or anyone named in the lawsuit, despite the enormous publicity this case has generated over the past six years.

8. Did Sovereign Grace have a policy of not reporting abuse?

Absolutely not.

- During the time period covered in the lawsuit, SGC as an organization did not have a policy with respect to these issues. Moreover, our churches (like Southern Baptist churches and those in many other denominations), are independently constituted, with their own policies and procedures.
- *SGC has never had a policy of “not reporting.”* Claims to the contrary are false.
- Despite the lack of a formal denominational policy at the time, we are aware that in our churches multiple instances of abuse were reported to authorities from the 1980s to the present, including situations referenced in the civil lawsuit. This is not to say that our pastors handled every situation as they would today (chiefly, the Morales situation noted above). It is to say that all SGC pastors (along with the rest of society) understand these matters much better now than they did 30 years ago. All of these instances point to a common awareness of the need for appropriate involvement of authorities that SGC embraces without reservation or qualification.
- Media reports and on-line posts have pointed to a few isolated quotes of pastors about dealing with abuse situations and inferred a specific policy for SGC as a whole to not report abuse. This inference is incorrect. We cannot speak to the intentions of such quotes, their various contexts, and all they may be referencing, but we can say:
 - One cannot specify a “denominational policy” through isolated quotes, *especially when pastors on that same pastoral team testify to a different practice;*
 - As noted above, we are aware of multiple instances of abuse being reported from the 1980s to the present (including within the church of the pastors quoted);
 - Even if this were not so, alleged practices used by one pastoral team in no way reflect upon SGC as a whole or any individual church (e.g., see Question 6 above);
 - We’ve spoken to dozens of SGC pastors in various churches who testify to an entirely different approach than what has been insinuated from those quotes;
 - Finally, not only did SGC not have a stated policy on these issues, it never would have mandated such a policy on affiliated churches, which are independently constituted.
- We regret that SGC—like many organizations and churches in past decades, including most denominations and seminaries—lacked formal guidelines addressing the particular

evil of abuse.

- Our denomination's bylaws now require all pastors to report suspicions of abuse to authorities whether required by their state laws or not.

9. Why doesn't Sovereign Grace conduct an independent investigation of these events?

- Some have publicly called SGC to undergo its own "independent third-party investigation" to determine if sexual abuse has been covered up and abusers protected in our churches. We have addressed our reasons for declining to recommend such an investigation in *Thoughts on the Call for an "Independent Investigation" of Sovereign Grace Churches* document.

10. What steps has Sovereign Grace taken to help its churches protect children, report abuse, and care for abuse survivors?

We have worked diligently, especially over the past ten years, to take numerous concrete steps to help our churches give attention to these critical areas:

- Our denomination began giving additional specific attention to this matter in 2009 in a meeting with all SGC pastors. Drawing from examples of inadequate pastoral care for survivors of abuse in SGC, C.J. Mahaney addressed all of our pastors on the intensive needs that survivors face and the compassionate pastoral care these needs require. He also reminded our pastors of the imperative of understanding and abiding by all laws regarding the reporting of abuse to proper authorities.
- We have enlisted experts in this field to train and support our pastors and staff in abuse awareness. Additionally, since 2014 SGC has purchased annually a comprehensive safety system designed by a leading organization dedicated to the prevention of sexual abuse, and we provide that system to all SGC churches at no cost. This system provides awareness training, a skillful screening process for staff and volunteers, proven policies and procedures, access to background checks, and monitoring/oversight processes.
- SGC's polity provides multiple layers of accountability for pastors as well as protections for those sinned against, including survivors of abuse, to ensure they have clear and objective ways in which to receive justice and care.
- Our denomination's bylaws require all pastors to report suspicions of abuse to authorities whether required by their state laws or not.
- The SGC Leadership Team, with the affirmation of the SGC Executive Committee, formed a Sexual Abuse Working Group that is currently reviewing our polity, exploring best practices in the area of addressing sexual abuse, and developing new initiatives for implementation in our churches. The overall goal of this effort is two-fold: (1) we want to ensure survivors have clear and safe avenues to report abuse and receive care, and

(2) we want to assist our pastors both in understanding the dynamics of abuse and providing the best care possible in such cases.

We have sought to do what we believe every church desires to do: provide a safe environment for all of our members, especially children, and care for the people in our churches wisely, compassionately, and faithfully.

11. Why did the President of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) recently include Sovereign Grace Church of Louisville (SGCL) on a list of churches suspected of “indifference to the crime of sexual abuse”?

