

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

February 25, 2026

Contact: Kim Nunes, Legislative Director for Clergy Law Reform

(Phone: 678-372-7584 | Email: kim@clergyreform.org)



**CLERGY
LAW REFORM**

Georgia Senate Judiciary Committee Unanimously Advances SB 542 Addressing Clergy Sexual Abuse

Survivor testimony highlights need for criminal accountability in cases involving spiritual authority

ATLANTA, GA — February 25, 2026 — Senate Bill 542 (SB 542), legislation aimed at strengthening criminal accountability for clergy sexual abuse in Georgia, unanimously passed the Georgia Senate Judiciary Committee on Wednesday evening [following powerful testimony](#), advancing the measure to the Senate Rules Committee and bringing it one step closer to a full Senate vote.

SB 542 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.

State Senator Randy Robertson (R-Cataula), the bill’s lead sponsor, presented the legislation before the committee, describing a longstanding pattern in which spiritual authority is manipulated to facilitate abuse.

“What we’ve experienced for many, many years here in the state of Georgia, is we have seen members of the clergy exploit their power and authority over individuals in their churches—females by the vast, vast majority,” Robertson explained. “The ministers gain the trust of these ladies and manipulate that trust into a ‘distorted discipleship’ where by the time they turn around they’ve entered into a sexual relationship with this predator.”

He noted that survivors often face significant barriers when seeking justice under current law. “When they come out and try to defend themselves, a lot of times the aggressor will say ‘well it was consensual.’ These ladies feel trapped and right now in Georgia there’s really no avenue within the criminal justice system for them to receive any kind of justice.”

Robertson was joined by Hayle Swinson, a survivor of clergy sexual abuse at Truett McConnell University, who delivered compelling testimony urging lawmakers to close what advocates describe as a gap in Georgia law governing authority-based sexual exploitation.

“Adult clergy sexual abuse does not begin with force — it begins with trust,” Swinson testified. “A pastor. A mentor. A spiritual authority. Someone who says, ‘You can trust me. I am your safe place.’”

She described how abuse within faith settings frequently unfolds through grooming and coercion rather than physical force.

“Authority is used to groom. Scripture is twisted to justify. Isolation is normalized. Boundaries are slowly eroded,” Swinson said. “What feels confusing and violating is reframed as obedience to God. This is not consent. This is coercion through power.”

Swinson emphasized that existing legal standards often fail to account for the dynamics of spiritual manipulation.

“When a clergy member uses spiritual authority to obtain sexual access, the power differential alone eliminates the possibility of free consent,” she told committee members. “After finding the courage to come forward, I realized there was no clear path to justice. This is why many survivors never report. This is why perpetrators continue. This is why the law must change. Silence protects systems, but the law is supposed to protect people.”

Swinson concluded her gripping testimony with a direct appeal to lawmakers:

“This bill does not attack faith or religious institutions. It establishes accountability when spiritual authority is used for exploitation. The need is urgent, the stakes are high, and any delay would be demoralizing for survivors who’ve already suffered so much,” she said.

“I urge you to pass this bill — for survivors of the past, for those suffering in silence today, and for those we still have time to protect.”

Several members of the Senate Judiciary Committee publicly commended Swinson for her boldness in sharing her experience and advocating on behalf of survivors across Georgia.

“I thank you for your courage because we would not have bills like this without people like you being willing to share your story, said Senator Brian Strickland, Chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee. “I can’t imagine how hard it is to have to share your story, but unfortunately sometimes it’s necessary to pass meaningful legislation. So I thank you for being so brave and stepping up like you are doing this evening.”

“I could tell that was hard, but it was powerful and we hear you,” echoed Senator Bo Hatchett (R-Clarksville). “This is a very important piece of legislation that I think is needed, and it’s a shame we haven’t done something sooner. So thank you.”

SB 542 amends Chapter 6 of Title 16 of the Official Code of Georgia Annotated to expressly include clergy members under Georgia’s improper sexual contact statute. Under the legislation, clergy who engage in sexually explicit conduct or sexual contact with individuals receiving pastoral counseling or subject to a spiritual authority relationship could face criminal charges. Consent would not serve as a legal defense in such cases, consistent with existing Georgia law governing other authority-based relationships such as educators, therapists, and law enforcement officials.

Also testifying in favor of the bill was Mike Griffin, Public Affairs Representative of the Georgia Baptist Mission Board, who stated he was speaking with the approval of Executive Director Thomas Hammond. Griffin stated that Georgia Baptists “fully support this legislation,” noting “how drastic and devastating the sex abuse is that’s going on across our nation, including even in our churches.”

“We believe this legislation is needed in order to educate those in our churches and institutions regarding the responsibility of maintaining protection over both minors and adults related to sex abuse,” Griffin added.

The legislation has garnered broad bipartisan support and continues to gain momentum as the Georgia General Assembly approaches the final weeks of the legislative session. Crossover Day is March 6 and the session is slated to end with Sine Die on April 2.

Supporters are [encouraging Georgians to contact](#) their state legislators and urge passage of SB 542 this session.

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

NOTE: The Senate Judiciary Hearing recording can be viewed online here, beginning at the 31-minute mark: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pf8JcPiFOFY>

<https://clergyreform.org/>

Follow this effort on social media at @clergyreform

