

Prominent Atlanta pastor named in four abuse suits

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Bishop Eddie Long, the Atlanta-area preacher facing charges from four young men that he coerced them to have sex, told his congregation September 26 he is "under attack" and will fight the allegations against him.

"I've been accused," Long told the New Birth Missionary Baptist Church in Lithonia, Georgia. "I'm under attack. I want you to know . . . I am not a perfect man but this thing I'm going to fight."

Four men, all in their early 20s, filed suits alleging that the 57-year-old Long used his spiritual authority to coerce them into sexual relationships. The men said Long gave them gifts of cash, cars and overnight trips.

The first three suits claimed that Long celebrates a ceremony with victims involving jewelry and talk of Bible verses, creating a covenant in which they are designated as his "spiritual sons."

The fourth suit, filed September 24, alleges that Long paid for shopping sprees and tuition for a 22-year-old with whom he had a sexual relationship.

Three days before he commented on the lawsuits to his congregation, Long said in a statement that they were "false allegations."

Long said his lawyers advised him to address the charges against him in court and not in the media.

"I feel like David against Goliath," Long said. "But I got five rocks and I haven't thrown one yet."

Long has protested gay marriage and is known for celebrating "muscular Christianity," which supports strong heterosexual male leadership.

His church, said to have upward of 20,000 attendees, received national attention when the congregation hosted the 2006 funeral of Coretta Scott King, the widow of Martin Luther King Jr.

In 2007 Long was investigated by Sen. Charles Grassley (R., Iowa) for questionable finances, along with five other ministries. His was one of three that gave "incomplete responses" to the probe, Grassley said. —*RNS*