

For immediate release: Wednesday, April 6, 2016

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Abuse victims to protest outside big church conference

They want preacher accused of concealing crimes “disinvited”

But event organizers are ignoring their request sent last week

Group says preacher’s role “will deter others from reporting abuse”

SNAP: “And it rubs salt into wounds of those who were hurt on his watch”

A support group for clergy sex abuse victims will protest outside a religious conference in Louisville later this month that is expected to draw more than 8,000 church-goers and staff.

Leaders of SNAP, the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, are upset because a controversial pastor who has allegedly concealed child sex crimes by at least 15 accused offenders will speak at the event, along with other officials from his troubled denomination.

He is C. J. Mahaney, the former head of a denomination called once called Sovereign Grace Ministries (SGM) but now known as Sovereign Grace Churches (SGC). It has roughly 70 churches across the US (mainly in eastern states) and in Australia, Bolivia, Ethiopia, Great Britain, Germany and Mexico.

Mahaney is accused in civil lawsuits of ignoring and hiding known and suspected child sexual abuse by church staff and members while he led SGM and Covenant Life Church in Maryland.

Last week, SNAP asked conference organizers to rescind their permission to let Mahaney and other SGM/SGC officials speak at the biennial international Together for the Gospel (T4G16) conference at the KFC Yum! Center on April 12-14. (<http://t4g.org> ; <http://t4g.org/speakers/>)

None of the three conference organizers has replied to SNAP’s letter. So SNAP members will picket and hand out fliers to attendees outside the main entrance to facility (near the fountain) at 1 Arena Plaza on Tuesday, April 12 from noon until 2:00 p.m.

“We’re sad but not surprised that these church officials won’t even reply to us, and feel like we have no choice now but to warn others about the reckless and callous actions of SGM/SGC officials by our presence outside the conference,” said Pam Palmer of Hagerstown, a former SGM member whose daughter was sexually abused in 1993 by a teenager and who plans to be in

Louisville at the protest. “We’ll be a small, peaceful group and hopefully we’ll be able to teach some people about this secretive, reckless denomination and maybe even reach one abuse victim who is still suffering in shame, silence and self-blame.”

“It’s reckless and callous when clergymen give prominent positions to colleagues who face charges of concealing child sex crimes,” said SNAP director David Clohessy. “It actually makes churches more dangerous. It discourages other church members and staff who see, suspect or suffer child sex crimes from speaking up. It emboldens those who commit and conceal child sex crimes.”

“Common sense and common decency would lead T4G officials to say ‘Look C. J., we’re just going to wait until this litigation is resolved before holding you out as a moral figure,’” said Palmer. “That would show compassion and prudence. But instead, these ministers all want to act as if these serious and pending charges don’t exist. And when they do this, they essentially encourage other church staff and members to hide child sex crimes.”

At least three prominent clergymen co-founded T4G. They are Al Mohler, President of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Mark Dever, President of 9Marks and Senior Pastor of Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, D.C. and Ligon Duncan, Chancellor/CEO of Reformed Theological Seminary in McLean, Virginia.

Besides Mahaney, several current SGC/SGM officials will be speaking at breakout sessions at the conference. They include Mark Prater, Executive Director, and Ian McConnell, Director of Church Planting and Mission.

SNAP wants them disinvited too.

For more than 30 years, Mahaney led both Covenant Life Church (CLC) in Gaithersburg, Maryland and SGM (now Sovereign Grace Churches). Multiple news sources have reported that he was forced to take a leave of absence as President of SGM in July, 2011 – in part, because of allegations of blackmail and abuses of power. ([link](#) [link](#))

In the midst of public controversy and leadership in-fighting, he fled CLC and began attending Mark Dever’s Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, D.C. Soon after, Mahaney hastily moved Sovereign Grace Ministry headquarters from CLC to Louisville, Kentucky. ([link](#) [link](#))

A few months later, in October 2012, victims of sexual abuse from Sovereign Grace filed a civil lawsuit against the denomination alleging longstanding conspiracy to cover-up sex abuse. The civil lawsuit grew to 11 plaintiffs before being dismissed because of statutes of limitations. A new civil lawsuit in Virginia, is slated to be filed against Sovereign Grace and related former churches in a few months.

