# Southern Baptist Convention meeting overshadowed by whistleblower Jennifer Lyell's death and stalled abuse reforms



More than 10,000 representatives from the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) have gathered in Dallas for their annual meeting, an event marked by both celebration and sorrow. While attendees engaged in praise sessions and shared encouraging reports of increased baptisms, the atmosphere was undeniably tinged with sadness following the death of Jennifer Lyell, a prominent whistleblower in the SBC's ongoing sexual abuse scandal. Lyell, a former denominational publishing executive who bravely disclosed her abuse during her time at seminary, passed away at the age of 47 after suffering catastrophic strokes. Her friend Rachael Denhollander, another advocate for abuse survivors, confirmed the news via social media, underscoring the tragic toll that the backlash from her revelations had taken on Lyell’s life.

Lyell's death has not only mourned the loss of a courageous voice but also highlighted the frustrations felt by abuse survivors and reform advocates regarding the SBC’s response to allegations of abuse within its ranks. Many who have previously championed change in the SBC are notably absent from this year's meeting, disillusioned by what they perceive as a lack of significant progress and accountability within the convention. This sentiment was shared by Johnna Harris, a podcast host focusing on abuse in evangelical ministries, who observed that for many survivors, the environment is far from supportive.

Compounding the grief over Lyell's passing is the SBC Executive Committee's history of dismissing survivors' claims. In a statement acknowledging their failures, the committee admitted to inadequately listening and caring for Lyell when she came forward with her allegations. However, despite a vote in 2022 to create a system for tracking credibly accused church workers, plans to develop this database have not been prioritised. Jeff Iorg, president of the Executive Committee, stated that the focus is now on directing churches to existing sex offender registries and enhancing education around abuse prevention. This approach has been met with skepticism from reform advocates, who criticise it as insufficient.

Christa Brown, an abuse survivor and long-time reform advocate, articulated her frustrations in a public forum, describing the ongoing responses from SBC officials as lacking in genuine commitment to reform. She branded the initiatives as “hollow words” and expressed concern over the convention's funding requests aimed at covering ongoing legal expenses related to abuse cases rather than proactively addressing the core issues.

Amidst this backdrop of sorrow and controversy, the conference agenda includes significant debates. Messengers at this year’s assembly will vote on resolutions addressing various issues, including same-sex marriage and pornography, as well as a proposed ban on churches with women pastors. This marks a continuation of the conservative stance that has permeated the convention's recent history, reflecting a broader effort to maintain doctrinal purity among its members.

Brent Leatherwood, president of the convention's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, is expected to address the internal "turbulence" surrounding these discussions, expressing confidence that the gathered representatives will support maintaining a distinctly Baptist voice in public advocacy. Despite the challenges, the SBC remains steadfast in its mission, clinging to tradition and conservatism while grappling with calls for transparency and accountability in the face of serious allegations of misconduct.

As the convention progresses, the poignant absence of advocates like Lyell serves as a reminder of the urgent need for lasting reform and genuine support for those who have suffered in silence. The weight of her legacy, coupled with the ongoing struggle for a safer and more transparent church environment, looms large over this year's proceedings.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/dallas-whistleblower-friends-rachael-denhollander-b2767565.html)
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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/dallas-whistleblower-friends-rachael-denhollander-b2767565.html> - Please view link - unable to able to access data