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NEWS

Southern Baptist Lawyer Says Independent Abuse Panel Not Possible

Adelle M. Banks
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(RNS) A top lawyer for the Southern Baptist Convention said Thursday that it is not possible for the denomination to create an independent sexual abuse review panel requested by a watchdog group.

"With regard to criminal matters, the proper investigatory panel for Baptists should be law enforcement officials," D. August Boto, a lawyer with the Southern Baptist Convention's Executive Committee, said in a statement.

His comments came two days after the Executive Committee met briefly with representatives of Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests (SNAP) to consider SNAP's requests to "make Southern Baptist churches safer."

Boto's statement said denominational officials have encouraged churches to do background checks on prospective ministers and volunteers, but "that due diligence cannot be mandated." He noted there are a number of denomination-related Internet resources about preventing child abuse.

Christa Brown, who coordinates SNAP's activism in Baptist churches, met briefly with committee members Tuesday and said she would like to see Southern Baptists follow the example of Catholic and Presbyterian leaders who reached "outside of their usual bylaws and structure" to establish panels to try to protect children.

She said leaving the matter to law enforcement is "a cop-out," noting that child abuse cases often cannot be prosecuted because statutes of limitation have expired.

"Over and over, of course, they say that their hearts are truly broken," she said. "We have heard the words a lot, but what we are looking for is deeds, deeds that will actually serve to make kids safer."

Boto, in his statement, said the denomination does not have an "authoritative role" over autonomous Southern Baptist churches, making it hard to meet some SNAP requests.

"Representatives from those churches meet annually to make decisions regarding the work of the Executive Committee and the SBC entities--not the other way around."

Southern Baptist officials were not immediately available for additional comment.

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