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Religion

Local pastors speak out against Denver preacher's wrapping of a Torah around a scandal-rocked Atlanta bishop

Posted: 02/26/2012 01:00:00 AM MST
 Updated: 02/26/2012 01:12:29 AM MST **By Electa Draper**
The Denver Post

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A viral YouTube video in which Denver-based Christian preacher Ralph Messer literally wraps scandal-rocked Atlanta Bishop Eddie Long in a Torah scroll during a showy ritual has created a painful backlash against the local Messianic Jewish community, its leaders say.

Half a dozen pastors, who claim Jewish heritage but hold the Christian belief that Jesus is the Son of God, say they have a responsibility to speak out against the Jan. 29 incident at Long's New Birth Missionary Baptist Church in Atlanta.

Long's Georgia church has been troubled since five young men made allegations of sexual misconduct against the bishop that resulted in May in an undisclosed, out-of-court settlement with four of them for more than \$1 million.

Church in the City senior pastor Michael Walker and other metro Messianic Jewish leaders told The Denver Post that the bizarre ritual acted out in Atlanta was an outrage, offensive to both the Jewish and Messianic Jewish communities, and it continues to hurt their congregations.

"The Torah is not an object to be manipulated according to one's whims or as a tool with which to stir the emotions of a crowd," Walker and seven others, including teachers from Denver Seminary, said in a written statement. Several national Messianic Jewish organizations also have denounced Messer's actions.

Messer, through a spokeswoman, declined to talk to The Post about the controversy.

Messer, founder and leader of Simchat Torah Beit Midrash in Centennial, has said he had simply been "honoring" and "encouraging" a beleaguered Long. Yet he referenced coronations in his nontraditional ritual, and he described in vivid detail features of the Torah to Long's audience that day, reportedly 8,000 people.

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In the weeks after — as the YouTube-video hits reached several hundred thousand, rabbis in the region — Messianic Jewish communities and Torah scholars have collectively identified more than 25 errors or false statements made by Messer about the Torah or Judaism. They include his description of the Torah mantle as a "foreskin" and his claim that 90 percent of the Jews in the world have "never seen, approached or touched" Torah scrolls.

"We condemn Messer's flagrant disrespect for the Sefer Torah in this ritual and his misrepresentation of Jewish tradition, an abuse which must stem either from ignorance or great presumption," wrote the presidents of the Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations and Messianic Jewish Alliance of America.

Messer, known as Rabbi Messer, has said he isn't part of the Messianic Jewish Community, but he is simply a Christian who wishes to teach other Christians about the Hebrew roots of their faith. His Simchat Torah Beit Midrash, also called the International Center for Torah Studies, offers its teachings in Centennial, Greeley and Colorado Springs.

Messer spokeswoman Judy Murphy said the rabbi has addressed the Eddie Long incident in a live church event that was captured on video and posted to Messer's website shortly after his New Birth appearance.

In the video, Messer speaks for more than an hour about his conduct, repeating a few times that, if he offended the Jewish and Messianic Jewish communities: "I truly repent."

Messer said he didn't really crown Long a king, despite imagery to that effect. He said his coronation rhetoric actually referred to the "kingship" of Jesus that all believers share in.

Messer said he used simple English, not Hebrew terms, to describe the Torah because Long's congregation and other audiences who have seen similar demonstrations wouldn't understand them.

"I speak to a Christian audience, people that are on the street or come in from the streets. People who are American citizens who can barely open their Bibles, who barely know the books of the Bible," Messer said in the later video. "I had to keep it very simplistic. I want you to know that from my heart."

According to the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Long has apologized for the episode with Messer, sending a letter to the southeast regional director of the Anti-Defamation League, in which he said "the ceremony was not my suggestion, nor was it my intent to participate in any ritual that is offensive in any manner to the Jewish

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community."

Long's church also removed the video of the event it had posted on YouTube.

Messer's son, Minister Russell Messer, told The Post his father personally has reached out to Jewish communities. Local Messianic Jewish leaders, however, said they've had no response to a letter they wrote to Messer. Murphy said Messer was not accountable to them.

It's not as simple as a blanket apology about what happened at New Birth, local leaders say, because Messer admits he often conducts such events. And, they say, Messer continually offers demonstrably false teachings about the Torah and Judaism.

"The fact the Torah was used in such a fashion was repugnant to us," said Rabbi Burt Yellin of the Congregation Roeh Israel in Denver.

Messianic Rabbi Chaim Urbach of Congregation Yeshuat Tsion in Greenwood Village said it wasn't the first offense.

"We have been caught for several years in the backwash of Ralph Messer's ministry," Urbach said. "And we have had congregation members who have been ground up and chewed up by him. He gives us a bad name. He shames us."

Walker estimates metro-area Messianic Jewish congregations have a few thousand members, ethnic Jews and non-Jews with an interest in Judaism as the foundation of Christianity. Messianic pastor Stewart Lieberman of Church in the City said that

part of their concern is how they are perceived by the Jewish community, and whether it sees Messer as part of the Messianic Jewish community, when he is not.

"We are seeking to spread a message already not well-received in the Jewish community," Lieberman said. "We are already criticized by the mainstream Jewish community, and we seek to be sensitive to our Jewish traditions, to our heritage."

Group members also include leaders from Boulder's Cornerstone Community Church and Estes Park Chavurah. Supporters include associate professor Hélène Dallaire, director of Messianic Judaism Programs at Denver Seminary, and Dr. Raleigh Washington, president and chief executive of the Christian ministry Promise Keepers.

It's painful to confront Messer on beliefs, group members said in their letter, but they must repudiate his Ephraimite teaching that non-Jewish followers of Yeshua (Jesus) are in fact the biological descendants of the 10 "lost tribes" of Israel.

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"We, in the Messianic Jewish community, have endured this burden for years," the group's letter states, "and we say to those who propagate this false teaching: 'Enough. Teach people to be comfortable in their own skins, to rejoice in who G-d made them and to steer clear of coveting others' identities.' "

Washington said that Messer often targets African-Americans in his preaching about lost tribes.

"I am speaking as an African-American, and my heart is broken and I'm appalled by this false teaching," Washington said. "It has deeply deceived hundreds and hundreds of African-American brothers and sisters, who buy into this fable and begin to parade themselves around as Hebrews."

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