

Former SBC president files lawsuit over sexual assault allegation

NASHVILLE (BP and local reports) – Longtime Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) pastor and former two-term President Johnny Hunt has filed a federal lawsuit against the SBC, the SBC Executive Committee (EC), and Guidepost Solutions seeking unspecified damages for defamation and invasion of privacy

Hunt's lawsuit is based on an accusation included in a 2022 Guidepost Solutions report issued at the conclusion of an EC-commissioned investigation into alleged mishandling of sexual abuse over the years by the SBC EC.

The report alleged that Hunt, who is married, sexually assaulted a fellow pastor's wife in a Florida condominium in 2010.

Hunt, represented by Nashville-based Cole Law Group, filed the suit in U.S. District Court in Nashville on March 17.

In the report, Guidepost stated, "During our investigation, an SBC pastor and his wife came forward to report that SBC President Johnny Hunt (2008-2010) had sexually assaulted the wife on July 25, 2010."

Guidepost says their report "was corroborated in part by a counseling minister and three other credible witnesses; and our investigators did not find Dr. Hunt's statements related to the sexual assault allegation to be credible."

According to the Guidepost report, Hunt initially denied the incident to investigators but eventually admitted to what he termed a brief, "consensual" encounter.

Hunt alleges, "the SBC, its leadership, and the firm hired for

'damage control' – Defendant Guidepost Solutions LLC ('Guidepost') – decided to use [Hunt] as their scapegoat."

The suit also alleges, "The encounter involving [Hunt] had nothing to do with the types of reports that led to Guidepost's engagement. It should not have been included in Guidepost's report. Indeed, it should not have been published at all."

Messengers to the 2021 SBC Annual Meeting overwhelmingly approved a motion calling for a task force to oversee a third-party investigation into allegations of mishandling abuse claims at the SBC Executive Committee.

Messengers are members appointed by local churches in friendly cooperation with the SBC to represent those churches at the SBC annual meeting.

Under terms of the motion, the independent review could span January 2000-June 2021 and could include any Executive Committee members and staff serving during that time. Executive Committee members and staff waived attorney-client privilege "in order to ensure full access to information and accuracy in the review," at the request of the messengers.

Hunt, senior pastor of First Church in Woodstock, Ga., for 33 years, was an *ex officio* member of the Executive Committee from June 2008 through June 2010, during his tenure as SBC president.

"The SBC Executive Committee is aware of the complaint against the Convention filed by former SBC president Johnny Hunt. We are reviewing the complaint and will not be commenting on active litigation at this time," a spokesperson for the SBC EC said in a statement.

Guidepost declined to comment.

While the suit, which demands a jury trial, does not

specifically list a financial amount desired for damages, it states, “[Hunt]’s life forever changed when the Defendants publicly released their report. He lost his job; he lost income from speaking engagements; and he lost income from publishing opportunities. His losses are substantial, and Defendants should be held liable.”

Hunt resigned from his vice president position with the SBC North American Mission Board shortly before the release of the Guidepost report in May 2022.

In a video released in November 2022, four pastors acquainted with Hunt and chosen by him – Mark Hoover, of NewSpring Church in Wichita, Kan.; Mike Whitson, of First Church in Indian Trail, N.C.; Steven Kyle of Hiland Park Church in Panama City, Fla.; and Benny Tate of Rock Springs Church in Milner, Ga. – announced the “restoration” of Hunt to public ministry.



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“I would permanently ‘defrock’ Johnny Hunt if I had the authority to do so. In a fellowship of autonomous churches, I do not have the authority to do so,” Barber wrote in a November 2022 Internet blog titled, “Praisegod barebones: The Online Musings of Bart Barber.”

Hunt preached at Hiland Park on Jan. 15, and at a men’s conference at New Season Church in Hiram, Ga., on March 17-18.

Todd Benkert, lead pastor of Oak Creek Community Church in Mishawaka, Ind., and a member of the SBC Abuse Reform Implementation Task Force formed to guide the sexual abuse investigation, confirmed the SBC Credentials Committee has placed the two churches under inquiry.

“The SBC messengers made clear statements about how we expect

churches to respond to abuse,” Benkert told The Tennessean newspaper in Nashville.

Messengers voted in 2019 to amend the SBC constitution to specifically state that mishandling sexual abuse is grounds for a church to be deemed “not in friendly cooperation” with the convention.

In 2021, messengers adopted a resolution stating: “Any person who has committed sexual abuse is permanently disqualified from holding the office of pastor ... [W]e recommend that all of our affiliated churches apply this standard to all positions of church leadership.”

A spokesperson told Baptist Press the Credentials Committee is committed to keeping in confidence the names of churches submitted to it for consideration as well as the names of those submitting concerns.