

## Episode 4 - People Who Have Consensual Affairs Don't End Up with PTSD

*We want to make sure that you, the listener, have a trigger warning for this episode, as it does talk about sex abuse. Because of the serious nature of this episode, we have chosen to place the ad from our sponsor at the beginning rather than the middle. That way, once we enter the story, we can stay in it without interruption.*

Right now, in the Southern Baptist Convention's archives, there is a cardboard box labelled "137."<sup>1</sup> In that box, there is a little white folder with a handwritten title: "Sex: Clergy Sexual Abuse." Inside, there is a scanned copy of a 1993 article from *Baptist Press*, covering a lawsuit in Baltimore which accused the SBC and others for negligence in hiring, retention, and supervision of a music minister named James Reed.

James Reed was convicted of child abuse and the molestation of three brothers in his church, North Point Baptist, and was serving an 18-month prison sentence as a result. The plaintiff family, whose names remained anonymous, had been members of North Point for 13 years, and said their sons were the ones Reed abused on multiple occasions both on church property and in his home. They alleged that despite knowing Reed was convicted of a sex offence 20 years prior and that he was accused of abuse at a nearby church, North Point Baptist still hired him and should be held responsible. The suit also named North Point's pastor, Dwight Evans, the Baltimore Baptist Association, the Baptist Convention of Maryland/Delaware, and the SBC.

When James P. Guenther, attorney for the SBC, was asked for comment, he said this: "The SBC has been named a defendant in this case on the erroneous theory that the minister of music was the employee of the SBC or that the SBC had the power to supervise the minister of music. Of course, the SBC has no right in regard to a church's decisions to employ its ministerial staff, to retain those the church has employed, or to supervise or discipline or in any way regulate the church staff."

The only evidence we could find for this case is from one newspaper clipping in the archives. It is true that the SBC could not directly fire James Reed without the participation of North Point Baptist. However, as we've seen in other instances, including the 2023 convention which we'll talk about in a later episode, the SBC *does* have the power to disfellowship churches. And, as we saw with Kathy Hoppe, entities like the Home Mission Board within the SBC also can pull funding when there are reasons for concern.

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<sup>1</sup> Inventory to the Christian Life Commission Resources Files, AR 138-2, Box 138, SBHLA, Nashville, TN.

Guenther's statement underscores a consistent pattern in the SBC's defense strategy for sexual abuse allegations: distancing itself from direct accountability by emphasizing its lack of authority over individual churches.

Otherwise known as "local church autonomy."

This hands-off stance was—how can we put this—*conveniently* inconsistent. As we've seen, the SBC was happy to exert influence when it drafted and passed resolutions which "regulated church staff" by restricting women's roles in affiliate churches. But when it came to "regulating church staff" accused of sexual abuse, the SBC was less inclined to claim authority at all.

For many people, like abuse survivor and advocate Christa Brown, this defense is inexcusable—a calculated abdication of responsibility that prioritizes institutional self-preservation over the safety and dignity of abuse survivors:

*Brown: I began trying to get the Southern Baptist Convention to do something long, long ago. Talked with Southern Baptist leaders, talked with state convention leaders, sent certified letters to 18 Southern Baptist leaders in four different states. Those light letters are in their archives somewhere, right? And not a one of those men did a thing, which in my mind speaks to, you know, this notion that the men are going to be our protectors. No, what they are protecting is their own crony network and their own system of unaccountable power. But it has nothing to do with protecting women. And to the contrary, we are the fall guys on whom all blame is put.*

Christa Brown knows firsthand what it means to be the SBC's fall guy. A trailblazing advocate whose impact is felt within and beyond the Southern Baptist Convention, she was one of the first Baptist abuse survivors to directly address the SBC's Executive Committee in Nashville. For over two decades, she has tirelessly championed reform, inspiring countless others with her unwavering commitment to justice. To many survivors, Christa is a beacon of light, courageously speaking truth to power. To many in the SBC's leadership, however, she is an unrelenting thorn in their side—one that will not go away.<sup>2</sup>

## **[Intro Music Start]**

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<sup>2</sup> Christa Brown, *This Little Light: Beyond a Baptist Preacher Predator and His Gang* (Lake Drive Books, 2024); Christa Brown, *Baptistland: A Memoir of Abuse, Betrayal, and Transformation* (Lake Drive Books, 2024); see also the Guidepost Solutions' Report of the Independent Investigation of the Southern Baptist Convention, <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/22031737-final-guidepost-solutions-independent-investigation-report/>, and the "For Our Daughters" documentary: <https://www.fourdaughtersfilm.com/>.

Created in partnership with the Bible for Normal People, this is **All the Buried Women: A miniseries uncovering women's stories hidden in the Southern Baptist Convention's archives. Hosted by me, Beth Allison Barr. And me, Savannah Locke.**

**[Intro Music End]**

Episode 4: People Who Have Consensual Affairs Don't End Up With PTSD

*Brown: I grew up in Farmer's Branch, Texas, which is a northern suburb of Dallas.*

Here is Christa describing her upbringing at First Baptist Church of Farmer's Branch.