Additionally, in October 2012, Nathaniel Morales, was arrested and eventually convicted of molesting three boys during the 1980s while he was a CLC youth and worship leader. While under oath during the criminal case, CJ Mahaney's brother-in-law and subordinate youth pastor, Grant Layman, admitted that he knew he should have reported Morales to law enforcement, but didn't. [\(link\)](#)

In an expose by The Washingtonian Magazine, reporter Tiffany Stanley wrote, "An investigation commissioned by CLC revealed that between 1990 and 2007 at least five members of the church's staff were told of Morales's abuse. None notified the police." [\(link\)](#)

Some say Mahaney was aware of or should have been aware of several serious reports of child sex abuse by Morales during the 1980s and following -- and that he and his pastoral staff did not report Morales to law enforcement.

In 2007, a group of CLC pastors, while CLC was still under CJ Mahaney's leadership, discussed Morales' sexual abuses and decided to not report him to law enforcement even though it had been reported to them that Morales had returned to ministry and was working as a pastor in Nevada. Several of these pastors publicly apologized in a church meeting for neglecting to report Morales after that meeting.

Mahaney was aware of or should have been aware of this 2007 decision by pastors within his flagship church to not report an alleged serial child molester, the lawsuit says.

According to sworn testimony at the Morales trial, a teenager told two pastors at CLC in 1991 about Morales abusing other kids, according to Brent Detwiler, a former SGM leader turned blogger:

[The two pastors] did nothing. This information would have been passed onto Mahaney by them. Obviously, he did nothing. His practice was not to report sex offenders. From then, until his arrest, Morales abused boys in different parts of the United States including two steps sons because he was not reported to police. The pastors at CLC who knew about Morales are largely to blame. At the time of his sentencing, criminal investigations were underway in five states. They were dropped once he was sentenced for what should be the remainder of his life. [\(link\)](#)

Sex abuse cases from Sovereign Grace Church of Fairfax located in Fairfax, Virginia were known of by Mahaney documented by email and phone conversations with victims and family members. It has been alleged that Mahaney was aware of legal mediation between the victims' family members and the church leaders because of sex abuse pastoral mishandling prior to the civil lawsuit. SGM, ostensibly under Mahaney's direction, sent a pastoral envoy, Kenneth Maresco, a pastor from CLC, to at least one of the mediation meetings. [\(link\)](#)

In addition, Detwiler says Mahaney knew of the sexual and physical abuses toward two victims in CLC by a wealthy member but that he and other pastors did not report to law enforcement. Instead, Mahaney and the other pastors, along with their families, were given an expensive vacation by the wealthy alleged perpetrator, Detwiler writes. ([link](#))

According to Detwiler, writing of Mahaney's leadership style in alleged sex abuse and cover-up cases: "I worked with C.J. for 30 years. Anyone withholding this kind of information from him would have been fired in all likelihood. He expected to be involved in things of much less importance." ([link](#))

Mahaney's complicity in the cover-up of child sexual abuse in SGM/SGC has been reported widely in the media. In a recent article in Baptist News Global, Bob Allen wrote of Mahaney's upcoming appearance at T4G16, states:

In 2012 Sovereign Grace Ministries announced a new program allowing transfer of credits from its Pastors College toward a master of divinity degree at Southern Seminary. The seminary broke off the relationship in 2014, after one of Mahaney's former associates testified during the criminal trial that church leaders knew about alleged abuse in the early 1990s but did not report it to the police. ([link](#))

Alleged victims of SGC/SGM predators and their family members and other concerned individuals have already privately and individually conveyed to some T4G conference organizers and scheduled speakers their strong objections to Mahaney and SGM officials speaking at the event.

"Every time an accused or admitted complicit church official is honored, it discourages victims, witnesses and whistleblowers from exposing predators, warning parents and protecting kids," Palmer emphasized. "Giving corrupt men like Mahaney praise and visibility adds to the already strong sense of powerlessness that many who saw, suspected and suffered clergy sex crimes feel. It decreases the chances they'll find the courage and hope needed to speak up about horrific wrongs. So it basically sanctions the concealing of sexual assaults against children."

In 2013, Boz Tchividjian of G.R.A.C.E (Godly Response to Abuse in the Christian Environment) a child sexual abuse awareness and victims advocacy group, released a petition in response to the SGM scandal, which was signed by over 1600 individuals, many whom are prominent in ministry and in professions related to serving sexual abuse victims.

