

# Clergy Sex-Abuse Survivor Questions Fairness of SBC Executive Committee Study

A clergy sexual-abuse survivor says the staff member guiding a Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee response to a motion calling for a national database of clergy sex offenders has a negative attitude toward the proposal and should be replaced with someone more objective.

Debbie Vasquez, who has filed a [lawsuit](#) against a Southern Baptist minister she claims began sexually abusing her when she was 14, released e-mails to EthicsDaily.com that she says cast doubt on whether August Boto, the Executive Committee's general counsel and vice president for convention policy, will give impartial advice to a bylaws work group.

Boto is the staff member assigned to the work group tasked with responding to a motion referred at the SBC annual meeting in June about the feasibility of establishing a denomination-wide database of ministers who have been convicted of, confessed to or credibly accused of sexual abuse or harassment. Boto led the work group Monday in an hour-long discussion, open to the media under rules that prohibit direct quotation or attribution, that consisted mainly of introducing resource material and gave little hint about what direction the process might take.

Vasquez began communicating with Boto and SBC president Frank Page in April about the possibility of stronger safeguards against clergy predators. Vasquez, 48, said a so-called "man of God" began touching her when she was 14 and raped her when she was 15. At 18 she became pregnant with his daughter and was forced to go before the church and confess to being an unwed mother but told not to identify the father, because it would hurt the church.

After learning years later the same minister was involved with other girls, she says, Vasquez became concerned and talked to police. They could not prosecute her case due to statute of limitations and could do nothing about other girls without their names, which the alleged perpetrator would not disclose.

Vasquez says her abuser is still a pastor in a Southern Baptist church. Her lawsuit identifies him as Dickie Amyx, [pastor](#) of Bolivar Baptist Church in Sanger, Texas, and [news reports](#) quoted depositions admitting he had sex with the girl while he was an associate pastor in Lewisville, Texas, but claiming it didn't begin until she reached the age of consent.

In a May 5 e-mail Vasquez asked Boto "would it be a bad thing?" for Southern Baptists to have a group to investigate allegations of sexual abuse.

"It would be hard for churches to investigate their own minister, because of the love they have for him and they will tend to believe him and not look at this with an open mind," Vasquez wrote. "Just as a doctor will not operate on a family member, why would you want to put the church family in such a position?"

"Why can we not set up a way to keep track of those who have been convicted or have confessed or have been shown to have had inappropriate sex with minors?" she continued. "If a minister can do this and then just move to another state, as this has happened in my case, and then put at risk yet another church's children. There should be a list and it needs to be shared with other churches to keep this from happening."

Boto replied that Southern Baptists work together in missions and ministry but not in church governance.

"Having an investigatory body would not be a bad idea in any denomination that recognizes ecclesiastical authorities outside the local church," Boto said, "but Baptists are among those faiths that do not."

In another e-mail, Boto warned against solutions that "have only the appearance of benefit."

"I remain convinced that the answer lies not in a list, but in an increased awareness at the local level, in training of congregants, and in aggressive law enforcement," Boto said. "I have not yet heard of a case where having the best list one can have would have made any difference. A list would only serve to offer a false sense of security, thus rendering those who depended on it more vulnerable."

Boto went on to offer Vasquez, whose [story](#) appears on a Web site of the

Survivors' Network of those Abused by Priests (SNAP), the following advice:

“With regard to how you can help, let me suggest that you consider a ministry of information to your church and other churches about your experience, and what you learned about what perpetrators do. SNAP and Stop Baptist Predators could be a great help to congregations if they took such a route instead of spending so much time placing blame, attempting to get Baptists to operate in hierarchical ways they simply will not, and being sarcastic and pejorative. People do not appreciate being attacked for things they did not do. Subjected to such tactics, people raise defenses. What needs to happen is a broad recognition by churches of the initial signs of perpetrator activity. You can help churches know what to look for. And you can help them know what good practices are and what should never be allowed. That is what I will be saying and writing about, but I am only one person. I need help. You mentioned Baptist cooperation. This is the kind they gravitate to.”

Boto asked Vasquez not to quote him from their communications, because they were written frankly and quickly and might be misunderstood if taken out of context and to a wider audience.

Vasquez told EthicsDaily.com she wanted to honor Boto's wishes about not releasing his e-mails, “but only if he was making an honest effort to change things.”

“From what I have been hearing and reading he is not, and therefore I feel no obligation to keep them private,” she said. “I never told him I would keep them private in the first place.”

Vasquez also released an April 14 e-mail she wrote to SBC President Frank Page, pastor of First Baptist Church in Taylors, S.C. Page wrote back two days later, saying he was “deeply saddened” by her story.

“Please do not accuse me of ignoring or pretending this problem does not exist,” Page continued. “There are people who are trying to paint a picture of me and our Convention which is patently untrue. In fact, some of the groups who are doing this are nothing more than lawyer groups, looking to raise their caseload level. They are not truly trying to help people in any way other than raise lawsuit possibilities.”

Page's e-mail included this disclaimer: "I send all e-mails expecting that, as a matter of courtesy, the recipients would ask my permission before sharing them with others. I hope you will honor this request, and if you received this e-mail in error, that you would let me know, deleting your copy of it."

Christa Brown of SNAP-Baptist told EthicsDaily.com that for religious leaders to communicate with a survivor of sexual abuse and then ask the communication be confidential is "dreadfully wrong."

"It mimics and recreates the same pattern of secrecy that was used by the clergy-perpetrator," Brown explained. "So, it's bad for the victim. It's also bad for the denomination. If Southern Baptist officials are going to have any credibility on this issue, they must act with total transparency. Obviously, that's not what's happening when they ask that their communications not be repeated."

Brown said it was also "very hurtful" for Page and Boto to raise questions about SNAP's motives and methods.

"Almost all clergy abuse survivors have enormous difficulties with trust," Brown said. "Debbie had begun to develop a little bit of trust for a couple people in a support group-i.e., SNAP."

Not only did Page and Boto "completely undermine" that trust, Brown said, they offered no alternative support or referral for counseling. "No amount of saying 'God bless you,'" Brown said, "changes the essential uncaring nature" of their response.

Brown described a portion of Monday's Executive Committee discussion, reported Tuesday in EthicsDaily.com, in a [forum](#) at BaptistLife.com, when a work group member referred to her as a person of no integrity.

"It was clear where the remarks were directed, and it was certainly hurtful for me personally," Brown said. "But far more importantly, what effect do you imagine that has on other Baptist abuse victims who might half-way contemplate speaking up .... and then they see hateful talk like that?"

"And why was there not one other person in that all-white, all-male room who would even call his colleague on the carpet for such harsh language directed at a Baptist clergy abuse survivor?" she asked.

“Such timid men. Every one of them sat by silently while their colleague kicked the messenger. Any wonder that victims don’t report abuse? It’s the same ‘kick-the-messenger’ pattern in most churches.”

“Thank goodness EthicsDaily was in that room to give an independent account of what happened there,” Brown said. “People who give money to this organization are entitled to know.”

*Bob Allen is managing editor of EthicsDaily.com.*