*Brown: And back then, of course, it was kind of a smaller, more independent community. You know, we had three Southern Baptist churches and a Methodist church and a church price. I mean, I could still picture all those churches on their street corners, right? And that was about it. And the church really was my whole life, right? It was everything. That was the circle I was in, the air I breathed.*

Christa was a quintessential Southern Baptist girl. She sang in the church choir, actively participated in her youth group, and achieved the prestigious title of Queen Regent in Service—the highest rank in the Girls' Auxiliary program. This accolade wasn't easily earned. Starting as early as fourth grade, girls achieved higher ranks in the Auxiliary program through scripture memorization, mission projects, and cooking traditional dishes from countries where SBC missionaries served. Girls started with the title of Maiden, moved to Lady-in-Waiting, then Princess, and eventually Queen. Once a Queen, they could work towards Queen in Service, Queen with Scepter, Queen Regent, and *finally* Queen Regent in Service.<sup>3</sup>

For Queen Regent in Service Christa Brown, faith was not an afterthought. It was the reason she existed:

*Brown: I was a girl who wanted always and only to know God's will and do God's will. That was Uh, that was my whole essence of being. So if the pastor says I'm chosen, chosen by God for this purpose, uh, yeah, I believed it.*

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<sup>3</sup> For further explanation of G.A.'s, see Judy Stubblefield Tyler, "Girls Auxiliary," *Legacy*, First Baptist Church of Killeen, <https://fbckilleen.com/magazine/magazineb19/>

As a teenager, Christa spent lots of time with her youth group—and her youth pastor, Tommy Gilmore. He would often drive her and other church kids around town in his '66 Mustang. They played games like flag football and Twister together, and with time, she grew to trust him. When her home life began to unravel, Gilmore was quick to offer a listening ear. He suggested they meet weekly to talk, scheduling their conversations between Christa's piano lessons and choir practice at church. He told her to keep their meetings a secret, though, warning that her parents would probably be upset if they knew she was talking about them.

It was common for him to drive Christa and other students home after youth events, but she began to notice that he made a point of dropping her off last. Gilmore drove her around in the dark and talked about all the big things he was going to do for God. Sometimes he would read the Song of Solomon to her and point out that she, too, had “doves’ eyes” and a neck like “a tower of ivory.”<sup>4</sup> She blushed. He kept driving.

One night, after all the other students were safe at home, Gilmore pulled over on a dark road and asked Christa a question: “Do you know what ‘obsession’ means?”

He explained the word and said that he was obsessed with the idea of kissing her. Gilmore was married and in his late 20s. Christa was on the cusp of 16.

Here's her description of what happened next, taken from her book, *This Little Light*:

“What I remember is how much I wished that I didn't have my Lionette uniform on. My legs were so white they practically glowed in the dark, and my thighs suddenly seemed enormous. I tugged at the short skirt, but it didn't do any good. On top of that, my hair was stringy and sweaty. I was drenched. That's how it is with Texas football. At the start of the season, there's so much sweat flinging around on the field that the grass gets watered on without any rain.

I just kept sitting there, feeling my sweat and looking down at my legs.

Finally, he asked me directly: ‘Will you let me kiss you?’

‘No.’

But I didn't want to hurt his feelings. So I tried to soften it.

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<sup>4</sup> Brown, *This Little Light*: <https://www.amazon.com/This-Little-Light-Preacher-Predator/dp/098184183X>, pp. 20-21.

‘You’re like an uncle to me or maybe a big brother. I just don’t understand.’

‘Silly goose.’

That’s what he sometimes called me.

‘I can see you aren’t ready. Go home and pray about it. We’ll talk again.’<sup>5</sup>

According to Brown, Gilmore continued to ask for a kiss every time they were in the car together. She said no again and again, but eventually he wore her down. She thought if he got one kiss, that would be the end of it. So in the dark of night outside an airport in Addison, Texas, youth pastor Tommy Gilmore kissed teenage Christa Brown. He kissed up and down her neck and licked her face and eyes and mouth. She froze as he whispered in her ear: “It’s all right. Nothing’s happening. There’s nothing happening here.”

Over the next few months, Gilmore would sexually assault Christa more than 30 times, with increasing severity. Once in the car while other youth group kids slept in the back seat. Sometimes in their church. Sometimes at his house.

When Christa was compliant, Gilmore would celebrate her obedience and say how much God loved her. He said God created her to be his helpmeet. He mentioned how many men in the Bible had multiple wives. But if she asked questions, he would point to the Bible for his defense:

*Brown: Nowadays I look back and I think, How could I have been so stupid as to have believed all these things. He said all these terrible twistings of Bible verses. But it wasn't a matter of stupidity. It was a matter of faith. I was a girl of faith. Lean not to thine own understanding. It was not my place to try to understand. My place was to be obedient and submissive and to obey them that have the rule over you, for they watch over your souls, and if you raise like me, believing in a very literal hellfire as an impossibility, then that admonition, for they watch over yoßur souls, obey or else, that way is pretty heavy if you're thinking about burning forever for all eternity in a literal hellfire. So this stuff weighed very, very heavily. I became compliant. I mean, even the story of Mary was weaponized against me because, I mean, I did as a kid. I tried to understand, right? So I was bulky sometimes as teenagers or want to be, and I certainly was. But he said, you know, "Christa, where would we all be if Mary hadn't trusted in what God wanted of her life, even when she could not understand?" You know, and in my kind of adolescent*

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<sup>5</sup> Brown, *This Little Light*: <https://www.amazon.com/This-Little-Light-Predator/dp/098184183X>, pp. 20-21.