G.R.A.C.E. begins the petition referring to the SGM sex abuse scandal promulgated under Mahaney's leadership:

Recent allegations of sexual abuse and cover-up within a well-known international ministry and subsequent public statements by several evangelical leaders have angered and distressed many, both inside and outside of the Church. These events expose the troubling reality that, far too often, the Church's instincts are no different than from those of many other institutions, responding to such allegations by moving to protect her structures rather than her children. This is a longstanding problem in the Christian world, and we are deeply grieved by the failures of the American and global Church in responding to the issue of sexual abuse. ([link](#))

A few days after this petition was released and only a month after the SBC's resolution was confirmed, T4G scrubbed their website of all the names of the co-founders – which prior, had prominently stressed the friendship connections of all co-founders to Mahaney for years, since the founding of the organization. ([link](#) [link](#))

After much public pressure, Mahaney bowed out from the most recent T4G conference held in 2014 because of the sex abuse cover-up allegations detailed in the 2012 civil lawsuit.

After the criminal conviction in 2014 of Morales on child sex charges, Mahaney was forced to resign from the board of The Gospel Coalition.

Since the controversy and scandal surrounding Mahaney, over half of the churches have left his denomination and over half of the members from the church he founded and led for over 30 years have left. Still, however, high profile Evangelical pastors have shared the stage with him.

The plenary speakers who are planning to share a stage with Mahaney are:

Ligon Duncan,

Albert Mohler,

Mark Dever,

John Piper,

Thabiti Anyabwile,

John MacArthur,

David Platt,

Matt Chandler,

Kevin DeYoung, and

R.C. Sproul (who cancelled as a plenary speaker citing health reasons – but is planning on possible participation in video).

A copy of SNAP's letter, sent last week by email to Together for the Gospel organization, is below:

Dear Drs. Mohler, Dever and Duncan:

We understand that C.J. Mahaney is a good friend of yours and a large financial contributor to many of your ministerial endeavors, and in fact a co-founder of Together for the Gospel. We understand that C.J. Mahaney has been in active pastoral ministry for over 40 years, is a well-liked preacher, author and conference speaker – and that you each have high regard for him.

However, we sincerely ask you to set aside your personal affiliation with C.J. Mahaney and instead focus upon the multitude of sexual abuse victims abused within the church that he personally founded and led as Senior Pastor and within the denomination for decades.

Furthermore, we beg you to consider the implications towards the Gospel message if victims of horrific, life-scarring sexual abuse victims are ignored and hurt again for the sake of the popularity of a preacher and the financial success of a conference. By allowing C.J. Mahaney to speak in an international place of prominence, you are inadvertently sending a message to all sexual abuse victims – and in particular those from within Sovereign Grace Churches - that their trauma is not worth your consideration.

Jesus said in a parable: “Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.” (ESV, Matthew 25:45b)

For their sake, and for the sake of still-vulnerable children within the entire Protestant church, we respectfully but urgently ask that you dis-invite C.J. Mahaney from speaking at the T4G16 conference.

C.J. Mahaney's complicity in the cover-up of child sexual abuse within his denomination is well-documented. At least 15 staff or members of SGM/SCG churches are accused of committing child sex crimes. We believe – and evidence suggests – that a number of top church officials knew of or suspected these crimes and ignored or hid them.

Even if you disagree, you must realize that our perception is shared by thousands of still-wounded child sex abuse victims and millions of Christians worldwide. Personally, you may think the world of Mahaney. However, letting him to have a place of honor within your organization's conference is tantamount to re-victimizing sex abuse victims. It is also tantamount

to telling other victims, witnesses and whistleblowers “Don’t bother speaking up. No one will care. No one will take action. No wrongdoer will be held accountable.”

In light of this, is it worth taking this risk and hurting this many?

Every time a complicit church official is honored, it discourages victims, witnesses and whistleblowers from exposing predators, warning parents and protecting kids. Giving corrupt men like Mahaney praise and visibility contributes to the already strong sense of powerlessness that many who saw, suspected and suffered sexual abuse within churches feel. It decreases the chances they'll find the courage and hope needed to speak up about horrific wrongs. Essentially, it sanctions the concealing of sexual assaults against children.

Please, gentlemen, for the protection of the vulnerable and the healing of the wounded, reconsider and rescind your invitation to C.J. Mahaney and his denominational colleagues.

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<http://www.christianitytoday.com/gleanings/2014/may/c-j-mahaney-joshua-harris-resign-from-gospel-coalition-sgm.html>

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/gleanings/2013/march/c-j-mahaney-leaves-leadership-of-sovereign-grace-ministries.html>

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