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Crusader confronts Baptists on abuse

BYLINE: Eileen E. Flynn American-Statesman staff

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On the Web site she designed to help victims of clergy sexual abuse, Christa Brown keeps a time line of her efforts to confront Baptist church leaders with her claim that she was molested by a youth minister in North Texas four decades ago.

Every few paragraphs, an icon of a hurdle appears in the text to symbolize the setbacks the Austin lawyer, 56, says she has encountered: wrangling with church lawyers, dealing with systemic blindness and finding aggressive resistance to change.

Despite her shy, private nature, Brown has become the public face of victims of abuse who hope to force the Baptist church to acknowledge their allegations and take concrete action to identify and sanction abusers.

As the Southern Baptist Convention, the country's largest Protestant denomination, prepares for its annual meeting this week in Indianapolis, the issue that Brown has championed will be aired more openly than it has in past meetings.

Brown's Web site, Stop Baptist Predators, features a blog and updates on Baptist sexual abuse cases and the group's efforts to change church policies. She has traveled the country to speak to victims and distribute information at Baptist gatherings. And she does outreach to Baptists through the Catholic-founded Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests, the country's largest clergy abuse support group.

David Clohessy, executive director of Survivors Network, describes Brown as a trailblazer for Baptist sexual abuse victims. Clohessy, who fought for years to get the Catholic Church to acknowledge what he and others suffered at the hands of priests, says he is astounded by the resistance that Brown has encountered.

"I just think it's so easy to succumb to fatalism and bitterness," he said, "and yet (she) just keeps chugging ahead with remarkably upbeat determination."

Debbie Vasquez of Lewisville said she hadn't found the courage to report her own story of abuse until she saw Brown interviewed on TV in 2006 and learned that Survivors Network helped Baptist victims. "Christa just encouraged me to talk and to tell," Vasquez said.

Brown says she has heard from dozens of other victims.

Last year at the Southern Baptist Convention's meeting in San Antonio, the Rev. Wade Burleson, an Oklahoma pastor, proposed that the denomination consider creating a database of credibly

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accused, admitted and convicted sexual abusers. Leaders have explored the idea and are expected to report their findings to about 9,500 clergy members and lay people at the meetings.

And the national convention magazine this month features an eight-page report titled Protecting Our Children that acknowledges the problem of clergy abuse and details how churches can conduct background checks and report allegations of abuse.

But Brown said she isn't getting her hopes up.

She has already pushed for a similar database, as well as a central reporting point for victims, that would be kept by the Baptist General Convention of Texas, the country's largest state convention, with 5,500 churches.

Emily Prevost, a state convention official, said those goals are unlikely to be met because Baptists value their autonomy so much that they would not support creating a central authority to handle abuse cases.

"They believe so strongly that the local church is the center of authority that to make that decision would be to give up something they believe so strongly in," she said.

Burleson counters that a database has no authority - it's simply information - so it wouldn't threaten the autonomy of local churches. And Brown says she knows how slowly the wheels can turn in a denomination that does not look to a central authority for rules the way the Catholic Church does.

"The buck stops nowhere," she said. "There is no one person who will take responsibility."

Brown says she was a goody-two-shoes and a "book nerd" as a teenager in the 1960s, when she says she was abused by Tommy Gilmore, the youth and education minister at First Baptist Church in Farmers Branch, where her family worshipped. Brown was 16 at the time, legally a minor.

Brown said Gilmore convinced her that sexual intimacy with him was a sign of great faith, a blessing from God and something so special that it must be kept secret from her family, according to a lawsuit that Brown filed in 2005.

"Good Baptist girls are raised to be submissive," she said.

Later, when Brown confided in another minister at the church, the lawsuit says, Gilmore made her kneel in front of him for 30 minutes while he prayed to cleanse Satan from her and then forced Brown to tell his wife that their relationship was Brown's fault.

Reached by phone in Florida on Friday, Gilmore, who now works in real estate, said his lawyer had advised him not to comment.

For decades, Brown said, she didn't tell anyone else what had happened.

But in 2003, as Brown watched her daughter approach the age she was when the abuse started, she began to think of her painful past.

At the time, she was meeting her friend Elana Einhorn for weekly walks around Lady Bird Lake. The two met at the Texas Supreme Court in 1989 when Brown was a staff attorney and Einhorn was a law clerk. In 2004, Brown confided her secret.

Einhorn said she stopped dead in the middle of the trail while Brown spilled the details of her abuse and her plan to confront the church.

The two lawyers, almost reflexively, began analyzing the situation in legal terms: criminal statutes and civil lawsuits.

Brown said she approached national and state Baptist officials. She said officials there told her to talk to the church. Church leaders told her that it wasn't their problem because Gilmore no longer worked there. And the Southern Baptist Convention said it had no record that Gilmore was still in ministry.

Shortly thereafter, she heard from a lawyer who represented both the church and the state convention. In a letter, the lawyer suggested that Brown may have misremembered details and warned that if she pursued the matter, she could face legal recourse.

After searching in four states, Brown said she finally tracked Gilmore down in Florida. He was still in ministry.

In 2005, Brown filed separate lawsuits against Gilmore and First Baptist Church. She had previously filed a criminal complaint against Gilmore, but the statute of limitations had expired.

She eventually settled with the church, receiving an apology letter and a sum that she isn't allowed to disclose, but she said it didn't cover the cost of her therapy. Gilmore fought the civil lawsuit, and Brown said she eventually dropped it because of the stress and expense.

Brown said her main objective with the lawsuit was to confront a church environment that appeared to allow abuse.

"I realized that if (church leaders) had done this to me and had worked so hard to silence me that they had undoubtedly done this to countless others," Brown said. "If you silence the victims, the perpetrators stay in their pulpits, and kids are not safe. And that's the reality I could not live with and still can't."

Einhorn says other people who claim sexual abuse are lucky to have a woman like Brown on their side. "She would say, 'If I could save one more kid from being harmed by putting myself out there.'"

"I would tell her, 'You've done enough; you can put it aside for a little while,'" Einhorn said. "And she can't yet."

Brown says she receives support from her husband and adult daughter and has the financial means to make advocacy for victims a full-time job. She knows that others in her position aren't so lucky.

"I have been so fortunate," Brown said. "I think that kind of grace carries obligation."

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(BOX)

On the Web

For more on Brown's ad-

vocacy work, go to [www.](http://www.stopbaptistpredators.org)

[stopbaptistpredators.org](http://www.stopbaptistpredators.org).

For the Baptist General Convention of Texas' policies on sexual abuse,

go to www.bgct.org/

[brokentrust](http://www.brokentrust.org).

Christa Brown

Ralph Barrera American-Statesman

Christa Brown says she was molested as a teenager by a minister of a Baptist church near Dallas. She has worked on behalf of sex abuse victims and wants churches to do more to help them.

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