

Pastor Asked Youth to 'Lay Hands On' and 'Pray' for Man He's Accused of Murdering

A pastor who faces murder charges after a man he fought with in a bar died of a head injury is maintaining his innocence.

Robert Cox, a youth minister with The Place of Refuge Church in Manteca, California, was released on \$100,000 bail Monday.

The murder charges come from an incident last June in which the 35-year-old father of two was with his wife and around 20 interns on a ministry trip in Las Vegas.

The group was dining at Four Kegs Sports Pub when another man at the restaurant, Link Ellingson, started threatening them out of the blue, Cox said.

"The first thing I said to all the students was, 'Let's lay hands on him and pray for him.' Because that's our heart," Cox told ABC News after he was released from the San Joaquin County Jail. "We never wanted to hurt him."

After an altercation between the two men, Ellingson hit his head on pavement and slipped into a coma. The 55-year-old businessman died in December and the coroner has ruled his death a homicide. But Cox insists his actions were out of self-defense.

"When somebody says they are going f--ing kill me and they attack me and choke me and punch me in the face and go after my students and give a student a concussion," he described.

He said he grabbed the man and they both fell down. Court documents and the police report show that Cox punched Ellingson in the head, but Cox denies the claims.

"No, I did not throw a punch," he said.

Prosecutors have alleged in court documents that Cox hit Ellingson "with premeditation and deliberation ... punching ... Link Ellingson in the face."

Cox's wife, Julie, said her husband didn't mean to hurt Ellingson.

"I believe wholeheartedly that my husband is innocent," she said.

Kelli Lane, who witnessed the incident, does not believe her pastor is guilty.

"Our pastor Rob defended his family and he acted in self-defense and really saved my life," she said.

Julie Cox said she fought to change the police report but couldn't get anywhere. She thought they were in the clear when she received a letter in October from the Clark County District Attorney's office stating no charges would be filed. They are now fighting the charge.

The next hearing in the case is Friday in Las Vegas, where Cox will be arraigned. He is expected to plead not guilty.