

Rollins, who sued Pressler for sex abuse, has died

May 28, 2025

(RNS)—Gareld Duane Rollins, whose lawsuit accusing a powerful Southern Baptist leader of abuse sparked a crisis in the nation's largest Protestant denomination, died May 23.

"The abuse he suffered by those touting their religion is unimaginable," said Michael Goldberg, an attorney for law firm Baker Botts, which represented Rollins. "This could not have happened if not for supposed good people keeping quiet. There are no innocent bystanders."

News of Rollins' death was first made public by journalist Robert Downen, who had covered Rollins' lawsuit against Texas judge Paul Pressler, an influential Southern Baptist Convention lay leader, for years.

Downen, a senior writer for *Texas Monthly*, said Rollins, who had long suffered from health issues and was in his late 50s, had been in hospice care the last time the two had talked. Still, his death came as a shock.

"His life was cut short just as he was freeing himself from the thing that had defined him for so long," Downen said.

The two had met by happenstance. Downen had been working at a courthouse as a reporter for the *Houston Chronicle* when he came across a notice about a filing in Rollins' lawsuit against Pressler. It would lead to years of reporting about the case and abuse in the SBC.

Downen said Rollins was a person of deep faith, which sustained his long battle to recover from abuse. His story also was complicated. Rollins had dealt with addiction for years and had served time in prison, and few

people believed his story of abuse at the hands of a powerful faith leader.

But he shared his story with Downen, starting in 2019.

“He really trusted me—when there were all the reasons in the world to be totally distrustful,” Downen said.

Alleged continued abuse and cover-up



Paul Pressler in a video from 2015.
(Video screen grab via RNS)

In 2017, Rollins sued Pressler, who died in 2024, alleging years of sexual abuse by the judge, who had been Rollins’ mentor and Bible study teacher. Rollins also alleged that church leaders knew of the abuse and covered it up to protect Pressler’s reputation.

During that lawsuit, Rollins revealed he had sued Pressler in 2004, claiming Pressler assaulted him at a hotel room, and he said Pressler had agreed to pay \$450,000 to settle the suit.

Rollins sued for a second time after Pressler reneged on the settlement, alleging the judge had begun sexually abusing him as a teenager.

“According to Rollins’s suit, Pressler began molesting him after they met at a Bible study group led by Pressler,” reads a description of the abuse

allegations in a Texas appeals court ruling.

“Pressler told Rollins that the sexual abuse was divinely sanctioned but needed to be kept secret because only God would understand it.”

By the time Rollins came forward with abuse allegations, the civil statute of limitations had run out and his lawsuit was dismissed by a lower court.

But the Texas Supreme Court overruled in 2022, after Rollins’ lawyers successfully argued that trauma from abuse had suppressed Rollins’ memories for years.

The lawsuit, which was settled in 2023, undermined much of the mythology that had grown around Pressler during the so-called conservative resurgence in the Southern Baptist Convention.

Pressler was one of the key architects of the resurgence and was long known as a GOP activist who railed against what he saw as the moral decay of America.

Pressler long claimed he left a Texas Presbyterian church where he’d been a youth leader to return to help the SBC save itself from liberals. But documents filed in the lawsuit revealed Pressler had been fired from the church after a teenager accused him of abuse.

Documents also revealed First Baptist Church in Houston had warned Pressler in 2004 to stop his habit of naked hot tubbing with young men after one of them accused Pressler of sexual misconduct. Other young men also alleged abuse by Pressler as the lawsuit made its way through the courts.

Prompted the ‘Abuse of Faith’ investigative report

Rollins’ lawsuit inspired Downen and other reporters from the *Houston Chronicle* and *San Antonio Express-News* to launch “Abuse of Faith,” an investigation that found hundreds of cases of abuse in the SBC.



In a video interview, Marshall Blalock (left), chairman of the SBC’s Abuse Reform Implementation Task Force, talked with Samantha Kilpatrick (right) of Guidepost Solutions about the organization’s new Faith-Based Solutions division. Heather Evans (center), a counselor and member of the previous Sexual Abuse Task Force, joined the conversation.(Screen Grab Image)

That opened the door for the denomination’s 2022 Guidepost report, which found SBC leaders had tried to downplay the severity of abuse in the SBC for years—and had mistreated survivors who came forward.

That report led to a series of reforms meant to address abuse in the SBC, and to SBC leaders apologizing to abuse survivors.

Over the Memorial Day weekend, abuse survivors and advocates paid tribute to Rollins.

“Duane was the courageous survivor who brought truth to light about the many crimes and abuses of the infamous Paul Pressler,” wrote activist and abuse survivor Christa Brown in commenting on Rollins’ passing on her Substack.

“He did it at enormous personal cost and despite decades of unfathomable suffering. We all owe Duane a debt of gratitude. Truth matters.”

Downen said Rollins had often wanted to give up during his long legal struggle but persevered because he knew the power his story could have.

“Duane did not come forward because he wanted a reckoning in the Southern Baptist Convention. He came forward because he needed to, and he wanted justice after a lifetime of trauma,” Downen said.

“His story shows how simply doing the right thing can have profound impact on people across the world.”