

How will Pressler's downfall affect SBC abuse reform?

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—Paul Pressler long has been an eminent Texas Republican, having served as a state representative and judge in Houston. He also once served as the first vice president of the Southern Baptist Convention, but the title doesn't capture his true place in the firmament of the SBC.

As one of the architects of the so-called "conservative resurgence" that reshaped the convention beginning in the 1970s, he had been hailed by supporters for decades as a hero who helped rid SBC churches of a perceived creeping liberalism.

But recently, Gene Besen, a lawyer for the SBC, called Pressler, 93, [a "monster" and "a dangerous predator"](#) who leveraged his "power and false piety" to sexually abuse young men even as he was building his reputation as a conservative reformer.

"The man's actions are of the devil," Besen said, clarifying that he spoke in his personal capacity and not as a representative of the denomination. "That is clear."

What makes Pressler's case so enraging to many Southern Baptists, however, is that his abuse has been detailed for years. A lawsuit, filed by former Pressler assistant Duane Rollins claiming the older man abused him for decades, has been making its way through the courts since 2017. The suit, which named Pressler, the SBC and other Baptist entities, was [settled in December](#).

In 2004, the year Pressler first was elected vice president, his home church

warned in a letter about his habit of naked hot-tubbing with young men after a college student complained Pressler had allegedly groped him, according to the *Texas Tribune*.

That same year, Pressler agreed to pay \$450,000 to settle Rollins' earlier claim Pressler had assaulted him in a hotel room. When Pressler stopped making the agreed payments, Rollins sued again, this time alleging sexual abuse.

SBC slow to address sexual abuse

Pressler's downfall also symbolizes a wider failure to deal with sex abuse in the SBC.

In recent years, leaks from the denomination's headquarters in Nashville and legal filings have shown leaders stonewalling survivors attempting to force the denomination to face the scope of abuse happening in member churches.

The thousands of local church messengers, meeting once a year at an annual meeting, have voted for measures to identify abusers and keep them from being employed as pastors.



The Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee building in Nashville, Tenn. (Baptist Press Photo)

They did so after learning the SBC's Executive Committee, which runs the organization day to day, long acted to shield the SBC—and particularly its assets—from liability, a strategy that led the leaders and their attorneys to defend things that were “indefensible,” said Marshall Blalock, a South Carolina pastor and former chair of a task force appointed to address the scandal.

The leaders in Nashville have relied in part on the decentralized structure of the SBC, which they repeatedly claimed makes reforms impossible to implement. The 47,000 churches of the SBC are independent entities held together by a statement of their beliefs—the Baptist Faith and Message—and their contributions to the Cooperative Program unified budget.

The SBC's more than 13 million members donate nearly \$10 billion annually to their churches, nearly half a billion of which goes each year to fund cooperative ministries in the United States and abroad, including six seminaries and a world missionary force.

While the SBC has no top-down authority, its churches and ministries are interwoven, tied together by a network of state conventions, local associations and “weak ties”—friendships between pastors, leaders and lay people. Its institutions are overseen by volunteer trustees and a handful of staffers in the national office.

The only authority the SBC holds over its constituent churches, according to its leaders, is to kick out those considered no longer in “friendly cooperation” with its doctrine.

As a result, Southern Baptist leaders boast of their power to spread the gospel but take little responsibility when things go wrong. And local congregations have little power to fix things that are broken on a national level.

“The beauty of the SBC is that we’re local and autonomous,” said Adam Wyatt, a Mississippi pastor and member of the SBC Executive Committee. “The challenge is, we’re local and autonomous.”

How the SBC has evaded accountability

The lawsuits against Pressler have provided a window into just how SBC leaders have evaded accountability. In a 2012 email revealed in court documents, an SBC attorney crowed over a 2008 decision not to create a database of abusive pastors the SBC’s annual meeting had asked for. The lack of action on abuse enabled the leadership to avoid being sued after a church hired a music minister who was also a two-time abuser.

“This defendant was convicted and is serving a 10-year sentence in one case involving a very young girl,” the email read. “He was the music minister and had molested before, twice. The church knew and hired him anyway.”

In another email, an SBC vice president complained the denomination’s insurance company had made a small payment in another abuse case.