*faith, addled brain, that made a certain sense. I wanted to be like Mary. And so I did become compliant with this and it went on and on and on for months.*

Eventually, Christa couldn't stay silent anymore. She confided in her piano teacher, who was also the music minister at her church, about her relationship with Tommy Gilmore:

*Brown: So I told him, I told him what had been happening. He knew. People in the church knew from way back. They always knew. There were always people who knew they never, no one ever doubted me because they knew they simply didn't care. But one of the things the music manager told me at the time, which now in hindsight, I find kind of fascinating, he said, well, his wife is pregnant. So their marriage is probably suffering. And that's probably why all this happened. And that was his way of excusing it. And I think, well, it's also a way Not that I'm any fan of that pastor's wife, but it is also a way of putting some blame onto her as though she were somehow not meeting her marital obligations.*

This music minister asked Christa if she had told anyone else about their "affair." Besides one friend, she hadn't told anyone. He told her to keep it that way, not to tell anyone else and instead leave it in God's hands.

Not long after this conversation with the music minister, Tommy Gilmore would be transferred to a different church... but not before he and his wife got an apology:

*Brown: Toward the end, he became much more mean, much more hostile, much more angry. So finally then, after this point, when he was finally going to be moving on to a new church, because I had broken down and told the music minister, I think at that point, because I had totally broken down, they realized they weren't going to be able to control me. So they wanted him to move on. And then it was at that point that I was made to kneel while he stood over me praying to cast Satan from me and then after that was made to apologize to his wife in the very office where many things had happened and there I am at that point 16 years old. She was probably 26 or 27. She was pregnant with her second child. And I, as a kid, just literally blubbered and begged for her to forgive me. I said it was all my fault. Those words came from my own mouth. I believed it when I said it. By that point, I believed it. She was very stony -faced, and all she said was, "I'll pray for you." And that was it. But yeah, I mean, I do see that she was a victim in some ways, too, but I also see that she was an adult woman. And I can't imagine how she could look at me as a girl, and it's very hard for me to muster compassion there.*

After Christa was made to kneel down before her abuser and his wife and apologize for seducing him, and after he prayed to cast Satan out of her, Tommy Gilmore would go on

to pastor at bigger and better churches. He worked at the prestigious First Baptist of Atlanta under Charles Stanely. Then he moved to Florida and worked for a pastor who served as the president of the Florida Baptist Convention.<sup>6</sup>

Christa, on the other hand, was told she harbored Satan and had the Jezebel Spirit. Labeled a seductress, she was held responsible for their “affair.” We reached out two times to Tommy Gilmore for comment about the stories we shared, but did not hear back.

Clergy sexual abuse inflicts unfathomable damage on the lives of its victims. Yet all too often, survivors like Christa are forced to carry the weight of this trauma while their abusers prosper without consequence.

To better understand the severe effects of clergy sexual abuse and the barriers survivors face, we spoke with David Pooler, a leading expert in this field. His research sheds light on the profound challenges survivors like Christa have to face, often without the support or justice they deserve:

*David Pooler: I'm David Pooler and I'm professor of social work in the Diana R. Garland School of Social Work at Baylor University.*

In 2015, David conducted a national survey of adult survivors of clergy sexual abuse. 283 survivors from 42 different states participated in the study. In order to participate, respondents had to be 16 years or older at the time of the abuse and at least 18 at the time of the survey.<sup>7</sup> Before we get into the details of his study, we asked David to define clergy sex abuse:

*Pooler: Clergy sex abuse is literally whenever you have a church leader with influence and power who misuses that influence and power to coerce and manipulate and control*

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<sup>6</sup> See about Tommy Gilmore's career in SBC at StopBaptistPredators: Shining light on Baptist Clergy Abuse, <https://stopbaptistpredators.org/TommyGilmore.html>. See too Christa Brown's open letter to Gilmore: [https://www.bishop-accountability.org/news2019/05\\_06/2019\\_06\\_07\\_blog\\_Christa\\_Pastor.htm](https://www.bishop-accountability.org/news2019/05_06/2019_06_07_blog_Christa_Pastor.htm).

