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Two Baptist ministers apologize after women bring forth accusations

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By Donna Fielder / Staff Writer - Denton Record-Chronicle

Two Denton-area Baptist ministers have apologized in the wake of lawsuits filed by women who allege the ministers molested them as teenagers.

Larry Reynolds, pastor of the Southmont Baptist Church in Denton, and Dale "Dickie" Amyx, pastor of the Bolivar Baptist Church near Sanger, were accused in separate lawsuits filed in June of molesting girls who sought their counseling when the girls were 14. Each also was accused of continuing to sexually exploit his position of trust with the girls for several years.

Different women made the allegations, and the lawsuits are not connected.

Reynolds said he could not comment for this story, and Amyx gave a one-sentence response when reached by telephone Thursday.

"I talked to my lawyer and he said to refer all questions to him," Amyx said.

Each man is accused in the civil lawsuits of crimes that would have been first-degree felonies with possible life sentences had the girls told authorities at the time. Neither girl told anyone about the incidents until the statute of limitations had passed for criminal prosecution. In cases involving juveniles, victims can report a crime until 10 years after their 18th birthday. Both women are now older than 28.

Reynolds is the only pastor Southmont has ever known. He became its first minister in 1979. Southmont is one of the largest Baptist churches in Denton and lies in the Southridge neighborhood in south Denton. The church carries on numerous programs in the community, beginning with pre-kindergarten children and continuing with Bible study and mentoring programs for all ages through adulthood.

As part of a settlement agreement, Reynolds issued an apology at a church Thanksgiving banquet Nov. 19, saying he was happy to report that all parties would soon be "dismissed" from the suit and that he needed to read a prepared statement "to bring closure to this process."

(The suit itself was not dismissed but was settled to the agreement of both parties.)

"Twenty years ago, I made a terrible mistake," the 59-year-old pastor said at the banquet, calling it a "lapse in judgment" that "caused one of our parishioners great harm."

"I confess that proper boundaries were not kept," he said.

He asked forgiveness of Katherine Roush, God and the church.

Amyx, as well, said he regretted his actions.

In a sworn deposition Nov. 14, Amyx, 61, said, "I told her many times I never meant to hurt her, and if I did, I'm sorry. And she always said that it was OK."

The Denton Record-Chronicle typically does not publish the names of sexual abuse victims, but both women have made their names public to shed light on the issue of clergy abuse.

Roush, now 37, who lives in Houston, alleged in a lawsuit filed in June that Reynolds began molesting her when she was 14, after he began counseling her. By the time she was 15, Reynolds was having intercourse with her. That lasted until she was 20, according to court documents. Reynolds was in his mid- to late 30s during that time.

That suit has been settled out of court with a cash award to Roush, reportedly "comfortably in six figures," according to a friend of Roush's who lives near her in Houston. But none of the litigants will talk about the settlement.

Several people familiar with the case said there is a confidentiality clause in the settlement.

In the second suit, Debbie Vasquez, now 46, filed a lawsuit in June alleging that Amyx began touching her inappropriately when she was under his counseling at the age of 14. The suit alleges Amyx began having sex with her when she was 15. It alleges that Amyx is the father of a child she bore at age 18.

In a sworn deposition that is part of the lawsuit, Amyx admits paternity and says he paid child support for nine years.

Reynolds' suit

In her lawsuit, Roush sued Reynolds, Southmont Baptist Church, the Denton Baptist Association, the Baptist General Convention of Texas and the Southern Baptist Convention.

In court documents, Roush alleged that her family began attending Southmont when she was 13. She was having problems at home, according to the suit, and sought counseling from Reynolds. The suit alleges Reynolds began asking her to baby-sit his children and began touching her inappropriately on the ride home. By the time she was 15, the touching had become intercourse, according to the suit. He molested her at various locations, including the church, the document states.

"Defendant Reynolds professed his love to Plaintiff verbally and in writing," according to the documents. "Defendant Reynolds promised Plaintiff that when she got older, he would leave his wife and marry her, creating a belief, relied on by Plaintiff, furthering the sickness of Plaintiff, that he would lovingly return to her," the documents state.

The suit states that Roush realized when she was 35 that he never had any intention of marrying her.

Her attorney, Catherine Herrington of Houston, declined comment on her client's behalf.

