

# **Executive Committee reaches resolution with abuse survivor**

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NASHVILLE, Tenn. (RNS)—Southern Baptist leaders announced Feb. 22 they had reached a resolution with a sexual abuse survivor whose story was mishandled when she came forward in 2019.

Jennifer Lyell, a former publishing executive for Lifeway Christian Resources, told Baptist Press in 2019 she had experienced abuse for years at the hands of a former Southern Baptist seminary professor. She made her story public out of concerns her abuser was still in ministry outside the Southern Baptist Convention.

Instead, the abuse was characterized in a news story as a “morally inappropriate relationship.” As a result of the backlash from that news story—for which Baptist Press, the official SBC news service, later apologized—Lyell lost her reputation, her job and her health.

Pastor Rolland Slade, chairman of the Southern Baptist Convention’s Executive Committee, announced the resolution and an apology to Lyell during an afternoon meeting. The Lyell resolution was approved by the entire committee.

## **‘Failure to ... listen, protect and care’**

“The SBC Executive Committee acknowledges its failure to adequately listen, protect and care for Jennifer Lyell when she came forward to share her story of abuse by a seminary professor. Baptist Press failed to accurately report the sexual abuse Jennifer Lyell reported to two SBC entities and local Southern Baptist churches,” Slade said in a statement

Tuesday.

“The SBC Executive Committee acknowledges its failures to Ms. Lyell, including the unintentional harm created by its failure to report Ms. Lyell’s allegations of nonconsensual sexual abuse [that] were investigated and unequivocally corroborated by the SBC entities with authority over Ms. Lyell and her abuser. The SBC Executive Committee apologizes for all the hurt it has caused, is grateful for Ms. Lyell’s perseverance and engagement, and prays for her complete healing from the trauma she has endured,” he said.

Lyell told Religion News Service in 2021 she wished she had never gone public about her abuse. Instead of receiving support and compassion, she found herself trying to convince critics she was not responsible for the abuse she had experienced.

“It takes years and years to recover from trauma, and no one should be in the position of having to explain it to the whole public while they’re still trying to do that,” she told RNS at the time.

The Executive Committee’s treatment of Lyell long had been a concern for abuse advocates. Baptist leaders were criticized in 2019 at a Caring Well conference organized by the SBC’s Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission for failing to make things right with Lyell. That led to backlash from former leaders of the Executive Committee.

## **‘Trying to build a future’**

Lyell said in a statement Tuesday she had connected with Slade in the fall of 2021 about her ongoing dispute with the Executive Committee and potential legal claims. She met with attorneys for the Executive Committee and also shared her discussions with the Executive Committee as part of the Guidepost Solutions investigation into how the committee has

responded to abuse in the past. She also acknowledged the pain and suffering of other abuse survivors who have not experienced the kind of resolution she has from the SBC.

In her statement, Lyell thanked Slade and other Executive Committee officers and members, as well as their attorneys, for taking action. She also accepted the committee's apologies and thanked former Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission President Russell Moore and his wife, Maria, as well as attorney and abuse advocate Rachael Denhollander, for their friendship and support.

"As I've shared with those to whom I've been able to speak and to their lawyers, although this by no means restores what I've lost, I am grateful because it is the only action I could imagine that may at least make the ongoing damage stop," she said. "My focus will now turn to my health and trying to build a future."