

# Senator concludes probe of ministry finances, calls for self-reform

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—Sen. Charles Grassley of Iowa has concluded a three-year probe into alleged lavish spending at six major broadcast ministries and asked a prominent evangelical group to study ways to spur self-reform among religious groups.

Since 2007, Grassley, the outgoing top Republican on the Senate Finance Committee, has pursued allegations of high salaries and the use of private jets and Rolls Royces by some of the nation's most prominent TV ministers.

On Jan. 6, he released a [final 61-page review](#) that said evangelists Benny Hinn of Texas and Joyce Meyer of Missouri had made "significant reforms" to their operations, but four others provided incomplete or no responses.

Grassley asked the Evangelical Council on Financial Accountability to conduct a formal study of issues raised by his staff, including whether churches, like other nonprofits, should be required to file detailed financial disclosure forms to the Internal Revenue Service.

"The staff review sets the stage for a comprehensive discussion among churches and religious organizations," Grassley said in a statement. "I look forward to helping facilitate this dialogue and fostering an environment for self-reform within the community."

Both Grassley and ECFA officials said they hope to resolve issues in ways that do not involve new legislation.

“Less government is better, and I think both ECFA and the senator espouse that philosophy,” said Michael Batts, an ECFA board member and certified public accountant who will chair the ECFA’s new Commission on Accountability and Policy for Religious Organizations.

Although the association has worked primarily on certifying the financial integrity of evangelical groups, the commission’s work will include a range of religious organizations and other nonprofits, he said.

“These issues are the types of issues that transcend theology and doctrine and actually relate to the freedoms and the practices of all religious organizations,” he said.

There is no timetable set for how long the new commission will work before sending Grassley a report, but ECFA President Dan Busby said it would be “a robust process” of more than a few months.

**Among the issues it will consider are:**

- Whether there should be limits on clergy housing allowances
- Whether tax rules about “love offerings” received by clergy should be clarified
- Whether current laws that prohibit partisan politicking in churches should be changed
- Whether the IRS should create an advisory committee of churches and other religious organizations.

Americans United for Separation of Church and State criticized the report’s recommendation of repealing the prohibition of church electioneering.

“If these multimillion-dollar ministries are already misusing their donations for personal gain, imagine how much more dangerous they would be operating in the world of partisan politics,” said Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United.

Grassley staffers determined they did not have “time or resources” to issue subpoenas to the four ministries that did not completely respond to their inquiries. They instead issued reports based on public records, third parties and insiders.

**Among their findings:**

- Insiders in Kenneth Copeland Ministries in Fort Worth said they were intimidated from speaking with committee staff, with one former employee saying they were told “God will blight our finances” if they talked.
- Georgia pastor Creflo Dollar’s ministry was called the “least cooperative,” with staffers unable to determine the names of board members.
- The majority of questions asked by Grassley staffers of Bishop Eddie Long’s megachurch in Lithonia, Ga., remained unanswered, including the amount of his salary.
- Several former staffers at Paula White’s megachurch in Tampa, Fla., wanted to speak with staffers but “were afraid of being sued by the church,” and at least one was reminded by a church lawyer of a previously signed confidentiality agreement.