

Former seminary prof named in Guidepost report sues SBC

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—David Sills, a former seminary professor and missionary who was fired after admitting sexual misconduct, has filed a second lawsuit against a group of Southern Baptist Convention leaders and entities, claiming they conspired to defame him.

In a complaint filed May 11 in the U.S. District Court for Middle Tennessee, Sills and his wife Mary claim he was made a scapegoat for the denomination's sex abuse crisis.

"After various mischaracterizations, misstatements, and contrived investigations by defendants, plaintiffs have been wrongfully and untruthfully labelled as criminals and shunned by the SBC and every other religious organization with which plaintiff Sills has tried to associate," the complaint alleges.

Sills lost his job as a professor of missions and cultural anthropology at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., in 2018 after admitting to what the complaint calls an "affair" with a former student.

In the complaint, Sills admits his conduct with the student, Jennifer Lyell, was inappropriate and says he was "repentant and obedient to the rules of the SBC."

But the complaint alleges that the seminary's president, Al Mohler, as well as members of the SBC Executive Committee, the SBC's former president, Lyell and others, then conspired to shame Sills, who alleges he has no longer been able to find work in Christian ministry. Sills now runs a real estate business in Jackson, Miss.

Sills made similar allegations in a lawsuit filed in Alabama state court last fall, alleging then as now that the supposed conspiracy against him was intended to burnish the reputation of the SBC during a major abuse crisis.

“The plaintiff’s decision to refile this lawsuit in Nashville was to be expected,” said Gene Besen, special counsel to the SBC, in an email. “As I’ve said before, the SBC Executive Committee will 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.”

Sills also sued Guidepost Solutions, a consulting firm hired by the SBC to conduct an investigation into how the denomination’s leaders treated survivors of abuse. That report, published a year ago, found that SBC leaders had mistreated abuse survivors for decades and tried to downplay the issue of abuse.

The Guidepost investigation was initiated at the direction of local church messengers to the SBC, who approved Guidepost’s involvement over the objections of top SBC leaders.

Even after the investigation was approved, a number of SBC leaders tried to limit its scope and restrict how much of Guidepost’s eventual report would become public.

Sills was named in the Guidepost report.

Guidepost declined to comment on the suit. Attorneys for Sills were not available for comment.

The details of Sills’ departure from Southern Seminary remained unknown until 2019, when he found a job with a different Christian ministry. Lyell then came forward, alleging Sills had been sexually abusive. She told her story to Baptist Press, the SBC’s official news publication.

When the story first was published, the Baptist Press changed the story to say that she had admitted an inappropriate relationship, causing a backlash against Lyell, then a vice president at Lifeway. Baptist Press later retracted the story and apologized to her, as did the SBC Executive Committee.

Mohler has confirmed repeatedly that Lyell reported abuse.

In the past, sexual misconduct by clergy has been described by the SBC as a “moral failing,” but increasingly such conduct is seen as an abuse of power. However, adult survivors of abuse often are seen as sinners and ostracized.

The Executive Committee’s treatment of Lyell was one of the issues that prompted the Guidepost Solutions investigation, which would lead to national headlines and eventually to a series of proposed reforms.

Disgraced former SBC President Johnny Hunt also sued the SBC and Guidepost, claiming his inclusion in its report was defamatory. Guidepost investigations found allegations that Hunt had sexually assaulted another pastor’s wife were credible. Hunt initially denied the allegations, then admitted he had a consensual immoral encounter.