

Grassley plans no hearings on alleged lavish spenders: Simply expects tax-exempt ministries to follow the law

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Senator Chuck Grassley, the Iowa Republican who is investigating the finances of six prominent Pentecostal and charismatic ministries, says he doesn't plan to hold hearings on any individual ministry and hopes he won't have to subpoena any of them.

In response to critics who wonder if his investigation into alleged lavish spending is too broad, Grassley said he simply expects tax-exempt ministries to follow the law. The National Religious Broadcasters said none of the six are members but that NRB officials were concerned about the ramifications of the probe.

"I think their fear is that we're going to get involved in doctrine, in the internal teachings of the church," said Grassley, the top-ranking Republican on the Senate Finance Committee, in an interview. "That's none of my business. But churches have to realize that they aren't any different from any other nonprofit organization. They have to abide by the tax laws."

Grassley had set a deadline of December 6 for the ministries to respond to his requests for detailed financial information. As of that deadline:

- An attorney for Creflo Dollar Ministries in College Park, Georgia, wrote a letter to Grassley suggesting that a request for information should come from the Internal Revenue Service or, possibly, a congressional subpoena.
- Kenneth Copeland Ministries of Newark, Texas, delivered a package of material.
- Joyce Meyer Ministries in Fenton, Missouri, also sent a package of material.

- Lawyers for Benny Hinn Ministries in Grapevine, Texas, held a meeting with Grassley's staff on December 6, according to a ministry spokesperson.
- Attorneys for Randy and Paula White of Tampa, Florida, contacted Grassley's staff.
- Representatives of Bishop Eddie Long of New Birth Missionary Baptist Church in Lithonia, Georgia, had not sent material or made contact with Grassley but had said publicly that they would cooperate.

"As long as they're cooperating, we obviously will be flexible because we want information," Grassley said. "When we sent the letter, I'm not sure we had an appreciation of how much work it might be to get all the stuff together."

As for Dollar's ministry, which appears to have no plans to comply, Grassley says he hopes it won't come to the point where he needs to consider issuing a subpoena.

"[His] would be the first nonprofit that's refused to cooperate," said Grassley, who has investigated nonprofits such as the Smithsonian Institution and the American Red Cross over the past five years. "I think Mr. Dollar would have a difficult time explaining why he wasn't cooperating if the other five [ministries] were."

Grassley said many of the nonprofits he's investigated have voluntarily made changes in their operations after probes demonstrated inadequacies. "We didn't have to force anything down their throat," he said. "We've . . . made very little change in law. I would hope that the ministries would be self-correcting."

The senator could not predict how long the investigation would last. "We don't have to be in a hurry," he said. "And we try to be deliberate and thoughtful." The six ministries were chosen because of the extent of anecdotal information he received from whistle-blowers about them.

Rusty Leonard, the CEO of MinistryWatch.com, said he wasn't surprised that not all of the ministries have responded fully. His Charlotte, North Carolina-based fiscal watchdog group has welcomed Grassley's investigation. "In large measure, four of the six are dodging and weaving," he said. *-Religion News Service*