

Eddie Long Denies Sex Abuse Claims, Says Truth Will Emerge

Atlanta megachurch pastor Eddie Long said he categorically denies allegations that he coerced three young men into having sexual relationships with him when they were teenagers.

In a statement his attorney read on the *Tom Joyner Morning Show* Thursday, Long said “ugly charges” made against him and his 25,000-member New Birth Missionary Baptist Church are false.

“I have devoted my life to helping others, and these false allegations hurt me deeply, but my faith is strong and the truth will emerge,” he said.

Three lawsuits were filed this week alleging Long used cars, money and trips to coerce three young men into having sexual relationships with him when they were teenage members of his church. The allegations have been widely reported on CNN and *Good Morning America*, and Long was among the top 10 trending topics on Twitter Thursday.

Charisma attempted to get a response from Long, who was featured on the magazine’s cover in August 1999. His attorney, Craig Gillen, said in a radio interview Thursday morning that he counseled the pastor against addressing the allegations in person. He said Long plans to respond to his congregation Sunday.

The lawsuits claim Long has “a pattern and practice of singling out a select group of young male church members and using his authority as Bishop over them to ultimately bring them to a point of engaging in a sexual relationship.”

Maurice Robinson, 20, Anthony Flagg, 21, and Jamal Parris, 23, claim they were targeted while participating in a mentoring program Long led at New Birth for 13- to 18-year-old teen boys. The teens involved in the LongFellows Youth Academy are known as Spiritual Sons and allegedly accompany Long on trips, both domestic and international.

The plaintiffs claim Long took them on trips to various locations in the U.S. and abroad, sharing a room with them and engaging in sexual acts. All three men allege Long gave them lavish gifts, ranging from cars to college tuition, in order to engage in sexual activity, and that they became paid employees of the church.

Atlanta attorney B.J. Bernstein, who represents Parris, Flagg and Robinson, said when Robinson began telling others about his experience with Long, "he realized he wasn't the only one," CNN reported.

"I am telling you these are very powerful, brutal allegations that are true," Bernstein said. "He has relationships at different times, at different places, with whomever he wants."

Bernstein said she told Flagg and Robinson they would be "crucified" for making the allegations against Long, "and they just said, 'We have to do it, and we know there are others,' " CNN reported.

New Birth and LongFellows Youth Academy are named as defendants in the lawsuits. The young men claim employees of the church and the mentoring program knew or should have known about Long's alleged behavior and failed to warn the teens.

Church spokesman Art Franklin said the lawsuits are "a case of retaliation and a shakedown for money by men with some serious credibility issues."

"Before rushing to any judgment on Bishop Long and this court of public opinion taking place right now, I really do hope you

will look at these guys that are throwing the mud and consider the source," Franklin said Wednesday.

Robinson was arrested in June and charged in connection with a burglary at Long's office, CNN reported. Bernstein said about \$100,000 worth of items was taken and that the theft was an attempt at retaliation.

She said Robinson claims that in May he sought solace from Long and instead became the target of a sexual advance. That "created a frenzy inside him," she told CNN.

Franklin said church members held a "Spirit-filled worship service" Tuesday night and expressed love for their pastor.

Atlanta-area radio host Frank Ski, a 12-year New Birth member, said he is standing by Long. "It's difficult for me because Bishop Long and I are very close," he told the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. "I'm one of these people who's really old school. When you're a friend and I support you, I support you. Right now it's allegations."

"I think that those who begin to judge him should wait until it all comes out," another member told the newspaper. "Based on what I know he's not that kind of person."

Long became pastor of New Birth Missionary Baptist Church in 1987 when the church had 300 members. The church grew to 2,000 in less than a year and today sits on a 240-acre campus.

The popular charismatic pastor has been known for his outspoken support for traditional marriage. In 2004 he led a march through downtown Atlanta to address various moral issues, including opposition to gay marriage.

In 2006, New Birth hosted funeral services for Coretta Scott King, widow of slain civil right leader Martin Luther King Jr. Four U.S. presidents and members of Congress were among the 10,000 mourners who attended.

The lawsuits are seeking unspecified amounts of punitive damages on counts ranging from negligence and fraud to emotional distress and breach of fiduciary duty.

Because the young men were ages 17 and 18 at the time of the alleged abuse and therefore over the age of consent in Georgia, the case will remain a civil matter and no criminal charges will be filed, a spokeswoman for Bernstein said.