

Senator probes finances of televangelists: A response to complaints from the public

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A prominent U.S. senator is seeking financial information from some of the biggest names among Pentecostal and charismatic TV ministries following “complaints from the public” and news reports of possible money mismanagement.

Senator Chuck Grassley (R., Iowa), the top-ranking Republican on the Senate Finance Committee, gave the ministries 30 days to turn over their records. The six ministries were asked to respond by December 6.

“I’m following up on complaints from the public and news coverage regarding certain practices at six ministries,” Grassley said in a statement. “The allegations involve governing boards that aren’t independent and allow generous salaries and housing allowances and amenities such as private jets and Rolls Royces.”

The letters were sent to Randy and Paula White of Tampa, Florida; Benny Hinn Ministries in Grapevine, Texas; Joyce Meyer Ministries in Fenton, Missouri; Bishop Eddie Long of New Birth Missionary Baptist Church in Lithonia, Georgia; Creflo Dollar of World Changers Church International in College Park, Georgia; and Kenneth Copeland Ministries of Newark, Texas.

“I don’t want to conclude that there’s a problem, but I have an obligation to donors and the taxpayers to find out more,” Grassley said. “People who donated should have their money spent as intended and in adherence with the tax code.”

Ken Behr, president of the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability, called the request “quite unusual” and “almost unprecedented.” He said that none of the six ministries targeted are members of his Virginia-based organization, but he expects that it will prompt others to get their houses in order.

“I think it’s a wake-up call for everybody that financial accountability, transparency, proper accounting processes are important,” said Behr.

The letters followed investigations of the Whites by the *Tampa Tribune* and a 2003 *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* series that questioned Meyer’s financial practices. In 2005 the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* accused Long of mishandling funds that were funneled through a charity he started.

“We charismatics certainly are in an awkward spot these days,” lamented J. Lee Grady, editor of *Charisma* magazine, noting also that Oral Roberts University “is under the microscope for alleged financial mismanagement.”

While saying in his weekly online column posted November 9 that he was not going to rush to judgment, Grady did assert, “Something needs to be said. Questions need to be asked.”

The Whites, who recently divorced, acknowledged receiving the letter. “We find it unusual, since the IRS has separate powers to investigate religious organizations if they think it’s necessary,” they said.

Meyer’s ministry posted a statement on its Web site saying, “Joyce Meyer Ministries is committed to financial transparency. We are diligently working on the presented requests and will continue to take the necessary steps to maintain our financial integrity.”

Long’s multifaceted ministry issued a statement saying that he intends to “fully comply” with the request. “New Birth has several safeguards put in place to ensure all transactions are in compliance with laws applicable to churches.”

Hinn’s ministry told Christian Broadcasting Network that the church’s board of directors and legal counsel are “determining the best course of action to best cooperate with the committee’s inquiry.”

Information requested by Grassley included audited financial statements from 2004 to 2006, names and addresses of board members, and detailed explanations of compensation paid to ministry leaders, including payments not reported as income to the IRS, and statements for credit cards used by ministry leaders for expenses paid by their ministries. The senator also asked for lists of vehicles owned or leased for the benefit of ministry leaders. –*Religion News Service*