

Lawsuit alleges SBC 'conspiracy' to cover up abuse claims

by [Mark Wingfield](#) in the [September 22, 2021](#) issue



Hannah Kate Williams (center left) accompanies Tennessee pastor Grant Gaines as he introduces a motion for a sexual abuse task force during the 2021 Southern Baptist Convention annual meeting in June. (RNS photo by Kit Doyle)

A sweeping lawsuit filed by a victim of alleged sexual abuse at the hands of her Baptist pastor father alleges a conspiracy among several Southern Baptist Convention entities and individuals to defame her and squelch her pleas for relief.

The suit, filed in Kentucky's Franklin County circuit court on August 16, is brought by Hannah Kate Williams, who has been an outspoken advocate for the SBC to address problems of sexual abuse in churches. Her work contributed to a decision by convention messengers in June to name a special task force to investigate the SBC Executive Committee's handling of sexual abuse claims.

Williams alleges that 12 named defendants “have engaged in a defamatory conspiracy to marginalize and negate her advocacy in the perverted and un-Christian desperate hope that the denomination can skirt its own culpability in the damage inflicted” upon Williams by her father, James Ray Williams.

Her claim is linked to letters from Russell Moore, former head of the SBC Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, that became public just before the SBC annual meeting in June and that document some SBC leaders attempting to discredit and silence claims of sexual abuse. Based on Moore’s documentation, the suit alleges, it is likely that Williams was one of those the SBC leaders were seeking to discredit or silence.

The suit lists eight instances in which individuals named as defendants used social media to publicly discredit Williams, calling her a liar, an ungodly person, a political operative, sick, evil, and a fraud.

The lawsuit names the SBC Executive Committee, Southern Seminary, Lifeway Christian Resources, Williams’s father, and eight other SBC figures, including Georgia pastor Mike Stone, who narrowly failed in his bid to become president of the SBC this summer.

Stone served as chairman of the SBC Executive Committee at the time the alleged mishandling of sexual abuse claims occurred. He and Executive Committee president Ronnie Floyd were singled out in the Russell Moore correspondence for mishandling or attempting to squelch claims of sexual abuse in SBC churches.

Williams has been telling the same story of her abusive childhood home for several years, and according to other press reports at least two of her four younger siblings now have leveled accusations of abuse at their parents. Williams, 26, is the eldest daughter of James and Regina Williams, who currently live in Frankfort, Kentucky.

The conduct Williams alleges against her father begins when she was around age four or five, when she says her pastor father began “baptizing” her in the home bathtub as punishment for misbehavior. The week of her eighth birthday, she alleges, her father began sexually abusing her, beginning a pattern that she describes as “ongoing and regular.”

During this time, her father was both a student and an employee of Southern Seminary, where he was jointly employed by Lifeway to run the campus Baptist

Bookstore.

According to the lawsuit, Williams first reported her abuse to a Southern Seminary employee in the summer of 2003. The suit contends that the child's report to an adult of sexual abuse in her home did not prompt an investigation or any known follow-up. Also during this time, her father, as a seminary student, received several pastoral placements in Baptist churches facilitated by the seminary.

In October 2019, Williams, then age 24, sought once again to obtain justice from Southern Seminary. She and one of her brothers met with seminary president Al Mohler and told him the story of their abuse. According to the lawsuit, their intent was to find some way to hold their father accountable for his wrongdoing and to protect younger siblings still living in the home.

Mohler, according to their account, said he would pray for the family and then had no further contact with them.

In response to the new lawsuit, Mohler issued a 660-word statement confirming that he met with Williams and her brother as the suit claims.

"Immediately upon learning of this matter, Southern Seminary reported this to the Louisville Metro Police Department, the Sex Crimes Unit, and the Crimes Against Children Unit," he wrote. "These are serious allegations, and I was saddened by the story that Hannah Kate and Micah told me and the pain that they obviously had endured. . . . I still take seriously these allegations and hope that the authorities will conduct a full investigation."

Despite Williams's claim that neither she nor her brother heard anything more from Mohler after their meeting, Mohler said that after the meeting, "we worked to identify individuals within Southern Seminary with whom we could talk who had known about this abuse and neglect, which had reportedly taken place more than a decade earlier. Despite our efforts, we found no one who told us they had any knowledge of such abuse and neglect or who had taken any steps to conceal it. Hannah Kate indicated she had told a student at Southern at the time, but that student was deceased, and we could not find anyone to corroborate this."

For its part, the Executive Committee issued a two-sentence response: "The Executive Committee is aware of the filing, and it takes allegations of any form of abuse seriously. The Executive Committee will review the pleading and will respond

appropriately in court, not in the media.”

Williams’s lawsuit against the Executive Committee and others comes at a precipitous time, due to the recent formation of the SBC’s special task force investigating allegations of mishandled sexual abuse claims. That task force has just begun its work. Five of its seven members are men, including the two leaders.

On August 6, the task force issued a public call for proposals from firms interested in conducting the review, apparently indicating that the task force is not committed to Guidepost Solutions, the firm previously hired by the Executive Committee. —Baptist News Global