<sup>7</sup> David Kenneth Pooler and Liza Barros-Lane, “A National Study of Adult Women Sexually Abused by Clergy: Insights for Social Workers,” *Social Work* 67, no. 2 (March 14, 2022): 123–33; and a forthcoming article by Sandra Moncrief-Stuart and David K. Pooler, “Adult Clergy Sexual Abuse Survivors, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and Institutional Betrayal Trauma,” cited in Rebecca Hopkins, “Some Churches Call Clergy Sexual Misconduct an ‘Affair’: Survivors Are Fighting to Make It against the Law,” *Christianity Today*, June 10, 2024, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/2024/06/clergy-sex-abuse-consent-law-crime/>

*someone to the point and they blur and break down any boundaries that are present to then get sexual access to them. In the cases that I'm most familiar with, we are talking about overt sexual activity that has happened. And in my study, 95 % of the perpetrators were married men and about 65 % of the victims were married women. There's no question that adult clarity sex abuse is a very gendered phenomenon. It is generally about heterosexual men in power, having enormous amount of control and the ability to coerce and manipulate people under their care.*

What happened to Christa Brown would be considered clergy sexual abuse. Tommy Gillmore misused his power as a youth pastor to manipulate Christa. He preyed on her vulnerable home life and broke down appropriate boundaries in order to gain sexual access to her. He also misused the Bible, prayer, and spiritual language to justify his behavior as good, when it was actually abusive. This caused immeasurable harm—harm that David Pooler's research suggests is equivalent to *or more damaging* than the multifaceted trauma experienced by combat veterans:

*Pooler: There's two different manuscripts I'm working on right now on how much PTSD post-traumatic stress disorder there is actually among survivors and the sample that I have it's at 39%. And I've done some comparisons to there's a large study of sexual assault survivors that was done global studied back in 2017 that's at about 20%. I looked specifically at those folks deployed in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, the kind of two most recent, and that sits at about 30 % for that group. So this particular subset, I have not yet found another subset of people with PTSD levels that high.*

To reiterate, David's research reveals that clergy sexual abuse survivors experience PTSD at rates higher than those of sexual assault survivors and even individuals who were deployed during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. There are several potential reasons for this, but one theory David has, informed by the work of Dr. Jennifer Freyd, is that institutional betrayal makes clergy sexual abuse traumatic at higher rates.

Institutional betrayal is when institutions harm those who are dependent on them or fail to respond supportively to wrongdoings within the institution. In David's research, only 7% of survivors said their church had a policy in place to help support them. Only 33% said when they reported the abuse they were believed. Only 9% said the church was helpful when they reported the abuse. And only 15% said their church or denomination thoroughly investigated the report.

Take a moment to sit with those numbers. Only 9% of these survivors said that their churches were helpful when they reported clergy sexual abuse. Meaning, 91% of



survivors who reported being sexually abused were *not* supported by their churches. Only one third of survivors said they were believed. Meaning, 66% were *not* believed.

These statistics align with Christa's story. When she confided in the music minister, it should have marked the end of Tommy Gilmore's alleged abuse. He should have been reported, and Christa should have been supported. Instead, she was silenced, told to keep the abuse a secret, and even forced to apologize to her alleged abuser—while the institution shielded him from accountability as he continued to be employed at different SBC churches.

This is the institutional betrayal that compounds the traumatic effects of clergy sexual abuse:

*Pooler: When someone has PTSD, and specifically when we're looking at PTSD in this population, it is a betrayal trauma. And what we mean by that is that it's human relationship trauma. Someone that we were close to, depended upon, had high regard for, injured us on the deepest level. And so what happens then is there's a lot of avoidance, avoidance of thinking about it, avoidance of the place, that's a symptom of PTSD. Often PTSD survivors also dissociate. They have a hard time, and by dissociation, really a simple term for that is you just can't be fully present in their body. It feels too yucky. So PTSD happens really when something is too much, too soon, you know, overwhelming, right? It overwhelmed my ability to make sense of it. Now let me add something in. One of the reasons why I do think there's PTSD among this group of people is because in my study, this kind of abuse isn't just a one-time thing, it lasted on average four years. So once an abusive pastor is able to be sexual with someone under their care, they maintain access as long as they can. Really what we're looking at, and some of the clinicians listening to this might get it, what we're really actually talking about is complex PTSD, which is a different phenomenon, which has more problems with emotional regulations and maintaining relationship in the aftermath. And I would absolutely say from the folks that I've talked with and had conversation with, most of them have complex PTSD. So it's an injury that disrupts a person's sense of safety, okayness, even their identity. So what we're really saying is when you are abused, sexually assaulted or abused by a pastor, how you make sense of life is shattered. And that's why I think we're looking at 39%. Now, every single survivor reported PTSD symptoms, but the sort of the cluster and the magnitude of them hit the screening level for PTSD at 39%. So almost half of them.*

As David highlighted, dissociation and avoidance are just a few of the symptoms of PTSD. Others include anxiety, flashbacks, recurring intrusive memories and dreams,

social isolation, anger, fear, shame, and hypervigilance. PTSD is also frequently linked to depression and suicide.

You might be asking yourself: why are we featuring this research? Doesn't everyone in the SBC agree that sexual abuse is wrong? Doesn't everyone think it's real and causes severe damage?

In theory, yes.

But in practice, the SBC has failed to address clergy sexual abuse with the seriousness it demands. No meaningful reforms have been made to protect women, children, and men from sexual abuse in their churches. And because the SBC operates as a self-regulated body, there's no external accountability forcing change.