Reynolds declined comment also.

"While I would very much like to be able to tell you my side of the story concerning the allegations that were made against me, I am not allowed to do so," Reynolds wrote in an e-mail to the Denton Record-Chronicle.

Gary Loudermilk, executive director of the Denton Baptist Association, declined to comment.

Attorneys for the state and regional Baptist associations did not return telephone messages asking for comment.

Church members asked for comment declined. In an e-mailed message Nov. 28, Southmont Minister of Administration James Crittenden asked the newspaper not to run the story.

"No amount of occupational responsibility [i.e. I'm just doing my job] could warrant the destruction of the subject parties and the cause of Christ," he wrote. "The lawsuit has been resolved complete with a public apology to the plaintiff and the church body. What possible constructive outcome could be gained by the publishing of such an article after the resolution of same?"

Roush's mother, Sandy Lyons, said she learned about the allegations when she visited her daughter at an alcohol and drug rehabilitation hospital in Arizona about a year and a half ago. Suppressed shame and anxiety over the abuse had driven her daughter to self-medicate, she said.

She had no idea of the abuse when her daughter was young, Lyons said. She thought the counseling Reynolds offered would help Katherine, who was reacting badly to her parents' divorce and her mother's remarriage.

"There was a great distance between her and us. ... She was not ready to accept Dennis [her stepfather] as a father figure. She needed a father figure, and Larry showed a lot of interest. He eventually took her away from us," Lyons said. "We had no idea what was really going on."

The Lyonses went to the rehabilitation center in May 2005 as part of Roush's therapy, her mother said. Reynolds also was there, she said.

"We wondered what he was doing there," she said.

Sandy Lyons said they learned about the molestation at the rehabilitation center.

She said that she has confronted Reynolds since she learned about the abuse.

"I said, 'Why?' And he said, 'I don't know why.'"

Therapists encouraged Roush to file a lawsuit to bring the issue to light so that, if there were any more women being victimized, they might come forward, Lyons said.

Lyons said everything she knows about the case she learned before her daughter signed the confidentiality agreement.

Now, Roush won't talk about what happened, her mother said.

Sandy and Dennis Lyons and other relatives attended Southmont's Thanksgiving dinner when Reynolds made the apology, and they videotaped it. The apology was too vague and was not made at a church service, which is what they thought he had agreed to do, Lyons said.

All those years ago, she said, she thought her daughter was safe with a minister. She is distressed to find out she was not.

"As my pastor, I loved him and trusted him. He hurt me, too," she said.

Dennis Lyons said the couple no longer attends Southmont. He believes the church needs to examine the fitness of its pastor for the pulpit. He believes the pastor and the church members are "in denial" about what happened, he said.

“He is a very loving pastor. A caring person. But he won’t deal with it the way he needs to deal with it,” Dennis Lyons said. “We have nothing against the Southmont Baptist Church. We feel like God has to start at the top and work down.”

The Lyonses term the settlement agreement “hush money.”

“He’s hiding behind that agreement,” Sandy Lyons said.

Sissy Davis is Roush’s neighbor and close friend in Houston. She said in a telephone interview that she learned soon after she met Roush about three years ago that she had been sexually exploited and was damaged emotionally by it. She learned about a settlement before Roush signed a confidentiality agreement, she said.

“He paid a comfortable six-figure amount of hush money tied to a confidentiality agreement to ensure this stayed secret,” she wrote in an e-mailed message.

“He absolutely messed with her life, big time,” Davis said in a phone interview. “She doesn’t trust men. She doesn’t trust God. She is an absolutely gorgeous woman, and she has never married.”

Amyx’s suit

Amyx has been pastor of the Bolivar Baptist Church since 1979. He served as pastor for an Arizona church for a time, and before that was a minister at the now-defunct Calvary Baptist Church in Lewisville. The Bolivar church recently moved to a large new building in the Bolivar community near Sanger.

Amyx said he could not comment and his attorney, James Harrison, said it would not be appropriate to comment during pending litigation.

Vasquez’s lawsuit, which lists Amyx and Bolivar Baptist Church as defendants, seeks damages for personal and mental injury, past and future reasonable medical costs, and past and future mental anguish. The suit also asks for punitive damages.

