

Senator ends probe of ministries, calls for 'self-reform'

by [Adelle M. Banks](#) in the [February 8, 2011](#) issue

Sen. Charles Grassley of Iowa, having concluded a three-year probe into alleged lavish spending at six major broadcast ministries, has 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.

His final 61-page review, released January 6, said evangelists Benny Hinn of Texas and Joyce Meyer of Missouri had made "significant reforms" in their operations, but four others provided incomplete or no responses.

Grassley staffers determined that 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.

The senator 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.

However,

Americans United for Separation of Church and State criticized the report's recommendation to consider repealing the prohibition of church electioneering—a subject that the staff review acknowledged was "not a central issue" in Grassley's probe.

Calling the recommendation "a breathtakingly wrong-headed suggestion," Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United, said: "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."

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, said of his role generally: "Less government is better, and I think both ECFA and the senator espouse that philosophy."

Although the association has worked primarily on certifying the financial integrity of evangelical groups, the commission will evaluate a range of religious organizations and other nonprofits. "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," Batts said at a January 7 news conference.

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 financial issues they will consider are whether there should be limits on clergy housing allowances and whether tax rules about "love offerings" received by clergy should be clarified.

Grassley's

report on the charismatic and Pentecostal ministries included accounts of stonewalling and internal pressures to resist the inquiries. Among their findings:

- Insiders in Kenneth Copeland Ministries in Fort Worth, Texas, 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, Georgia, remained unanswered, including the amount of his salary.
- Several former staffers at Paula White's megachurch in Tampa, Florida, 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. —RNS