This lack of regulation is, in David's opinion, a major problem:

*Pooler: The only stopgap measure we have right now is to criminalize this behavior. And there are 13 states plus the District of Columbia, in Texas actually is included in the list, where it is actually a crime to be sexual with someone in your care, if you're a pastor. It is a crime, just like it would be for a social worker. So that's the other interesting thing. Along with regulation, there's also a law. So absence, any regulation in any religious institution, all we have are laws. And that's where we need to go. Now, let me just say this, we have separation of church and state, which means that generally the state doesn't wanna touch the church with a 10-foot pole. And so I don't see the state ever regulating the church, at least not in my lifetime. But then where's the But where do churches step up and do the right thing? I don't know. I mean, so it's hard for people to really imagine this because we think of churches as ordered and sort of controlled and managed well, but it's the, if you will, it's the wild west. Let me just put this in another context. I'm a licensed clinical social worker. And sexual contact between me and a client is prohibited precisely because that would be so difficult for a client to manage. Like, I'm going to have a sexual relationship with this person who has power and influence. Like, there's no way to ensure that that wasn't coerced. That's why sexual behavior is prohibited. And if that were to be reported I have a licensing board here in Texas and there are some other professional organizations that would regulate me and would either watch me or remove my license or both for a time I mean I would be sanctioned I would not just go on practicing as usual and return to my position as usual and if I were to apply for licensure in other state they're gonna they're gonna get my record of licensure, for example, where I was practicing, and if there's a sanction against my license or, you know, someone reported a misconduct, right? I just simply say that. All helping professions get that with the exception of ministry.*

We've seen this pattern over and over again, even in this short series. It's Paige Patterson's mentee, Darrell Gilyard, going to jail for child molestation just to be put back in the pulpit for "adult only" services when he got out. It's Conservative Resurgence mastermind Paul Pressler allegedly abusing young boys and men for decades without being held accountable for his actions. It's Paige Patterson allegedly covering up Paul's crimes. It's Tommy Gilmore getting a tearful apology from teenage Christa Brown, on her knees, for allegedly seducing him into an "affair" in the very office where he abused her. It's the relentless pattern of these men being welcomed back into the fold, no matter their actions, while their victims are cast out, labeled as Jezebels and temptresses—often wrongly portrayed as equal participants in so-called "affairs."

Speaking of, it's important to note how the SBC and other denominations have used "affair" language to dismiss clergy sexual abuse as a mutual rendezvous—especially when the victims are adults. This faulty framing implies that adult women and men cannot possibly be abused by an adult pastor- and that when two adults are involved, it is just an affair. We are not implying that mutual affairs never happen, just that "affair" language often distorts the reality of the power dynamics involved in clergy sexual abuse.

David Pooler had a short but profound insight on this we'd like to share:

*Pooler: This just isn't a consensual affair. People who have consensual affairs don't end up with PTSD. So we're talking deep and profound abiding injuries that absolutely disrupt people's functioning.*

The distinction he makes here is vital: people who have consensual affairs do not experience the kind of trauma that leads to PTSD. This underscores the critical difference between consensual relationships and clergy sex abuse. The misuse of "affair" language in cases of abuse is not just dismissive—it's a harmful distortion that protects abusers and retraumatizes victims.

It's tactics like this which allow the SBC to scapegoat victims and ignore the abuse happening in their churches.

Christa Brown knows this all too well. As a teenager, she was blamed for causing an "affair" with Tommy Gilmore. Clergy sex abuse wasn't in their vocabulary. But when her own daughter reached the same age she had been during the abuse, Christa saw with heartbreaking clarity just how young and vulnerable she truly was—and how her experience was not an affair, but abuse.

That realization compelled her to act.

*Brown: I saw how much kids were at risk with no one doing anything. And in the beginning, of course, I really, really believed that well, If only I explain all this to them, if only I tell them this, if only I show them this, these are good people, they will surely, they're older, they're wiser now, they've raised children of their own, they'll surely want to do something. And of course I was dreadfully, dreadfully wrong about that. The church's first response was to threaten to sue me. Just a pre-emptive strike, all of them threatened to seek legal recourse against me, which sort of set me back on my heels for a while. But things went downhill from there. You know, you think these things aren't going to affect you, but they do. And I was pretty much overwhelmed, I would say, with the level of hate and vitriol that was sent my way. Much of it from some of the highest leaders of the something Baptist convention. So when you have high leaders who will say these things publicly, you know, call me an evil doer, publicly use the Baptist press to say I was making false accusations, they've got their own press arm, right? I'm kind of just this little person, you know, publicly call me a person of no integrity, I went in person to speak with them in person and that whole attitude manifested in the physical there with me speaking to a subcommittee of the executive committee because there I am before them trying to get them to do something, telling them about the childhood rapes that I experienced by a pastor. By that time, I had heard from many, many, many other Southern Baptist abuse survivors. I knew that this was widespread. I'm talking about something terribly painful. One man literally gets up and turns around and sits backwards in his chair. So he has not, so he put his back to me. Another man in the room just loudly, chortled out loud as I'm talking. And of course, these things are bad enough, but I think what really struck me at the time was that no one else in that room. These are all men who are some of the highest leaders in the largest non-Catholic faith group in the country. Not a one of them spoke up. Not a one. Not a one said, whoa, you know, we aren't going to behave this way, whoa, you know, we're going to maintain civility here. Not a one, not a one.*