Vasquez, who would not say where she lives, alleges she met Amyx at Calvary Baptist Church in Lewisville. She came from an abusive family, according to her lawsuit, and at age 14, sought counseling from Amyx, who was an associate minister.

He took her on long drives to discuss her problems and began touching her sexually, the lawsuit said. When she was 15, he began having intercourse with her, the lawsuit alleges.

“She begged him to stop and told him that he was hurting her, and his typical response was that she would ‘get used to it,’” according to the lawsuit.

Amyx threatened the teen at times with guns and other times with knives, once firing a gun close to her head, according to the suit. He threatened to harm her if she ever betrayed him, the suit stated.

Vasquez became pregnant at age 18 and told church authorities that Amyx was the father.

“They forced her to confess before the entire congregation the fact that she was an unwed pregnant teen-aged girl and to ask for forgiveness,” her lawsuit states. “She was also directed never to tell anyone that Amyx was the father of the child she was carrying.”

“Amyx by contrast was never required to confess to the congregation that he had committed the crime of raping a young girl under his ministry. Instead, Calvary Baptist Church simply assisted in Amyx’s transfer to a church in Arizona for a period of time.”

The suit alleges the abuse continued through Vasquez’s college years and that he stalked her even as she moved from city to city to try to escape his attentions.

The suit alleges that Bolivar Baptist Church “knew or should have known” about the abuse when he was hired and that he was acting as an agent of that church when some of the abuse happened.

In its court filings, the church argued that Vasquez had never attended church there and that none of the alleged abuse occurred there.

Vasquez said in a telephone interview recently that, as a teen, she was looking for someone to talk to about the problems in her family and turned to Amyx.

“I thought he was someone I could trust,” she said. “I was trying to find someone to tell, and he hurt me instead.”

Vasquez said that she was terrified after the gun was fired near her head and that church officials had told her that what happened was her fault. She was ashamed and scared, she said. Amyx told her he had killed people in Vietnam and had no problem with that, she said.

“After the gun, I pretty much did what he wanted me to,” she said.

Before she filed the lawsuit, Vasquez tried contacting the Baptist General Convention of Texas. The convention keeps a confidential list naming Baptist pastors who either have confessed or had substantial evidence presented against them of sexual misconduct. Some cases involve underage girls and others involve adult indiscretions, according to information about the list provided by the state convention. Vasquez joined other activists in asking that the list be made public.

The convention’s lawyer did not return a telephone message asking for comment, but a convention official defended the confidentiality of the list in a telephone

interview.

Vasquez never was able to meet with state convention officials, even with the help of an activist group. Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests or Other Clergy (SNAP) supports victims and advocates making the list public.

Vasquez believed that no one would take her accusations seriously, she said.

In the years since the abuse began, she has attempted suicide three times, she said.

Patricia Lehtola, one of Vasquez's attorneys, said in a telephone interview that one of the main goals of the lawsuit is to bring to light more awareness of the issues of clergy abuse against females.

Recent publicity about Catholic priests and young boys has focused attention on male victims, she said. Female victims, no matter how young, are often considered to have encouraged the sexual attentions and to have been complicit in the abuse.

"Somehow, if it's a woman, people seem to think less of that," Lehtola said.

In a sworn deposition Amyx gave Nov. 14, he insisted that Vasquez was 17 when he began having sex with her.

"I wanted to quit," he said in the statement.

"But you just kept on doing it?" asked Vasquez's attorney.

"Yeah," he said.

Amyx said in his deposition that he paid child support for nine years after being ordered to by a judge when Vasquez's child was 9 years old. He visited the child at Christmas in 1987, according to his statement.

"I said, 'I'm your daddy.' And I asked her if she wanted to talk about anything or what was going on. And she's just busy playing ... just being a kid," his statement said.

Activists

Christa Brown is an Austin lawyer and an activist for victims of Baptist clergy abuse. She runs a Web site called StopBaptistPredators.org.

Her pastor molested her as a young teen, she said, and she knows both Roush and Vasquez because of her work in trying to help victims of clergy abuse.

Two years ago, she filed a similar lawsuit against the minister who abused her and included the state and regional Baptist conventions as defendants. Stephen Wakefield, who represented the Baptist General Convention of Texas in her lawsuit, also represents the convention in Roush's suit.

