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Sen. Grassley probes televangelists' finances

The Associated Press

Acting on tips about preachers who ride in Rolls Royces and have purportedly paid \$30,000 for a conference table, the top Republican on the Senate Finance Committee said Tuesday he's investigating the finances of six well-known TV ministers.

Sen. Chuck Grassley of Iowa said those under scrutiny include faith healer Benny Hinn, Georgia megachurch pastor Creflo Dollar and one of the nation's best known female preachers, Joyce Meyer.

Grassley sent letters to the half-dozen Christian media ministries earlier this week requesting answers by Dec. 6 about their expenses, executive compensation and amenities, including use of fancy cars and private jets.

In a statement, Grassley said he was acting on complaints from the public and news coverage of the organizations.

"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," Grassley said.

"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. People who donated should have their money spent as intended and in adherence with the tax code."

Those ministries that responded Tuesday either said they were cooperating or committed to financial transparency and following the law.

The investigation promises to shine new light on the kind of TV ministries that were crippled by sex and money scandals in the 1980s. Experts also say it stands out as an unusual case of the government probing the inner workings of religious organizations.

Most of those under investigation preach a variation of the "prosperity gospel," the teaching that God will shower faithful followers with material riches.

Grassley's letters went to:

- Kenneth and Gloria Copeland of Kenneth Copeland Ministries of Newark, Texas, a \$20 million organization and prosperity gospel pioneer. Questions were raised about the transfer of church assets to a for-profit company, Security Patrol Inc., a \$1 million loan from Gloria Copeland to the group, and a "personal gift" of more than \$2 million given to Kenneth Copeland to mark the ministry's 40th anniversary.

A Copeland spokeswoman released a statement saying the ministry is working on a response to Grassley's letter, follows all laws and best practices governing churches and religious non-profit groups, and "will continue to do so."

- Creflo and Taffi Dollar of World Changers Church International and Creflo Dollar Ministries of College Park, Ga. Grassley's letter asks for records on private planes, board makeup, compensation and donations and "love offerings" to visiting ministers. In a statement, Dollar called his ministry an "open book" and said he would cooperate. He also questioned whether the investigation could "affect the privacy of every community church in America."

- Benny Hinn of World Healing Center Church Inc. and Benny Hinn Ministries of Grapevine, Texas, is asked about use of a private jet, a home in Dana Point, Calif. and "layover trips" while traveling on ministry business. Hinn did not respond to requests for comment.

- Bishop Eddie Long of New Birth Missionary Baptist Church and Bishop Eddie Long Ministries of Lithonia, Ga., was questioned about his salary, a \$1.4 million real estate transaction and whether he, and not the board, holds sole authority over the organization. Long plans to fully comply with the Senate's request, and his church has "several safeguards" to ensure transactions comply with laws governing churches, according to a statement from Long's spokesman.



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- Joyce and David Meyer of Joyce Meyer Ministries of Fenton, Mo., who were quizzed about receiving donations of money and jewelry and the handling of cash from overseas crusades. They also were asked about expenditures at ministry headquarters, including a \$30,000 conference table and a \$23,000 "commode with marble top."

The ministry's lawyer released a statement describing the ministry's work and public release of several years' worth of audits. He also said the IRS found in October that the group continues to qualify for tax-exempt status.

- Randy and Paula White of the multiracial Without Walls International Church and Paula White Ministries of Tampa are asked about home purchases in San Antonio, Texas, Malibu, Calif., and New York, credit card charges for clothing and cosmetic surgery and the reported purchase of a Bentley convertible as a gift for Bishop T.D. Jakes, a prominent Texas preacher and televangelist. An e-mail to a spokeswoman for Jakes was not immediately returned.

In a statement, Randy and Paula White declined to comment on specifics, saying they needed time to review the letter with their lawyers. But the Whites called the Grassley letter "unusual, since the IRS has separate powers to investigate religious organizations if they think it's necessary."

Hinn, Kenneth Copeland and Creflo Dollar all sit on the board of regents for Oral Roberts University, which is mired in a financial scandal of its own.

The Senate Finance Committee has chided secular non-profits for governance and compensation problems in the past, but this level of scrutiny for what are basically "non-pulpit churches" is unprecedented, said Ken Behr, president of the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability.

Because the groups have tax status as churches, they are not required to file tax forms open to public inspection.

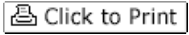
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