When Christa met face to face with leaders in the SBC, she hoped they would listen to her story and make positive changes to protect children, women, and men in their denomination. Instead, they ignored her, chastised her, and hid behind local church autonomy, using it as an excuse for why they couldn't regulate or intervene.<sup>8</sup>

When Christa says she was berated by members of the SBC for speaking out, she is not exaggerating. For example, Augie Boto, who was general counsel and Vice President of the Executive Committee, said the focus on sexual abuse in the SBC was a "satanic

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<sup>8</sup> Again, see the Guidepost Solutions report:

<https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/22031737-final-guidepost-solutions-independent-investigation-report/>.

scheme.” He named Christa Brown as one of the architects of this scheme, saying, “This whole thing should be seen for what it is. It is a satanic scheme to completely distract us from evangelism. It is not the gospel. It is not even part of the gospel. It is a misdirection play.” He went on to say that Christa and other advocates “have succumbed to an availability heuristic because of their victimizations.”<sup>9</sup> Meaning, she was being self-serving. Others in the Executive Committee said Christa and some other survivors are “critics that lack integrity and will not be satisfied no matter what Southern Baptists do.”<sup>10</sup> She has been on the receiving end of thousands of emails and social media posts questioning her motivations and character, when, at least from our view, she is advocating for very commonsense changes.

One reform she advocated for was a database which would list all credibly accused or convicted pastors and leaders within the SBC. This would allow for a Southern Baptist Church in Florida, for example, to know if a potential youth pastor from Texas had been credibly accused or convicted of a sexual crime. But the SBC refused to do this because, get ready for it, it would infringe upon local church autonomy. But Christa said this would allow autonomous churches to make better informed decisions. If a church knew a potential youth pastor was a convicted sex offender, they would have the opportunity to not hire him. Because the SBC wouldn’t do it, Christa started her own public database for churches to reference, complete with links to articles outlining the abuses each leader allegedly committed.<sup>11</sup>

At least now, she thought, churches would have access to this important information and make better choices to protect their congregations.

As far as she knew, nobody else was doing this work. Certainly not the SBC- they had told her it was simply not possible.

But years later, she would learn the truth. The SBC *had* been building a database all along—a list of over 700 names, spanning 205 pages, documenting credibly accused or convicted abusers who were pastors or church personnel. But unlike Christa’s database, the SBC kept their list private. It was so private that most people on staff had no idea it existed.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup><https://www.baptistpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/FINAL-Guidepost-Solutions-Independent-Investigation-Report-.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Bob Allen “Look Back: SNAP Seeks ‘Transparent’ Study of Clergy Sex Abuse,” <https://goodfaithmedia.org/look-back-snap-seeks-transparent-study-of-clergy-sex-abuse/>

<sup>11</sup> [http://stopbaptistpredators.org/scandals/sbc\\_ministers.html](http://stopbaptistpredators.org/scandals/sbc_ministers.html)

<sup>12</sup> The website, StopBaptistPredators.org lists publicly-reported news accounts involving Southern Baptist clergy, [https://stopbaptistpredators.org/scandals/sbc\\_ministers.html](https://stopbaptistpredators.org/scandals/sbc_ministers.html).

The only reason it was brought to light was because they *had* to turn it over to Guidepost Solutions, an independent firm the SBC hired to investigate the Executive Committee's handling of sexual abuse from 2000 to 2021. The Executive Committee is just one subset of the SBC, made up of about 20 staff members and an 86-member board.<sup>13</sup> They decided to hire Guidepost in direct response to the public's growing scrutiny of the SBC's sexual abuse problem—scrutiny that gained momentum during the Me Too movement and, more specifically, the Church Too movement. In 2019, the dam broke when reporters Lise Olsen, John Tedesco, and Robert Downen – yes, Robert Downen who we interviewed in Episode 2– broke a bombshell story through the *Houston Chronicle* with a database they'd be working on for six months listing key church officials and volunteers convicted of sex abuse crimes in the SBC. In their research, they found 380 Southern Baptist church leaders and volunteers who faced allegations of sexual misconduct, leaving behind more than 700 victims.<sup>14</sup> This news story went viral and suddenly, all eyes were on the SBC. They had to do something.

For the next seven months, Guidepost Solutions would investigate the SBC's Executive Committee and draft a 288-page report about their handling of sexual abuse. Christa Brown has read every word. During our interview, she reached for her copy, pulling it from a bookshelf behind her. It was well-worn, brimming with dozens of color-coded tabs, highlighted passages, and handwritten notes. So we asked her, "What did you think of the report? What was your impression?" She was quick to jump in:

*Brown: It's a scathing report, which basically shows that for decades, it confirmed and validated everything I had been saying for years, that for decades their priority, singular priority, was protecting the institution against potential liability risks, even if that meant leaving reported clergy child molesters in the pulpit. The priority was protecting the institution and it documents numerous instances of how horribly they treated survivors who made efforts to report their perpetrators. My name appears some 70 times in this document, precisely because they did treat me so terribly. This was 2022 when the report came out. It got massive media, both nationally and internationally. I talked with reporters all over the planet about the guidepost report. Uh, you know, there was a little*

