

OUR OPINION

The sin of false profits

Bishop Eddie Long shouldn't count himself among the needy that his charity was created to help

The Atlanta Journal Constitution

08/30/05

Bishop Eddie Long contends that a church can give alms to the poor and a Bentley to the pastor.

The morality of Long's driving a \$350,000 luxury car and living in a \$1.4 million six-bedroom, nine-bath mansion on 20 acres is probably best left to a higher power. However, the legality of how Long financed those extravagances and whether he violated the tax laws governing charities demands a public airing by the Internal Revenue Service. Long leads the 25,000-member New Birth Missionary Baptist Church in south DeKalb County.

An investigation by Atlanta Journal-Constitution reporter John Blake raises serious questions about the compensation Long collected from a nonprofit, tax-exempt charity he created in 1995 to help the poor and spread the Gospel. Between 1997 and 2000, Bishop Eddie Long Ministries Inc. provided its founder with at least \$3.07 million in salary, benefits and use of property. In those same four years, the charity only made \$3.1 million in other donations. It's impossible to tell to whom those funds went as the records aren't itemized, as required by the IRS. The four-person board responsible for overseeing the charity included both Long and his wife.

Under the law, nonprofits are exempt from paying state and federal income taxes if they meet certain criteria. Among the requirements of the federal tax code is that their executives' benefits may not be excessive. Authorities on nonprofit compensation who examined Long's pay say it certainly qualifies as excessive.

"I've never seen anything quite like what Long [was] getting, when you include his salary, the house and the car," said Jeff Krehely, deputy director of the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy, a Washington-based group that promotes accountability in the philanthropic community.

Long defends his CEO-sized perks, saying that he is the confidant of presidents and prime ministers. "We're not just a church, we're an international corporation," Long said. "We're not just a bumbling bunch of preachers who can't talk and all we're doing is baptizing babies."

Well, international corporations pay taxes, and they don't ask taxpayers to chip in when they decide to bestow a kingly sum on their CEO.

Keep in mind, too, that the income Long drew from this one charity was in addition to whatever his congregants awarded him each week in their "love offerings." Churches report to the IRS how much they pay employees, but those records aren't public. It's also not known how much Long has collected from the other 20 nonprofit and for-profit corporations that he started after becoming pastor of New Birth in 1987.

A publicist hired by Long defended his pay and his perks Monday: "I think it goes back to a long-standing culture in the black community to make sure your minister is well-compensated and drives a nice car," said Jeff Dickerson.

New Birth Missionary Baptist Church can choose to reward its pastor with a gold chariot and a castle. But neither churchgoers nor Long should expect the American taxpayer to underwrite that generosity.