

SBC Executive Committee chairman calls churches to higher standard regarding sex abuse

EL CAJON, Calif. (BP and local reports) – Rolland Slade is perplexed that certain secular institutions have the good sense to strip professional credentials from sex offenders, while some churches seem to overlook such heinous crimes.

“The world can’t have a better idea than we do. We’re serving God,” said the senior pastor of Meridian Church in El Cajon, Calif., and first African-American chairman of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) Executive Committee, “so how could their standard be that person’s got to change their career, and our standard is we put them back? That doesn’t make sense, at least not to me.”

Presiding over his first Executive Committee meeting since his election in June, Slade emphasized the church’s responsibility to provide a safe haven for sexual abuse victims. “It’s very personal to me. For the last 40 years of my life, I have been in touch with a survivor of sexual abuse in church. In fact, we’ve been married 39 years so when I say it’s personal – it’s personal.”

Can’t return to ministry

Slade said when he worked as a teacher and part-time high school track-and-field coach, he witnessed secular groups tackle sexual abuse decisively when detected. “As a teacher or a coach, if a coach violates that rule and is brought up on criminal charges, guess what? They can’t be a coach anymore. A teacher does it, can’t be a teacher. Doctor, can’t be a doctor. Lawyer, can’t be a lawyer – but unfortunately, what

happens with us in the church [is] we talk about redemption and grace and mercy, and I understand those concepts.”

It’s that Slade doesn’t appreciate grace and mercy being used to return sexual abusers to ministry. “I understand we can restore them... but we can’t put them back in leadership,” Slade cautioned. “They can’t go back there. They’ve got to find another vocation.”

Tackling the problem

Slade’s chairmanship of the Executive Committee means he has a seat on the SBC Credentials Committee, which is charged with reviewing reports of churches operating in ways that are not in friendly cooperation with the SBC – including those churches that look the other way when sexual abuse in their ranks is exposed.

“The Credentials Committee, now that I’m a part of it, I understand our limited scope,” Slade said, adding that he appreciates the solid accomplishments the SBC has made in fighting sexual abuse and doesn’t intend to cast a negative tone on advancements already made in ministering to sexual abuse survivors.

“As it stands today, the Credentials Committee can determine that a church is not in friendly cooperation with the SBC and make a recommendation to the Executive Committee to disfellowship a church,” Slade explained, “or in the case where the church is technically in friendly cooperation, it recommends not to disfellowship. In my mind those are two ends of a long spectrum.”

Multipronged approach

Slade said he doesn’t anticipate that a standardized solution to handling sexual abuse will please everyone. He realizes that while teachers, doctors, and others are can have their credentials removed, stripping ministers of ordinations likely

would be neither plausible nor effective among autonomous Southern Baptist congregations, as each church handles ordinations differently.

Slade envisions a multipronged approach to fighting sexual abuse much in the same way the medical community targets certain diseases with medical care, education, and behavior modifications. He recommends the Caring Well Challenge the SBC launched in 2019 as a resource for churches, coupled with other targeted steps.

The Caring Well Challenge was created as the SBC addressed sexual abuse extensively in 2018 and 2019. SBC President J.D. Greear in 2018 initiated a Sexual Abuse Advisory Study in collaboration with the SBC Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission that released its findings shortly before the 2019 SBC Annual Meeting in Birmingham. Messengers received the report, established the responsibilities of the Credentials Committee, passed the first of two votes required in two successive years to make sexual abuse grounds for disfellowship, and amended applicable bylaws.

Addressing the trauma

“We need to figure out a way, and I hope that over the next couple of years we get a chance to really drill down and find a way that we can deal with this issue in the Southern Baptist Convention so that we’re not passing sexual predators from one church to another, one state to another,” Slade stressed.

Churches need to understand the long-lasting trauma and vulnerability sexual abuse victims experience, he said. “If we don’t understand the trauma as a church, oftentimes we re-traumatize them by making them tell their story over and over again, or we traumatize them by not believing them. They’re telling you and sharing with you their experience so now your part is to investigate that their experience is correct... and if so, you’ve got to make some change. ...You can’t allow that

to continue.”

According to Slade, when churches fail to address the issue properly the victim gets the message that the church’s love is superficial, and because the abusive environment continues the church remains an unsafe place for victims.

Caring Well materials to help churches learn how to prevent and deal with sexual abuse are available at caringwell.com/.