

Southern Baptist layman Paul Pressler subject of sex abuse suit

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—Paul Pressler, a key figure in the self-identified “conservative resurgence” in the Southern Baptist Convention in the late 1970s and early ’80s, is fighting a lawsuit by a former office assistant who alleges the onetime Texas appeals court judge sexually abused him over the course of several decades.

Gareld Duane Rollins Jr. filed the \$1 million suit Oct. 18 in the District Court in Harris County.

The plaintiff, now in his 50s, claims he was abused by Pressler starting when he was in his midteens, continuing when he was hired as a “boy Friday” in the judge’s home office and ending around 2014 when Rollins was rearrested and imprisoned for driving while intoxicated.

Pressler denies all allegations

In a court document responding to the claims, Pressler and his wife, Nancy, a co-defendant, “categorically deny each and every allegation.”

Pressler’s attorney, Ted Tredennick, said the suit’s claims cannot be taken seriously.

“Mr. Rollins is clearly a deeply troubled man, with a track record of multiple felonies and incarceration, and it is the height of irresponsibility that anyone would present such a bizarre and frivolous case,” according to a statement from Tredennick.

The 40-page suit describes sexual acts that allegedly occurred around the time Pressler enrolled Rollins in a Bible study at First Baptist Church in Houston. The suit says Pressler told Rollins he should consider the alleged rape “our secret, our freedom, no one but God would understand.”

Rollins’ attorney who filed the suit, Daniel Shea, is a Houston lawyer and former Catholic deacon who previously represented young men who alleged they were sexually abused by a seminarian who fled to his native Colombia after the charges arose. That case was settled in 2008.

Legal documents filed in the suit against Pressler, now in his 80s, contain letters he wrote on behalf of Rollins to a parole board reviewing his status after he was charged with forgery and driving under the influence. The suit says Rollins turned to drugs and alcohol—leading to multiple DUI arrests—as a response to the alleged abuse.

In one letter, Pressler mentions plans to employ Rollins after the younger man was granted parole and released from rehab.

Seminary and church named in suit

The suit also names as defendants Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and its president, Paige Patterson, and Houston’s First Baptist Church, and claims they are liable for their professional, personal or denominational connections with Pressler.

The legal document also goes into the movement led by Pressler and Patterson starting in 1979 that turned the Southern Baptist Convention in a more conservative direction after deep theological battles. It claims the movement was focused on power, which the suit called “a key ingredient in the abuse of children and women.”

Mark Lanier, a Houston lawyer representing Patterson and his seminary,

rejected the allegations, saying they are “riddled with errors and falsehoods.”

“We will diligently defend the fine reputation of Dr. Patterson and SWBTS in court,” he said, referring to the seminary.

Jared Woodfill, who along with his Houston-based Woodfill Law Firm was also named as a defendant, said Rollins’ suit has no grounds. The suit describes Woodfill as a principal of the firm that succeeded one whose leadership he shared with Pressler.

“This is a frivolous lawsuit filed by an ex-con in an attempt to extort money from the Pressler family, Paige Patterson, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, First Baptist Church of Houston and me,” he said. “We will fight this case until we win and justice is served.”

The church responded with a statement saying the allegations about it date to the 1980s, and “we do not believe that any former or current staff members had knowledge of or involvement with any of the conduct forming the basis of the allegations.”

Rollins’ suit, which seeks relief for alleged “severe mental injuries,” claims the other defendants were “co-conspirators” or “joint enterprisers” or otherwise liable for their professional, personal or denominational connections with Pressler.

“There are no allegations that any of the other defendants were physical perpetrators,” Shea said in an interview.