

Eddie Long: 'This Thing I'm Gonna Fight'

Atlanta megachurch pastor Eddie Long said he plans to fight recent allegations that he coerced several young men into sexual relationships when they were teenagers.

"I want you to know, I am not a perfect man, but this thing I'm gonna fight," Long told his 25,000-member New Birth Missionary Baptist Church Sunday.

"And I want you to know one other thing," he added. "I feel like David against Goliath, but I have five rocks and I haven't thrown one yet."

Speaking for roughly 20 minutes during each of two morning worship services, Long spent little time addressing the allegations directly, saying his attorneys advised him not to try the case in the media. He told the packed services he wasn't the man described in the lawsuits.

"I have never in my life portrayed myself as a perfect man, but I am not the man that is being portrayed on the television," he said. "That's not me. That is not me."

Four men—all former members of Long's church now in their early 20s—claim the pastor used gifts, trips and money to coerce them into engaging in sex acts with him beginning when they were 17 or 18. Because the men were over the age of consent in Georgia, which is 16, no criminal charges are being filed.

The men claim Long used Scripture to justify the alleged activity and convinced them that a sexual relationship was a healthy component of their spiritual lives.

Long walked into Sunday's service holding his wife's hand, and

the couple was greeted with warm cheers and applause.

Long said the last week had been the “most difficult time in my entire life” and spent most of his time talking about persevering through painful situations. He quoted from Psalm 34:19, saying, “Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord delivers out of all of them.”

“We are all subject to face distasteful and painful situations,” he said. “Bishop Long—Eddie Long—and you can put your name in that blank, will have some bad situations. The righteous face painful situations with a determined expectancy. We are not exempt from pain, but He promises to deliver us out of our pain.”

He asked the church to be prayerful and said New Birth would continue to worship. “We ain’t gonna stop it,” he said.

After the services, several church members told CNN they were pleased with Long’s response.

“It’s a very difficult moment for the church, for the pastor, but I know for sure they’re going to overcome it—overcome it in a big way,” church member Juan Davis told a CNN affiliate.

Gabrielle Richards, 21, said her love for New Birth and Long had not changed since the allegations surfaced. She said she was proud of the way Long “came out with his head up. ... He showed the strength that I’m accustomed to.”

Other New Birth members are taking a wait-and-see approach.

“Do we know if it’s true? No,” Carol Alexander, 51, told the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. “We’re praying that it’s not true.”

Christina Brown said she expected Long to say more.

“I know him to be a great speaker,” Brown told the newspaper. “This wasn’t very convincing.”

Long gave no indication that he might step down from the church. "We're here today and every Sunday morning," he told the congregation. "And I'll be here next week."

Long has been an outspoken critic of gay marriage and has for years preached that homosexual activity is sinful. The lawsuits are seeking a jury trial and unspecified monetary damages.