

# Lyell deposition revealed details of alleged abuse

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*CAUTION: This report contains sensitive descriptions of sexual abuse.*

DALLAS (RNS)—In early April, Jennifer Lyell, a former Christian publishing executive, sat for a deposition in a defamation lawsuit filed by her once mentor and professor David Sills.

There she detailed alleged sexual and spiritual abuse by Sills in graphic detail—and insisted he had coerced her into sexual acts without her consent, and then asked her to join him at family meals afterward.



Abuse survivor and former Lifeway vice president Jennifer Lyell died June 7. She was 47.

“But he always knew that I never, ever wanted any instance,” she said in an excerpt from her April 10 deposition. “And I always, always tried to stop it.”

Lyell died June 7 after suffering a series of strokes. She was 47. A few weeks before she died, her lawyer filed excerpts of her deposition in a federal court as part of a legal battle over discovery in the defamation lawsuit.

Attorneys for Sills had filed a motion to compel discovery of a number of things, including notes from Lyell's counseling sessions. Lyell's lawyers argued those notes were privileged and should not be turned over.

## **Deposition provides details of alleged abuse**

The excerpts from Lyell's deposition, filed as part of the response to the discovery requests, revealed additional details about the alleged abuse by Sills. In excerpts from the deposition, Lyell describes being forced to perform sexual acts despite telling Sills no.

"I resisted—attempted to resist verbally, physically squirming, reasoning, no, all these things," she said in her deposition, adding Sills would often corner her and not allow her to get away.

The conflict over discovery is the latest chapter in the legal battle between Sills and leaders of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Sills, a former seminary professor, claimed SBC leaders defamed him by including his name in a report on the issue of sexual abuse published in 2022. Sills has admitted to misconduct but claimed it was consensual and denied in court documents that he was abusive.

Lyell, a former vice president of Lifeway, also was named in the lawsuit. In 2019, she went public with her allegations against Sills. But few details of the abuse had been revealed until the May 20 court filing.

Along with abuse, Lyell also described spiritual manipulation by Sills—a longtime missionary and seminary professor—saying she was made to feel as if she somehow tempted Sills into sexual activity.

# Lyell's deposition recounts coercion

According to Lyell's deposition, Sills often coerced her into sexual activity while she was visiting his home, and while family members also still were in the house.

Sills, a family friend and surrogate father figure, would go from being encouraging and parental to abusive and back again, Lyell alleged in her deposition, claiming that not long after forcing her to perform sex acts, Sills would lead his family and Lyell in prayers at the dinner table.

Following a sex act, Sills allegedly would tell her to repent for what she had done—warning her that once she repented, she never could tell anyone about what had happened.

“And then he had rules, such as that after you repent, because of 1 John 1:9, that you can never speak of whatever you've repented of, or that's blasphemous. And so, I was stuck without a way to figure out how to navigate the, all of the confusing and seemingly conflicting dynamics.”

In the deposition excerpts, Lyell said that at first, she blamed herself, saying something “broken” in her was causing Sills to act in an abusive manner. She eventually realized he wanted the sexual activity and she was not causing him to sin, according to the deposition excerpts.

Attorneys for Sills did not respond to a request for comment. A mediation session in the Sills lawsuit in late April failed to reach a resolution earlier this spring.

Court documents also mentioned claims of alleged sexual misconduct involving another woman who had sought spiritual counsel from Sills for her troubled marriage. Sills' lawyers are attempting to block her from being deposed.

“Plaintiffs moved to prohibit the deposition of that witness, who is expected to testify that David Sills took advantage of her vulnerability after she and her husband came to him for counseling concerning their marriage and manipulated her into giving him oral sex,” according to a document filed by Lyell’s lawyers.

## **SBC still dealing with lawsuits**

Lyell’s death and the excerpts from her deposition come at a time when the Southern Baptist Convention is in Dallas for its annual meeting. During that meeting, SBC messengers will have to vote on how to pay ongoing legal bills from a sex abuse crisis, including Sills’ lawsuit.

The Sills lawsuit is one of three suits, filed by Southern Baptist leaders accused of alleged abuse, against the nation’s largest Protestant denomination.

Over the past four years, the Executive Committee, which oversees the Southern Baptist Convention’s business between annual meetings, has spent more than \$13 million in legal fees, depleting most of its reserves.

The committee took out a \$3 million loan and put its Nashville headquarters up for sale.

## **SBC messengers asked to approve \$3 million**

Now the Executive Committee has asked messengers to approve a \$3 million allocation from the denomination’s Cooperative Program, which funds national ministries and overseas missions for the nation’s largest Protestant denomination.

Jeff Iorg, president of the Executive Committee, told committee members in a meeting on Monday there is “an end in sight for these high legal costs.”

“We are not there yet,” he said. Iorg also told SBC leaders he hopes the lawsuits will be concluded soon.

“While many have joined me in lamenting this action,” Iorg said, referring to the allocation request submitted to the messengers, “I also believe most leaders understand the need for it and will support it.”

An investigation by the U.S. Department of Justice, which led to about \$2 million in legal fees, recently concluded with no charges filed.

In March, a federal judge dismissed most of the charges in a defamation lawsuit filed by former SBC President Johnny Hunt. The Hunt lawsuit and the Sills suit have cost more than \$3 million to defend.

The SBC is also appealing a ruling by a Tennessee judge in a defamation case filed by Preston Garner, a worship leader and teacher, who says the denomination’s Credentials Committee told a church where he’d been hired about allegations of abuse at a former congregation. That disclosure cost Garner his job.

The SBC has sought to have the suit dismissed, saying the courts have no jurisdiction over what is an internal religious debate. So far, Tennessee courts have disagreed.

Lyell’s name was not mentioned during the Executive Committee’s June 8 meeting nor at a panel on abuse sponsored by the committee later that day. In 2022, the Executive Committee apologized to Lyell for running a news story that referred to her allegations of abuse as an affair.