

# Lawsuit filed over accusation of sexual abuse that former Mississippi pastor says are 'untrue claims'

MOBILE, Ala. (BP and local reports) – A former Mississippi pastor and Southern Baptist seminary professor has filed suit against the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and 10 other individuals and entities connected to the SBC.



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The news of David Sills' May 23, 2018, resignation from Southern Seminary was first reported by the Biblical Recorder. Baptist Press later reported on Lyell's allegations of being sexually abused by Sills on March 8, 2019. The story was later removed and an explanation was issued on Oct. 15, 2019.

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In addition, the Executive Committee acknowledged “failure to report Ms. Lyell’s allegations of non-consensual sexual abuse were investigated and unequivocally corroborated by the SBC entities with authority over Ms. Lyell and her abuser.”

The suit claims David Sills never abused or forced himself on Lyell. It claims she “did initiate and affirmatively cultivate and maintain a personal and emotional relationship” with him. Named in Sills’ defamation suit are:

- Southern Baptist Convention.
- Ed Litton, former SBC president.
- Bart Barber, current SBC president.
- Willie McLaurin, interim SBC Executive Committee (EC) president/CEO.
- Rolland Slade, former chair of the SBC Executive Committee.
- Jennifer Lyell.
- Southern Seminary (SBTS).
- Albert Mohler, SBTS president.
- Lifeway, where Lyell was employed.
- Eric Geiger, former Lifeway executive.
- Guidepost Solutions, the third-party investigative firm secured in 2021 by the Sexual Abuse Task Force

The lawsuit also accuses the SBC, Lifeway, Lyell, Geiger, the Executive Committee, Litton, McLaurin, Rolland, SBTS and Mohler of “making an example out of SBC member and employee David Sills who, without controversy, had admitted to an affair with Lyell and willingly accepted the SBC requirement that he depart from his position at the Seminary.”

The suit claims these parties “saw an opportunity to improve the appearance and reputation of SBC’s handling of abuse cases, long under fire, even though there had not been any legitimate and proper investigation into the allegations, nor was Dr. Sills adequately informed of the specific nature and

extent of accusations made by Lyell.”

The filing also mentions the work of the Sexual Abuse Task Force (SATF) appointed in July 2021 by Litton following the 2021 SBC Annual Meeting in Nashville and their subsequent work with Guidepost Solutions in producing the report presented publicly on May 22, 2022.

The suit claims that Guidepost “perpetuated a false narrative” in its report and never reached out to the Sills during its investigation, while it gave “particular focus on and disproportionate page space dedicated to Lyell’s statements against Sills.”

It claims Litton “should have known that the phony ‘investigation’ he designed would not, and could not, yield the truth concerning Dr. Sills.”

A written statement from SBC special counsel Gene Besen of Dallas said, “The SBC Executive Committee is still evaluating the specious allegations within the complaint. We intend to vigorously defend ourselves from this troubling attempt to recast an accused perpetrator as the victim of an imaginary conspiracy. We look forward to our day in court.”

A series of questions posed by Baptist Press to Lyell’s attorney, Philip Elbert of Nashville, included one addressing the lawsuit’s venue.

“We will, of course, be looking at the issues of jurisdiction and venue in this case, as we do at the outset of every case,” Elbert said. “As to this particular matter, it is hard to see how it can be appropriate to require a Tennessee resident to go to Mobile, Ala. to litigate with a plaintiff from Mississippi.

“Rest assured, though, that regardless of venue, the case will be vigorously defended.”

Addressing Sills' charges, Elbert said "a plaintiff can allege anything. But, in the end facts matter. For her part, our client looks forward to the truth coming out in court."

Other defendants say they are in the process of responding. "The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary has followed best practices in this matter and has nothing to hide. We will make this truth clear in any forum necessary and we will do so vigorously," Mohler said.

"Lifeway was made aware of the lawsuit last week," said Carol Pipes, director of corporate communications. "Our legal team is in the process of reviewing the complaint and we do not have any further comment at this time."

Guidepost Solutions declined to comment, and requests for further comment from Sills' attorneys were not returned.