She knew before Roush signed the confidentiality clause that there was great pressure for Roush to sign, Brown said. Wakefield also tried hard to convince her to sign such a clause in her suit, Brown said, but she refused.

Secrecy is the shield that keeps pedophiles in the pulpit, she said.

"Parents in Baptist pews ought to be outraged," she said, "because there is nothing about these sorts of agreements that protect kids. I don't see why church and denominational leaders don't see that as well."

According to the book Ministerial Ethics by Joe Trull, editor of Christian Ethics Today, and James Carter, a former official in the Louisiana Baptist Convention, Catholics don't have a monopoly on clergy sexual abuse. It runs the gamut of all denominations. Some of the nation's foremost authorities, according to the book, "confirm that Protestant victims far outnumber Catholic victims."

Brown's personal experiences and the stories of people who contact her have convinced her that Baptist churches and denomination leaders know about many abuse cases and don't correct the problem.

"How can so many others know and do nothing?" she asked. "That's the question that haunts me."

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Following are quotes from experts on clergy sexual abuse and from the parties involved in the Denton-area cases.

"Early last summer, I told you that a lawsuit had been filed against me and the church and several other Baptist groups. I am very pleased to be able to announce to you tonight that all parties will be dismissed from the lawsuit very soon. To bring closure to the process, I have agreed to read to you the following statement. And I'm going to read the statement to make sure I don't miss any words in it.

"Twenty years ago, I made a terrible mistake. I realize now that my lapse in judgment caused one of our parishioners great harm. I confess that proper boundaries were not kept. I am publicly apologizing to Katherine Roush for hurting her. I ask God for forgiveness, you for forgiveness and Miss Roush for forgiveness."

—Statement made by Larry Reynolds on Nov. 19 at a Southmont Baptist Church Thanksgiving dinner, taken from a videotape

“The problem of clergy sexual abuse is not just a Catholic issue — the problem extends to Protestant denominations as well. Studies have shown no differences in its frequency by denomination, region, theology or institutional structure.”

—From the book Ministerial Ethics, by Joe Trull and James Carter

“National policies regarding clergy sexual misconduct have been adopted by most mainline denominations. ... Decentralized denominations such as the Southern Baptist Convention ... have no national policies, leaving each individual church to establish its own guidelines. Sexual misconduct is routinely covered up in these settings.”

—From the book Ministerial Ethics

“At all material times herein, Defendant Reynolds sexually molested Plaintiff on the premises of Southmont Baptist Church. Defendant Reynolds also sexually molested Plaintiff in Dallas, Rockport, Houston and other cities.”

—From Katherine Roush’s lawsuit petition

“Defendant Reynolds knew of his own dangerous sexual propensities toward minor children, and yet continued an active and systematic role in the church’s youth program.”

—From Katherine Roush’s lawsuit petition

“While I would very much like to be able to tell you my side of the story concerning the allegations that were made against me, I am not allowed to do so.”

—Larry Reynolds in an e-mail message to the Record-Chronicle

“The lawsuit has been resolved complete with a public apology to the plaintiff and the church body. What possible constructive outcome could be gained by the publishing of such an article after the resolution of same?”

—From an e-mailed message to the Record-Chronicle by James Crittenden, administrative minister at Southmont Baptist Church

“She begged him to stop and told him he was hurting her, and his typical response was that she would ‘get used to it.’”

—From Debbie Vasquez’s lawsuit petition

“When she reported the abuse and pregnancy to Amyx’s superiors at Calvary Baptist Church, they forced her to confess before the entire congregation the fact that she was an unwed pregnant teen-aged girl and to ask for forgiveness. She was also directed never to tell anyone that Amyx was the father of the child she was carrying.”

—From Debbie Vasquez’s lawsuit petition

“[I regretted] that I had done an immoral wrong act. I hated it, that it happened.”

—From a sworn deposition given by Dale “Dickie” Amyx on Nov. 14, 2006

“I didn’t have sex with her when she was 16 or under.”

—From Dale “Dickie” Amyx’s Nov. 14, 2006, sworn statement

“

I told her many times I never meant to hurt her, and if I did, I’m sorry. And she always said that it was OK.”

—From Dale “Dickie” Amyx’s Nov. 14, 2006, sworn statement

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