Credentials Committee of the Southern Baptist Convention
cc: Dr. Tommy Green, Executive Director of the Florida Baptist Convention
Troy Varnum, Associational Missionary of the Northwest Coast Baptist Association

February 15, 2023

Dear SBC Credentials Committee,

We write today in response to your letter dated February 1, 2022. We can only assume 2022 was in error since we received the letter by email on February 1, 2023.

First, thank you for your service to Southern Baptists, specifically in the matter of addressing sexual abuse. Hiland Park Baptist Church joins you in abhorrence of the evil of sexual abuse. Our church policies and procedures reflect our commitment to provide a safe environment for children and vulnerable populations.

We have enjoyed an 80-year history of fellowship and cooperation with our local association, the Florida Baptist Convention, and the Southern Baptist Convention. After you sent a letter of inquiry to Hiland Park Baptist Church, we were notified that your Credentials Committee also sent copies to the Florida Baptist Convention and our local association, the Northwest Coast Baptist Association. In light of your letter, we checked with both the Florida Baptist Convention and the Northwest Coast Baptist Association and each confirmed that Hiland Park Baptist Church remains a church in good standing and fellowship.

While we do not agree with the overreaching implications of your recent letter, it is in the spirit of cooperation and our commitment to global missions that we offer this brief response.

In your letter you reference both the 2021 SBC Resolution regarding Sexual Abuse and an SBC By-Law pertaining to churches and sexual abuse. You stated that the resolution contends that a person who has committed "sexual abuse" should be permanently disqualified from ministry.

Without debating the merits of that resolution, it is worth reminding the committee that resolutions, by their form, are not governing documents. By their very content, resolutions do not speak for the Southern Baptist Convention on the whole. As the precise phrase your committee cited states, this was merely the sentiment of a majority of "the messengers of the Southern Baptist Convention, meeting in Nashville, Tennessee, June 15-16, 2021."

Thus, using a resolution as an enforcement mechanism on a local church violates every historic norm of our understanding of SBC resolutions and local church autonomy. We reject an insinuation that we are bound by a resolution passed by a body of messengers gathering at a given meeting. While this renders the entire reference to the resolution a moot issue, we nevertheless have additional concerns about the overreach of this resolution and the committee's use of it in initiating this inquiry.

Moreover, there is no proof whatsoever that our recent guest speaker has "committed sexual abuse." The Bible states in Proverbs 18:17, "The first to plead his case seems right until his neighbor comes to question him." We are not aware of any evidence, any proof, or any legal charges against our guest speaker. This remains an anonymous allegation regardless of the conclusion of one investigatory body. It falls far short of a legal accusation.

Furthermore, we as a church believe the credibility of Guidepost, as an investigatory body to render moral verdicts that are consistent with biblical categories and definitions regarding sexual behavior, to be highly questionable. Guidepost, as an organization, advocates for and celebrates sexual sin directly in violation of the biblical ethic our church firmly holds to.

We believe the standard of "credible accusation" to be troublingly ambiguous, far below biblical standards of considering evidence against a spiritual leader, and exceedingly dangerous.

While we disagree with most of your conclusions, we do agree with you that your committee has no ecclesiastical authority over our autonomous congregation.

Further, we agree with SBC Bylaw 8C(5), part of the bylaw that created your committee, as it explicitly states that your committee "shall never attempt to exercise any authority over a church through an investigation or other process that would violate Article IV of the Constitution."

You also mentioned the SBC bylaws regarding a church acting consistent with the convention's beliefs regarding sexual abuse, however since, a) no duly authorized body recognized by our church has proved Pastor Johnny Hunt as guilty of having "committed sexual abuse," and b) your committee, by bylaw, has no authority to conduct an investigation and draw any such conclusion in itself, and c) no governing document of the SBC states that having a guest speaker who has been "credibly accused by an independent third-party investigation" is grounds to be deemed out of cooperation, we find the essence of your letter problematic.

Your letter asks us to provide information to prove how our church's recent decision to have Pastor Hunt speak "can be considered to be consistent with the Convention's beliefs regarding sexual abuse?" While this letter does that clearly, we reject wholesale the unbiblical standard suggested here, that we are being asked to give evidence of our innocence of violating the parameters of cooperation with the SBC.

"Guilty until proven innocent" is an ungodly and unbiblical standard. This flawed standard has been rejected by our Lord, should be rejected by Biblically-minded Southern Baptists, and is firmly rejected by Hiland Park Baptist Church.

We also feel compelled to share our concerns about one very troubling part of this inquiry process. It does not seem logical to us that Southern Baptists, when they approved a revised Bylaw 8 at the 2019 annual meeting, envisioned or would have knowingly approved a process whereby one activist individual, who was also appointed by the current President of the SBC to the Abuse Reform Implementation Task Force, could submit a church for inquiry, leak that submission to the secular press, and thereby place that church in secular and denominational headlines before the church can be informed.

Finally, as we continue to discuss this matter with our own counsel in pursuance of all of our legal recourses, it would be helpful to all potential parties involved if you would provide clarity, in writing, of the following question: Is the Credentials Committee, which is a duly elected committee of the Southern Baptist Convention, which is a Georgia corporation, formally and officially claiming, in writing, to an entire SBC-affiliated congregation that when we hosted Pastor Johnny Hunt we hosted a speaker who has “committed sexual abuse?”

Thank you for your anticipated reply.

The Pastoral Team and Leadership
Hiland Park Baptist Church
Panama City, FL