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Georgia House Judiciary Committee to Hold Hearing Today on Clergy Sexual Abuse Accountability Bill

SB 542 would make it a criminal offense for clergy members to engage in improper sexual contact with a person under their pastoral counseling or spiritual authority; survivors and advocates to testify in support

ATLANTA — March 19, 2026 — Today at 1:00 p.m., the Georgia House Judiciary Committee will hold a public hearing on Senate Bill 542, legislation aimed at criminalizing clergy sexual abuse in Georgia. The hearing comes as survivors and advocates continue to push for accountability for religious leaders and stronger protections for those under their care. A livestream of the hearing will be available [here](#).

SB 542, filed by Senator Randy Robertson (R-Cataula), addresses a critical gap in Georgia law that has left adult victims of clergy sexual abuse without a meaningful path to justice. Under the bill, a clergy member who engages in improper sexual contact with a person under a pastoral counseling or spiritual authority relationship could face criminal charges. The bill specifies that consent cannot be used as a legal defense when a position of authority is used to obtain sexual access, a code that already applies to teachers, therapists, and law enforcement officials.

The bill unanimously passed the Georgia Senate on March 6 with a vote of 55-0. House Majority Leader Chuck Efration is carrying the bill in the House.

In addition to broad bipartisan support, the bill has drawn strong affirmation from survivors, advocates, faith leaders, and mental health professionals across Georgia. They emphasize that this abuse is not isolated but systemic, and not a series of consensual relationships but rather the exploitation of trust and spiritual authority.

Hearing details are as follows:

- **Committee:** Georgia House Judiciary
- **Date and Time:** Thursday, March 19, 2026 | 1:00 p.m. ET
- **Location:** 132 CAP Committee Room (Georgia State Capitol)

Hayle Swinson, a survivor of adult clergy sexual abuse at Truett McConnell University, will testify in support of the bill. “Adult clergy sexual abuse is real. It does not begin with force. It begins with trust. Survivors are often seeking faith, guidance, belonging, or healing—and instead encounter manipulation, coercion, and abuse,” she explains. “I urge the passage of SB 542—for survivors of the past, for those suffering in silence today, and for those we still have time to protect.”

Ruth Malhotra, a whistleblower in the Ravi Zacharias International Ministries abuse crisis, will also testify. “I’ve witnessed firsthand how allegations of sexual abuse were mishandled internally, resulting in coverup, silencing, and further harm to the victims,” she describes. “SB 542 establishes a necessary legal boundary for clergy that is long overdue. Positions of authority—particularly those grounded in profound spiritual trust—must never be used for exploitation.”

14 states currently have laws in place holding clergy accountable, and several other states are considering similar legislation. “Georgians deserve laws that recognize the reality of power dynamics and protect the vulnerable from being victimized,” said Kim Nunes, Legislative Director for Clergy Law Reform. “The House now has the opportunity to ensure that no one can hide behind spiritual authority to avoid accountability.”

Ongoing updates and resources are available at: www.clergyreform.org