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<sup>13</sup>Liam Adams, "Justice Department inquiry into abuse within the SBC ends with no charge, *The Tennessean*, March 6, 2024, <https://www.tennessean.com/story/news/religion/2024/03/06/us-department-of-justice-southern-baptist-convention-abuse-inquiry-with-no-charges/72844632007/>

<sup>14</sup>Robert Downen, Lisa Olsen, John Tedesco, "20 years, 700 victims: Southern Baptist Sexual abuse spreads as leaders resist reform," *Houston Chronicle*, February 10, 2019, <https://www.houstonchronicle.com/news/investigations/article/Southern-Baptist-sexual-abuse-spreads-as-leaders-13588038.php>

*wave of hope there. And I think that wave of hope is kind of normal Because people think, how can people know about this terrible thing and not do something? How can a multi-billion dollar institution, the size of a mid-tier Fortune 500 company, they've got the resources they could if they wanted to, how can they not choose to effectively address this when it is put in black and white in front of them? But that is where we're at. That is exactly what happened. They have not addressed it.*

At the end of the Guidepost Report, several recommendations were presented to help the SBC and its Executive Committee better prevent sexual abuse and support survivors. These include implementing comprehensive background checks, prohibiting the use of NDAs in sexual abuse cases, and establishing an independent commission to oversee and enforce reforms. Additional suggestions include creating a permanent entity to serve as a resource for prevention and response efforts, adopting a self-certification program for churches to promote awareness and enhance prevention, establishing an ethical code of conduct, and allocating sufficient funding to ensure these reforms are effectively implemented.

We asked Christa to share her perspective on the SBC's response. What did they do with these recommendations?

*Brown: They put up these study groups, committees, two different task forces by two different names, none of which have accomplished much of anything. There's been little things, you know, tried it out that they tried out for public relations purposes, in my opinion. At one point they made a huge hoopla about we're launching a database. Oh and they talked about people weeping that thought this would never happen and it got a lot of press. But there was not a single name on that database. It was nothing more than a skeleton website that some teenager could have put together. There was no launch and I say this, and yet, if there's anything I have seen over the course of these 20 years that they have gotten better at, it is that they've gotten better at public relations. They really truly have. They can pitch, you know, the notion of progress in the face of backward steps, but they've gotten good at that. So that's the guidepost report. It still sits there. And now we have seen in more recent days, you know, there are some within the Southern Baptist Convention that try to discredit the guidepost report. There are some in high places who are going back now and trying to discredit the work that the Houston Chronicle and San Antonio Express News did with the Abuse of faith series, major, major newspapers, you know, they had, they vetted everything they published through their legal departments, reporters, professional journalists. And now there are those in the Southern Baptist Convention who are saying that all of that was a fraud. And so they aren't moving forward with addressing what they're doing is still trying to squash it all.*

If you search “Guidepost Report” on any social media platform, you’ll encounter a wide range of opinions. As Christa pointed out, it’s true that many within the SBC are working to discredit the report. Some argue that many of the individuals listed in the private database either no longer have ties to the SBC or weren’t affiliated with the denomination at the time of the alleged abuse. Others claim that Guidepost Solutions lacks credibility, citing the firm’s public support for LGBTQ rights as evidence of an ideological bias. Some contend that the issue has been exaggerated altogether, accusing Guidepost and the media of using a handful of abuse allegations to unfairly portray the SBC as having a systemic problem.

We asked almost everyone we interviewed about this: do you think the issue of sexual abuse in the SBC is being exaggerated? Do you think sexual abuse survivors are trying to throw the SBC under the bus for their own clout or gain? We want to end this episode by playing some of their responses, giving the last word to Christa Brown.

Let’s start with David Pooler, whose research is helping us understand the impacts of clergy sexual abuse:

*Pooler: The cost there, in my experience with listening to survivors, I could literally cry right now, is profound, multi-layered injury coming at them from multiple directions. And I even had an item in my survey because I had been anecdotally hearing this in Conversations with Diana Garland, and I and it just basically said the response from the church is worse than the abuse itself and I you know put it on a Likert scale from strongly disagree To all the way up to strongly agree and I'm I wish I knew I remember the exact statistic right now But I want to say about 50 % agreed or strongly agree that that was the case So, we're already seeing that, you know, ten years ago, prior to a decade of awakening around this, people were already saying that the response from the church deeply injured me and was actually worse than what happened. So, you know, social support, belonging, meaning, connection, friendships are all fractured and disrupted When someone makes a decision to report, so yeah, I would absolutely push back against anyone who says a survivor is just making a big deal of this or looking for attention. I've never seen it, not once.*

Here’s journalist Robert Downen’s response, in which he discusses how practically difficult it is to even report sexual abuse in Southern Baptist Churches in the first place:

*Downen: So one, someone would have to come forward, which is extraordinarily rare. We know from research that most people do not come forward about their sexual abuses until they're, after they're 50 years old. Two, these people would have to come*