“Our insurer agreed to pay \$5,000 of a \$67,500 settlement figure,” wrote the vice president. “Made me mad that ANYTHING was paid on our account, but we are not in control of that decision, the insurance company is, and for them it is not about principle, it is about cutting their expenses.”

In 2021, messengers to the SBC annual meeting commissioned an investigation—which leaders made concerted efforts to derail—by the third-party firm Guidepost Solutions. Its 2022 report showed the lengths SBC leaders had gone to mistreat abuse survivors and stonewall any possibility of taking national action to address abuse. In response, the SBC annual

meeting called for a series of reforms.

Josh Wester of the SBC's abuse reform implementation task force said real reform is coming. Work continues on the long-anticipated database of abusers, known as Ministry Check, even though no names have been added to it yet. Wester said the task force is also looking for permanent funding to make the reforms stick—something that remains uncertain.

“We are trying to find a system that would work in accordance with Southern Baptist polity,” he said. Wester said he has seen change at the local level and in state conventions, but changing the SBC on a national level remains a difficult task.

“We are working aggressively on all of the ... things necessary to help our churches be safer places and to help keep dangerous people away from the vulnerable,” he said.

Abuse survivors see systemic problems



Paul Pressler (right) in a stained glass window that eventually was removed

from Southwestern Baptist
Theological Seminary.
(Photo courtesy of Don
Young Glass Studio)

But Christa Brown, an abuse survivor and longtime advocate for reform, said she sees no path to real reform. Brown recently called on members of the SBC task force charged with implementing reforms to resign, saying that while they have good intentions, the institution itself is untrustworthy.

“I believe they’re simply lending credibility to a process that is wholly polluted,” said Brown, author of a forthcoming book *Baptistland*.

Brown tracks the problem back to the conservative takeover of the SBC Pressler set in motion, to which all of the current leaders owe their rise. It explains why few have criticized him publicly, she said, even after details of his abuse became known, and why few have empathized with Pressler’s victims, including Rollins.

“None of them seem to have an ounce of respect for Duane, who brought truth to the table,” she said.

Attorney and abuse advocate Rachael Denhollander, an abuse survivor whose testimony helped convict former USA Gymnastics doctor and serial abuser Larry Nasser, said [documents from Pressler’s trial](#) show the SBC’s lawyers knew all along the abuse allegations were true and that SBC leaders should have known as well.

“Scripture tells us that when a leader falls, you are to rebuke him in the face of all so that he will become a warning,” she said. “The principle behind that is, as far as his reach has gone, that’s as far as the rebuke goes. If you have helped spread his platform, you have a responsibility to undo what you did.”

After the Rollins lawsuit was settled in December, Danny Akin, the longtime president of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, told RNS: “We can’t deny the reality of the accusations. You’ve got too many people stacked up that were ready to testify.”

But Akin said he still believes in the ideals of the resurgence. He said Southern Baptists will need to acknowledge their sins and abuse when teaching about the conservative resurgence.

Some younger Southern Baptist leaders also have denounced Pressler. They include Wyatt, who said Southern Baptists can appreciate the accomplishments of the conservative resurgence and still repudiate the wrongdoing of its leaders.

The sound of silence

Wyatt, who declined to comment on the committee’s settlement in the Rollins lawsuit, said he has been more concerned about what SBC leaders knew about Pressler’s past misconduct.

“How could you know and not say something?” he said.

He hopes Southern Baptists will be more concerned about the character of their leaders than they have been in the past.

“I just hope that we’ve learned enough to know that we don’t need to platform people we don’t trust. It seems like a no-brainer to me,” he said.

One Southern Baptist voice that has been notably silent about Pressler is Al Mohler, longtime president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and perhaps the most prominent theologian in SBC circles. A spokesman for Mohler did not respond to requests for comment.

Karen Swallow Prior, a professor of English who has taught in evangelical

Christian schools for decades, said the SBC can't escape the failings of the conservative resurgence. She said she became a Southern Baptist because she believed the resurgence was about the Bible. Now she suspects it was about power.

"It's the convenient myth that the SBC has told us for the past several decades," she said.

Prior said those who raised questions about abusive leaders in the SBC eventually were told they were not welcome—while figures like Patterson and Pressler were allowed to remain.

She worries the abuse reforms will fail, and that that failure will break the SBC.

"My best guess is that this is the hill they will die on," she said. "And how long that will take, only God knows."