

# Appeals court rules in favor of Pressler accuser

March 2, 2021

HOUSTON (RNS)—A state appeals court ruled a sexual abuse lawsuit could go forward against Paul Pressler, a former judge and influential Southern Baptist who helped lead what supporters called a “conservative resurgence” in the denomination in the 1970s and 1980s.

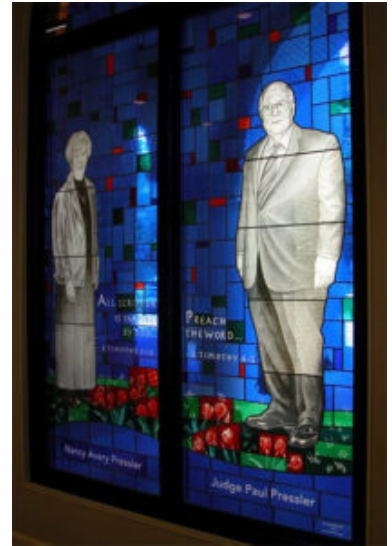
Gareld Duane Rollins Jr., who met Pressler in a Bible study when he was 14, sued Pressler in 2017, accusing the Southern Baptist legend of sexually abusing him for years, including an alleged rape in 1980. The alleged abuse continued until Rollins was in his 30s, according to the lawsuit.

Rollins, who also served as an assistant to Pressler, has alleged that the abuse led to a lifetime of struggles with addictions and troubles with the law.

Pressler, 90, has denied any wrongdoing.

A lower court dismissed the sexual assault claims in Rollins’ suit three years ago, citing the statute of limitations, but Rollins’ lawyers argued the trauma from abuse prevented him from realizing the alleged sexual relationship had been non-consensual, according to the appeals court ruling.

The appeals court ruled Feb. 25 that Pressler and other defendants in the case “did not conclusively negate” the argument made by Rollins’ lawyers and sent the lawsuit back to a lower court.



Paul Pressler (right) is depicted in a stained glass window that has been removed from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. (RNS Photo courtesy of Don Young Glass Studio)

In 2003, Rollins and Pressler had “an altercation in a Dallas hotel room,” according to court documents, leading Rollins to sue the Baptist leader for assault. That lawsuit was settled, with Pressler agreeing to pay Rollins \$1,500 a month for 25 years while Rollins agreed to keep the settlement and the 2003 altercation confidential. Rollins credited the counseling he received in prison for helping him realize he had been a victim of abuse.

Pressler and Paige Patterson, who was fired as president from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in 2018 for mishandling abuse claims, were key leaders in what is remembered by Southern Baptists as the “conservative resurgence.” The movement wrested power in the nation’s largest denomination from more moderate Baptists, who remember it as a “fundamentalist takeover.” The two were once among

SBC leaders commemorated in a series of stained-glass windows at Southwestern Seminary.

Those windows were removed after Paige's firing.

The appeals court also ruled that the Southern Baptist Convention, which is also being sued by Rollins, had failed to negate the "unsound mind tolling" argument case made by the defense.

"The convention was not involved or connected in any way with the harms that Mr. Rollins alleges," said James P. Guenther, attorney for the Southern Baptist Convention. "Additionally, the convention did not have control over or any duty to control Mr. Pressler or any of the other defendants.

"So, none of the facts necessary to assert any valid claim against the convention is present. The convention is simply not responsible if another defendant in this case engaged in any wrongdoing. In any event, we continue to monitor the developments in the case."