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My Letter to the Southern Seminary Community: Our Duty to Report



Friday, November 18, 2011

This letter to The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and Boyce College community was released in the wake of the tragedy and scandal at Penn State University, and in honor of all those who have experienced such abuse.

November 16, 2011

Dear Member of the Southern Seminary Family:

I write to you concerning a crucial dimension of our responsibility to God, to our churches, to Southern Seminary, to each other, and to the society at large. I write

concerning our proper response to any report of the sexual abuse of children.

The tragedy at Penn State University continues to unfold day by day, and this scandal has forced all of us to consider anew what is at stake when the abuse of a child is observed or reported.

This much is clear: The tragedy began with what a Pennsylvania grand jury documents as the observation of the sexual abuse of a child. The person observing the act reported it to university officials, who did not take responsible action. According to the grand jury report, the man who reported the abuse to his superiors took no further action, nor did



university officials. There was no report of the abuse to law enforcement officials. The abuser was thus allowed to continue preying on young children.

We can now see how the tragedy was compounded beyond the initial horror of a single act of sexual abuse. The abuser was allowed to continue his abuse, and it took a brave survivor, many years later, to bring the pattern to light. The arrests and firings in Pennsylvania are a horrifying way to learn the lessons of moral and legal responsibility that each of us bears.

Put as directly as possible, our responsibility is to protect those who cannot protect themselves. The problem of sexual abuse is far larger and more prevalent than we would want to think, and the dangers to children and youth are real. Our responsibility is to contact law enforcement officials when the sexual abuse of any child is observed or reported. As the governor of Pennsylvania said over this past weekend, there can be no margin of error or delay when it comes to our legal, moral, and personal responsibility to report abuse.

This means that if you observe or receive any credible report of such abuse, your first and immediate action must be to contact law enforcement officials without delay. If you are ever in doubt of the proper authorities to call, just dial 911 and make your report as quickly and clearly as possible.

Since we update our policies regularly in light of best practices, I had been fairly certain that our Seminary policy, published in our handbook and documents was adequate. Upon review, we found that it was not. The policy called for any employee of the Seminary who witnessed such abuse or received such a report to report the abuse to his or her supervisor. Plainly, this is not enough.

The very day this was discovered we changed the policy to require that employees first contact law enforcement officials, then their supervisor.

I am writing now to the entire Southern Seminary and Boyce College family in order to remind *all* of us – not just Seminary employees – of our moral and legal responsibility.

Attached with this letter is an essay on the Penn State scandal that I wrote in its aftermath. This may provide further information on why this letter is so timely and urgent.

We need to pray for all victims of sexual abuse. This kind of crime reminds us of the Puritan way of describing “the sinfulness of sin.” In this fallen and sinful world, we must be ready to respond rightly when children are at risk.

Thank you for all you do to make Southern Seminary safe and faithful in order that we

may accomplish the mission entrusted to us.

If you ever have any question about any Seminary policy, please do not hesitate to ask your dean or supervisor.

Sincerely,

R. Albert Mohler, Jr., President

R. Albert Mohler, Jr., "The Tragic Lessons of Penn State: An Urgent Call to Action,"
Thursday, November 10, 2011.

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