

THIS IS MEMBER-EXCLUSIVE CONTENT ⓘ

OPINION

Gateway Church's Robert Morris sex abuse allegations should spur revival laws in Texas

Victims should have a period of time to file civil suits after the statute of limitations has expired.



Pastor Robert Morris applauds during a roundtable discussion at Gateway Church Dallas Campus on Thursday, June 11, 2020, in Dallas. A statement issued on Tuesday, June 18, 2024, said that Morris has resigned after a woman said he had abused her on multiple occasions in the 1980s, beginning when she was 12. (Alex Brandon / ASSOCIATED PRESS)

By Kathryn Robb

3:09 PM on Jun 20, 2024 CDT



Last week, Cindy Clemishire came forward with [allegations of child sexual abuse by Pastor Robert Morris of Gateway Church](#). Morris did not deny the allegations. What Morris did is what many abusers do — minimize and soften the descriptions of his behavior. It was, as Morris said, “inappropriate sexual behavior with a young lady.”

It was more than “inappropriate.” If Clemishire’s allegations are true, it was criminal. And she was not a “young lady.” She alleges the abuse began when she was was 12.

A 12-year-old is generally in sixth or seventh grade. Her brain and body are still growing. Her permanent teeth are still emerging. She can’t drive, drink alcohol, smoke or vote. A 12-year-old is a child.

According to the [World Health Organization](#), 1 in 5 women and 1 in 13 men report being victims of sexual assault as children. Those numbers equal a shocking 11% of all children worldwide.

Because of these alarming numbers, many state legislatures are responding with commonsense reforms to statutes of limitations. Unfortunately, Texas isn’t one of them yet.

Presently, 19 states, two U.S. territories and the federal government have eliminated the statutes of limitations for child sexual abuse cases. Twenty-nine states and three U.S. territories have passed revival legislation specifically for child sexual abuse cases. Those include nearby Louisiana, Arizona and Arkansas. Revival laws give victims a period of time to file civil suits in cases where their abuse comes to light after the statute of limitations has expired.

That’s important because sexual abuse silences young victims, often for decades and sometimes even for a lifetime. [Research suggests](#) that most victims of childhood sexual abuse significantly delay disclosure or never report it at all.

The silence and delay are procedurally advantageous to the wrongdoer but not to the adult victims or children. Revival laws protect children because they lift the veil of cover-up and secrecy, and they expose hidden sexual predators. They also force institutions, by the fear of liability, to provide better child protection training, policies, procedures, and responses.

Sexual assault of a child is a unique type of civil wrong, certainly not one I studied in my first-year torts class in law school. The public policy purpose of statutes of limitations is ill-fitted for child

sexual abuse claims. It just doesn't make sense to reward the perpetrator with a shield for the very silence and shame-induced delay they create in their victims.

Where is Texas in this national movement to fully protect children by reviving child sexual abuse claims? Sadly, at the back of the class.

Article 1, Section 16 of the Texas Constitution holds, "No bill of attainder, ex post facto law, retroactive law, or any law impairing the obligation of contracts, shall be made." Fair enough, but not for claims of child sexual abuse. Common sense and reason demand a narrow exception to this restriction. An exception makes sense in light of what so many good Texans never knew — that 11% of the world's children suffer at the hands of sexual predators. Indeed, the drafters were also unaware of the enormity of this societal problem back in 1876.

This disturbing story isn't a one-off. Countless stories of alleged child sex abuse fill the news. Consider Southern Baptist leaders Paul Pressler and Tommy Gilmore, former Kanakuk Kamp employee Matthew Harmon, and Dallas priest [Ricardo Reyes Mata](#), to name a few.

Minimization of any dangerous epidemic is never a smart move, especially when it affects the health and welfare of the most vulnerable among us — children. That would include the "young lady" who was only 12 years old.

Kathryn Robb is national director of the Children's Justice Campaign at Enough Abuse.

We welcome your thoughts in a letter to the editor. See the guidelines and [submit your letter here](#). If you have problems with the form, you can submit via email at letters@dallasnews.com

Kathryn Robb
