

Appeals Court Dismisses Most Defamation Claims Against Robert Morris, Gateway Church

A Texas appeals court has dismissed most of the defamation claims filed against founder and former Gateway Church Pastor Robert Morris and other former church leaders.

According to Fox 4, the Dallas-based court ruled that First Amendment protections prevent civil courts from interfering in internal church governance. The court found that most of Cindy Clemishire's claims concerned Gateway's investigation of Morris, its handling of the allegations and its communications with the congregation and public.

Clemishire's civil lawsuit centers on statements made about Morris' misconduct and Gateway's response after the allegations became public. The defamation case is separate from the criminal prosecution that resulted in Morris pleading guilty to five child sexual abuse charges.

Gateway Church praised the ruling, saying the court had protected the church's religious liberty.



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Thomas Leatherbury, director of Southern Methodist University's First Amendment Clinic, told Fox 4 that the ecclesiastical abstention doctrine has a constitutional foundation.

"It doesn't protect the abuse itself," Leatherbury said. "And the abuser can be sued for physical injuries, emotional injuries, and can be criminally prosecuted."

Clemishire's attorney, Jeff Leach, said he plans to appeal the decision.

"We will not stop fighting for that accountability," Leach said. "Religious freedom is sacred. Protecting child rapists is not."

At least one defamation claim against Morris and Gateway was not dismissed.

Gateway Church's Full Statement

We are pleased that the Court of Appeals has dismissed the case against Gateway and the Independent Elders. As the Court's opinion confirms, this case was never about Gateway. While Gateway grieves and laments Robert's child sexual abuse of Cindy, that abuse happened 20 years before Gateway was founded. Its current elders did not know of Robert's crimes until Cindy told her story, at which point they immediately conducted an investigation and acted to ensure that no one complicit in hiding Robert's past remained in Church leadership.

Plaintiffs did not sue Gateway over the tragic abuse itself, but over the Church's statements about Robert's misconduct. Those statements were made by a Church seeking to shepherd its congregation and, as the Court held, are therefore protected by the First Amendment.

Indeed, the Court rightly recognized that the First Amendment "prohibits civil courts from delving into ecclesiastical matters that are inextricably intertwined with matters of doctrine or church governance." It therefore bars the claim against Gateway, which "questions a church's investigation into allegations of a pastor's misconduct, the church's reporting of its investigation and the allegations, the church's actions determining the truth of the allegations, and the church's communications with the public regarding the

investigation and allegations.”

We are grateful that the Court’s opinion vindicates and safeguards Gateway’s foundational first liberty, and we continue to pray for healing and peace for Cindy and her family.

Prepared by Charisma Media Staff.