*forward in a place, often SBC churches are located in small parts of the country where the pastor, you may be accusing of abuse. The sheriff and mayor and the entire political apparatus may be sitting in the very pulpits of that person's shirt. So you are not just accusing some random person in town of abuse. You are accusing someone who is ostensibly has almost as much power and political sway in that community as anybody else. Three, the person to whom this person reported would have to have reported it to police, which again, very rare for police would have had to follow through with the investigation, which is extraordinarily rare. I believe less than I don't have the exact stats, but an infinitesimally small number of cases of sexual abuse reports are actually followed through on by police, let alone end in any kind of conviction. So all of all of the odds just to get to there are extremely long. And then on top of that, the person who, if there was a conviction, some sort of local news agency would have had to find the conviction, been willing to report on it, make the connection between the church and the conviction, and still have a website that was active in 2019 for us to find, which is extraordinarily rare, given that something like two thirds of all rural newspapers over the last 20 years have been closed. So like if you think about all of the steps that a case would have to go through just on the land on our radar and we were still able to find 400 with a team of three that only spent a few months looking, I think I get very frustrated when I hear people talk about trying to compare the SBC numbers based on what we were able to find and compare them to the Catholic church or really anybody who is trying to diminish these findings because once you understand the dynamics of abuse and the dynamics of what got to those numbers, the 400 numbers should be almost paralyzingly terrifying because if we were able to find that many, think about how many aren't out there. And I can tell you that in the wake of our reporting, the number of people that just in the first few weeks reached out to us was proof of that, you know, hundreds, hundreds and hundreds of people coming forward and saying this happened to me and I thought I was alone or I had never told anybody until now and the statute of limitations is gone so nothing will ever happen but I just needed someone to know. I mean, it is a full blown crisis and anybody who is trying to argue otherwise has no idea what they're talking about or does know what they're talking about and has a vested interest in portraying it as so.*

Here's a response from Rosalie Beck, the first female professor of religion at Baylor:

*Beck: It's all about image. It's got nothing to do with truth. And I think that the guidpost, what I've read of it, is damning. Absolutely damning. It affirms the lack of worth that the leadership place on the women in the denomination.*

Here's Meredith Stone, Executive Director for Baptist Women in Ministry:

*Stone: Between the years of 2016, when the Me Too movement started in 2022, when the Guide Post report came out, detailing the horrific actions of Southern Baptist leaders to not only commit sexual misconduct, but cover it up. I think what was happening in those years is that in order for people to take sexual harassment, sexual assault, sexual misconduct seriously, you have to acknowledge the full humanity of women. And as soon as you acknowledge the full humanity of women, that opens up the door that women might think they actually can do things and have leadership and maybe even be able to serve in leadership roles. And so I think what happened in 23 and 24 was backlash to that move where women might be starting to think that they have equal value, and so we have to make sure that women know their place.*

Here's Barry Hankins, Baptist historian, who spoke to the dismissal of sexual abuse in the SBC as a kind of conspiracy theory:

*Hankins: Historians are roundly unimpressed is too weak of a word at such sort of conspiracy theories. I mean it's a form of a conspiracy theory and the best evidence for conspiracy theories is that there's no evidence for them, you know, and historians know that real conspiracies are found and they're written about and they become part of the historical record because you find evidence that people really work inspiring a conspiracy theory is when there's no evidence, you know. So, I, and on that score, I would, I would, I would think even if you were going to try to refute a handful of the 700 documented cases, you know, that would be remarkable if you could refute a handful of them, you know, and the methodology that the Chronicle and San Antonio Express News used is very impressive. I mean, they were using public records. They had documented case after case after case, you know, and it ended up being 700 that they were able to document over a 20-year period. So how you're going to refute all that, you know, with something is just, It's behind the pill. And I don't see any way that it could be refuted by a few people out here saying these were ginned up*

And last, here is Christa Brown:

*Brown: There has never been anything to gain for me individually, personally, in any of this. To the contrary, it's taken an enormous toll. I mean, I can talk about all the hate and the backlash and... But it's one thing to talk about it in the abstract and it is another to go through stretches where every day you're opening up your emails to name -calling and threats. This stuff does take a toll, but the idea that this is all overblown or that anybody gets anything out of this most survivors just want to try desperately to get on with their lives and yet this this thing hovers this is not a matter of hating the church or wanting to harm the church. But, for me, this has always been about people. How can we help people, ordinary, individual people? And if the church is continuing to harm people,*

*which it is, then yeah, that's a church I think needs to be called to account, and I'm using church in the broader sense there. I just wish people could, I think people want to believe that these are just isolated cases, but it is not. It is, these are not, you know, just a few bad apples. This is a whole huge barrel that enables and facilitates the rot, And this kind of widespread abuse and cover -ups, I mean, this does not happen without the active complicity of many thousands of others.*

### **[Music Transition]**

In our final episode, we're going to talk about a woman whose story was buried in the archives, and has never been told publicly, until now. Join us next week as we piece together her life, reflect on her courage, and explore how her voice echoes today, like a haunting canary in the Southern Baptist Convention's coal mine.

We reached out to the SBC, Paige Patterson, Darryl Gilyard, Tommy Gilmore, and the Council for National Policy for comment, and did not hear back.