

Dallas Morning News: Arguments in Gateway Church Defamation Hearing Hinge on Religious Liberty Doctrine

October 31, 2025 Ronald Breaux

PRACTICES Litigation, Religious Institutions

Haynes Boone is representing Gateway Church in its defamation case against Cindy Clemishire, with Litigation Partner [Ronald Breaux](#) leading the team on behalf of the firm. [The Dallas Morning News](#) reported on a late-October hearing. Read an excerpt of that front-page article below:

Gateway’s attorney Ronald W. Breaux argued the church should be dismissed from the lawsuit. ... Breaux cited the ecclesiastical abstention doctrine, which comes from the First Amendment’s mandate that the government not sponsor one religion over others or interfere with religious freedom.”

The doctrine says the First Amendment’s guarantee of freedom of religion shields churches and their operations from the government’s reach, particularly in civil lawsuits.

Based on that doctrine, Breaux said the court didn’t have the authority to determine whether Gateway’s leaders defamed Clemishire or conspired to cover up her abuse. If the court attempted to do so, it would be telling a church how to govern itself or respond to pastoral misconduct — in direct violation of how past Texas courts had applied this doctrine, he argued.

Breaux cited previous cases in which Texas courts had ruled that that doctrine protected a church from potential liability in a civil lawsuit. He brought up one case in particular which he said was extremely similar to Clemishire’s lawsuit.

In that case, the Court of Appeals for the 5th District of Texas at Dallas upheld a lower court’s ruling that a fraud claim against the Diocese of Dallas could not proceed, based on the ‘ecclesiastical abstention’ doctrine.

Read more in [The Dallas Morning News](#).