

Transparency in ministry finances

By [John Dart](#)

June 29, 2011

Critics of Robert H. Schuller say that his glassy Crystal Cathedral, now in bankruptcy, was more transparent than the fiscal accounting and health of a ministry long dependent on television fame. While it's prudent for church bodies to have a reasonably independent board of trustees and avoid conflicts of interest, court filings reveal that the Crystal Cathedral and its charities were run by numerous Schuller family members.

The Evangelical Council of Financial Accountability was founded in 1979, a time when big churches and ministries were growing even bigger. World Vision and the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association helped greatly to launch the group. By 1981, the ECFA seal of approval was held by 162 evangelical charities--though it did not include outfits run by Oral Roberts, Rex Humbard, the Christian Broadcasting Network or Schuller.

Potential donors have allies in online sources such as [Charity Navigator](#) and [Wall Watchers](#). Last year the latter red-flagged 30 organizations in a "donor alert" about ministries that "engage in questionable practices." Schuller's ministry was on that list, as were the Trinity Broadcast Network, Paul White Ministries, Feed the Children and Joel Osteen Ministries.

The ECFA does not name organizations that fail to meet its standards. It does, however, list its accredited organizations on its [website](#).

One of the newest members is the venerable [American Bible Society](#). The ECFA recently revised its dictum that members "subscribe to a written statement of faith clearly affirming a commitment to the evangelical Christian faith." That sentence now continues: "or shall otherwise demonstrate such commitment and shall operate in accordance with biblical truths and practices."

ABS spokesperson Geof Morin told the *Century* that the 195-year-old organization has avoided making a doctrinal statement of faith because "we have always tried to

serve the whole church. For us to work with Protestant evangelicals, Roman Catholics, Orthodox and mainline [Protestants], we could not land on one doctrinal statement of what the Bible means," he said. "It's always been interconfessional in that sense."

The ECFA is not about to rename itself the "ecumenical" council. President Dan Busby said in a statement that the group considers the ABS to be evangelical Christian in practice. Any ECFA applicant for membership that doesn't have a statement of faith "will be carefully evaluated in good faith on a case-by-case basis."

As for the Bible society, Morin said his organization was "excited" to add the ECFA seal to its website, since many donors today compare figures and ratings from a variety of sources. "We have a lot of people who review us, including the charity watchdogs and the Better Business Bureau. We picked up just this year, for instance, a 'Best Christian Workplace' rating."