

Should Black Preachers Live Like Kings?

By *The Associated Press*
reprinted in *BlackNews*
09-12-05

LITHONIA, Ga. - Jesus wasn't broke, and leaders of churches shouldn't be either.

That's what African-American Bishop Eddie Long, who heads Georgia's biggest church, has to say in defense of his grand lifestyle, funded largely by the nonprofit religious charity he started in 1997.

According to tax records, Bishop Eddie Long Ministries, Inc. provided him with more than \$3 million in salary and benefits, including a \$1.4 million 20-acre home and use of a \$350,000 Bentley. Long also received more than \$1 million in salary, including \$494,000 in 2000.

Long maintains the money came from royalties, speaking fees and several large donations - not from members of New Birth Missionary Baptist Church, where he became pastor in 1987. The charity stopped operating in 2000.

During his 18-year tenure, New Birth has swelled from 300 members to 25,000. Long told the Atlanta Journal-Constitution he heads an international corporation, not just a church.

"You've got to put me on a different scale than the little black preacher sitting over there that's supposed to be just getting by because the people are suffering," he said.

Long's charity and his church were separate organizations, and his charity was incorporated as a nonprofit religious corporation - not a church. He and his wife, Vanessa, were two of the charity's four board members.

The charity, which Long incorporated in New York in 1995, made \$3.1 million in donations to others between 1997 and 2000, according to tax records - compared to at least \$3.07 million paid to Long during the same period.

Nonprofits are exempt from paying state and federal income taxes if they meet certain criteria, but executives' benefits may not be excessive according to federal law.

Churches must report to the IRS how much they pay employees, but those records are not public. The charity's tax returns are public record.

Long's benefits were excessive, said Jeff Krehely, deputy director of the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy, a Washington-based group that promotes accountability in the philanthropic community.

"After reviewing the compensation packages of foundation executives, including those who have been written up in the press as being excessive, I've never seen anything quite like what Long (was) getting, when you include his salary, the house and the car," Krehely said.

Long's tax attorney, J. David Epstein, said the charity's compensation committee decided to use some of the charity's assets to pay Long for his work at New Birth to make up for years when he was underpaid.

"Bishop Long has never received the legal amount of compensation he is due by law," said Epstein, a Philadelphia lawyer specializing in church law and producer of a video for pastors called "How to Maximize Your Clergy Salary and Benefits Package."

Long used to receive a salary from New Birth, but now accepts "love offerings" from church members, according to a church spokesman.

Sen. Chuck Grassley (R-Iowa), who chairs a Senate committee investigating lavish salaries of nonprofit executives, expressed concern upon hearing about Long's situation.

"I'm worried that a few people are confusing the ringing of a church bell with the ringing of a cash register," Grassley said in a statement to the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. "When I hear about leaders of charities being provided a \$300,000 Bentley to drive around in, my fear is that it's the taxpayers who subsidize this charity who are really being taken for a ride."

Long says he represents a "paradigm shift" in the black church, and that any problems people have with his charity stem from people's expectations that pastors should be poor. He said his congregation is inspired by seeing its pastor do well.

"I'm not going to apologize for anything."