- SGCL, like some other churches in SGC, is dually affiliated with both Sovereign Grace and the Southern Baptist Convention. SGCL took this step, with the support of the SGC Leadership Team, in order to partner with the SBC for purposes of mission and training.
- In the wake of recent media reports (January 2019) about child sexual abuse in the SBC, the President of the SBC, J.D. Greear, issued a list of ten churches that he deemed worthy of inquiry due to suspicions of “indifference to the crime of sexual abuse.”
 - According to the President of the SBC, SGCL was included on this list solely on the basis of “concerns” expressed by two members of the SBC’s “Great Commission Council.”
 - SGCL appears to have been included on this list based on nothing more than the fact that C.J. Mahaney and one other pastor named in the dismissed 2012 civil lawsuit are on the pastoral staff of SGCL.
 - SGCL was constituted as a church in 2012, and, unlike other churches on this list, no pastor, staff member or even *individual member* has been credibly accused of, charged with, or convicted of abuse or the cover up of abuse.
 - SGCL was shocked by this inclusion, having received no questions, explanations, or communications whatsoever from any SBC official.
- A proposed amendment to the SBC’s constitution laid out four criteria to determine if a church has knowingly acted wrongfully in regard to child sexual abuse.
 - This amendment was acted on at the SBC Annual Convention in June 2019 including the repurposing of their Credentials Committee “to make inquiries and recommendations for action regarding instances of sexual abuse, racism, or other issues that call church’s relationship with the SBC into question.”
- SGCL agrees with, and is in full compliance with, these four criteria. In particular, no pastor of SGCL has ever “unlawfully concealed from law enforcement information

regarding the sexual abuse of any person,” or has ever “willfully disregarded compliance with mandatory child abuse reporting laws.”

- As early as February 25, 2019, SGCL made numerous attempts to communicate with the SBC’s Executive Committee, its Bylaws Workgroup, and Dr. Greear. No one reached out to SGCL to explain this process, or to ask for more information for resolving this issue until April 4, 2019.
- Upon receiving the April 4, 2019 correspondence from the Bylaws Workgroup, the SGCL elders responded quickly and appealed for greater urgency on behalf of the Workgroup to resolve this matter. Even though the concerns expressed by the two “Great Commission Council” members have been vague, the SGCL elders also provided information contained in this FAQ.
- In early 2019, SGCL communicated their commitment to answer any questions any SBC official or body had for them. They said they were fully prepared to provide factual and ethical reasons—including the information provided in this FAQ—why the church should be removed from the SBC President’s list and to have its good name cleared of the public suspicion created by being placed on this list.
- Since its inception in 2012, SGCL has worked diligently to protect against sexual abuse and ensure the safety of their members. All of the SGCL pastors, staff, and children’s ministry volunteers have undergone background checks and sexual abuse awareness training provided by a recognized authority in the area of sexual abuse training and child protection systems. Furthermore, the SGCL pastors are committed to, and have fully complied with, Kentucky laws requiring the reporting of sexual abuse and suspicions of sexual abuse.
- Updated information: On February 7, 2020, the Sovereign Grace Church of Louisville elders received a letter from the SBC Credentials Committee notifying them that Sovereign Grace Church of Louisville had been removed from inquiry. Here is a portion of what was communicated in the letter: *“Based on the information the committee has gathered about this issue, including a review of the concerns that led to the initial “under inquiry” status, our committee has found no reason to recommend your church be declared not to be in cooperation with the Southern Baptist Convention and find no basis for further inquiry. We therefore decline to take any further action regarding your relationship with the Convention and have removed your church from inquiry at this time.”*

We hope this document will bring clarity to some of the confusion and misrepresentations surrounding accusations made against SGC, our pastors, and our churches. We provide this realizing that it is impossible to deal fully with complex situations many years after the fact, and that not every question will be answered or every concern alleviated. It is, however, a truthful account. It is offered in good faith with the genuine hope that it will be considered in good faith.

While we believe it is important to defend ourselves against false accusations and mischaracterizations, we must always do so with a concern for those who have suffered from

abuse and its grievous effects. Despite our best intentions, we realize that the mere fact that we are defending ourselves will strike some as uncaring and insensitive. We are not questioning for a moment the profound pain that abuse survivors and their families experience. We do not want to add to that pain or alienate those who have suffered deeply because of the sins and crimes of others. The desire of all Sovereign Grace pastors is to care for the hurting and to communicate about these issues in a way that is honest and compassionate.

We would be remiss if we did not thank the members of Sovereign Grace churches. We are humbled to serve alongside such faithful, supportive, and Christ-loving people who pour their lives into their local churches for the glory of God. Some of these members are survivors of abuse themselves, and we greatly respect their perseverance and trust in Christ as they've walked through their pain and grief. We pray this statement will serve you and will honor the Savior we worship together.

Finally, we would ask any who reads this to pray for us as we seek to serve the churches under our care and remain faithful to the cause of the gospel.

The Sovereign Grace Leadership Team