

Suffering and the children

The current crisis for the Catholic Church over decades of child sexual abuse has further obscured a similar but less reported story. One of *Time* magazine's "Top Ten Underreported Stories of 2008" was the refusal by America's largest Protestant church, the Nashville-based Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), to create a database of those among its 101,000 clergymen who have been convicted or credibly accused of sexually abusing children. That refusal is one of the practices that make the 44,000 churches of the SBC, says Christa Brown, "a perfect paradise for predators". The shocking evidence, expertly marshalled by Ms Brown, a successful appellate lawyer in Austin, in this riveting account of her own victimization, suggests that in the case of the SBC the distinction between predator and clergyman is all too often diaphanous.

In powerful descriptions of her abuse and its aftermath of madness, tainted relationships and loss of faith (years later, writes Brown, "I would sometimes go out alone on moonless nights and scream into the ocean . . . I didn't have a clue why I was screaming"), the author demonstrates how her own descent into hell corresponds to a typical scenario for Southern Baptist victims. Under the guise of counselling a child, she

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Christa Brown

THIS LITTLE LIGHT

Beyond a Baptist preacher predator and his gang
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says, a pastor rapes her, quoting scripture all the while, but insists that she is the guilty party and enlists his church and the SBC to successfully cover up his crime. Three decades after the incidents, Brown was finally able to put a name to what had happened to her; having become a mother made it urgent to her to file a complaint. Although the SBC claimed to have no record of her aggressor, he was serving in a well-known church when Brown located him in 2004. On January 18, 2006, her former church produced a letter acknowledging the facts of the case, for which Brown agreed to suspend legal proceedings.

The SBC gives two reasons for its refusal to maintain a list of predators: 1) Each of the churches belonging to the SBC is autonomous, so it is powerless to intervene. 2) We can, they claim, simply check to see if our ministers have criminal records. Rebuttals: 1) While the SBC has yet to sever ties with any

of the thousands of its churches in which paedophiles are or have been known to occupy the pulpit, its Nashville headquarters keeps very close tabs on what is going on and where. On June 23, 2009, the SBC "disfellowshipped" the Broadway Baptist church of Fort Worth, Texas, because it has one openly gay member. 2) Over 90 per cent of sex offenders have no criminal record.

Data from American insurance companies suggests that Protestant clergy lead Catholics in the sexual abuse of children, with the SBC the worst offender. A combination of suprajudicial procedures (e.g. victims, who are warned not to contact police, may not address the SBC with complaints, which must come to it from the church, in other words, from the pastor or person who committed the crime about which the complaint is being made); hillbilly pilpulism (the SBC's resident quack "expert" distinguishes between sexual predators, who are first degree felons facing potential life sentences in prison if caught, and who simply, says he, don't exist in the Baptist clergy, and mere "wanderers"); and systematic persecution of victims who complain means that most of the SBC's predatory activities remain unprosecuted. The former President of the SBC, Paige Patterson, whose hobbies include "hunting dangerous game" (his website

shows him kneeling behind the much-dreaded zebra) shocked other faith group leaders, including Catholics, when he referred to Brown and other victims of confessed rapists as "evil-doers" and "just as reprehensible as sex criminals". The SBC's lawyers place their faith in the statute of limitations, which requires that complaints be made by the age of twenty-eight (average age of childhood sex abuse victims: twelve; that of the complainants: forty-two), in the fact that fewer than 10 per cent of clergy sex abuse cases are ever reported, and in the high suicide rate of victims. Alone among faith groups, the tax-exempt SBC, with \$10 billion in assets, offers no counselling to victims, yet provides free counselling to clergymen who have been caught raping children.

Both Brown's story and the data she has gathered on other victims of the SBC in *This Little Light* and on her website (stopbaptistpredators.org) and blog (stopbaptistpredators.blogspot.com) suggest that legal reform is urgently needed. When the statute of limitations for victims of sexual abuse disappears, as it inevitably will, the resulting class action will probably spell the end of the SBC.

The SBC has refused to keep a list of its criminal clergymen; Brown has kindly begun to keep one for them, pro bono. They have clearly bullied the wrong woman, and in so doing have awakened both a whistleblower of historic proportions and a writer.

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