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Broad Coalition of State Senators Introduce SB 542 to Address Clergy Sexual Abuse by Amending Georgia Criminal Code

Legislation Clarifies That Exploitation of Spiritual Authority May Constitute a Criminal Offense

ATLANTA, GA — February 23, 2026 — Georgia State Senator Randy Robertson has introduced Senate Bill 542 (SB 542), legislation that would amend Georgia’s criminal code to allow clergy members to be charged with certain sexual offenses when they exploit a position of spiritual authority.

Filed on February 20, 2026, SB 542 updates Chapter 6 of Title 16 of the Official Code of Georgia Annotated (O.C.G.A. § 16-6-5.1) — Georgia’s statute governing “improper sexual contact by employee or agent” — to expressly include clergy members within its scope. Under the bill, a clergy member who engages in sexually explicit conduct or sexual contact with someone who is the subject of a pastoral counseling or spiritual authority relationship could face criminal charges.

The legislation has garnered support from 24 co-sponsors in the Georgia State Senate.

“SB 542 is important to me as a follower of Christ, as the husband of a woman who has been impacted by improper and criminal action by a clergyman, and as the father of two daughters—both of whom know a life where we are in church when the doors are open,” said Senator Robertson. “We are called to hold those who serve in the pulpit to a higher standard, and this bill does exactly that.”

This legislation formally defines:

- **“Clergy member”** as any person — licensed or unlicensed — who represents themselves as a minister, pastor, priest, rabbi, imam, or other spiritual leader, or who provides spiritual guidance, pastoral counseling, religious instruction, or spiritual direction in a relationship of trust.
- **“Pastoral counseling or spiritual authority relationship”** as a relationship in which a clergy member provides spiritual guidance or emotional support under circumstances where a reasonable person would view the clergy member as exercising influence, trust, or authority over another’s spiritual or personal well-being.

Importantly, SB 542 maintains that consent is not a defense in these cases — consistent with existing Georgia law covering other authority-based relationships such as educators, law enforcement officers, and therapists.

If passed, first-degree violations could carry prison sentences ranging from one to 25 years, with enhanced penalties in cases involving minors or repeat sexual felony offenders.

Supporters say the bill addresses the unique power imbalance that exists between clergy and those under their spiritual direction or care.

“Positions of spiritual authority carry profound trust,” said Afton Phillips, an advocate with a grassroots online platform that amplifies survivor stories and documents systemic abuse of power in religious institutions. “When that authority is used to exploit someone sexually, the law must recognize and respond to the seriousness of that harm.”

“This bill is being spearheaded by three women — Ruth Malhotra, Kim Nunes, and Hayle Swinson — who were directly affected by Adult Clergy Sexual Abuse (ACSA) that occurred in parachurch organizations, not only in church environments but also in Christian higher education and nonprofit ministries based right here in Georgia,” said Sarah Bauer Anderson, an author and advocate with 20 years of experience working in Christian settings. “ACSA is much farther reaching than many people realize, which makes this legislation all the more necessary. When you consider the broad influence of organizations such as Ravi Zacharias International Ministries (RZIM) and Orange Curriculum, led by Reggie Joiner — which brought tens of thousands of people into their orbit — the potential impact of abuse within those systems becomes exponentially more devastating.”

“In my case, leaders used spiritual authority and religious language to groom, manipulate, intimidate, and control me, leading to sexual exploitation and abuse,” said Hayle Swinson, a survivor of clergy sexual abuse at Truett McConnell University. “I implore Georgia’s elected officials to address this imbalance of power and pass SB 542 to hold abusers accountable and create a path toward justice for survivors in Georgia.”

With the legislative calendar moving quickly, supporters are [encouraging Georgians to contact](#) their state senators, representatives, and legislative leadership to urge passage of SB 542 this session. Crossover Day in Georgia is March 6 and the session is slated to end with Sine Die on April 2.

For more information about SB 542, please contact Kim Nunes at 678-372-7584 or kim@clergyreform.org, and check clergyreform.org for updates.

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