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The Pulpit And the Bling-Bling

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By Michelle Singletary

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Is it okay for a minister to live large?

A new probe by [Sen. Charles E. Grassley](#) of [Iowa](#), the ranking Republican on the Finance Committee, will certainly call into question whether it's appropriate for some leaders of multimillion-dollar ministries to live in majestic homes, drive luxury cars and earn CEO-like salaries.

There's a popular term used to satirize the bling-bling of some prosperous pastors -- "pimps in the pulpit."

I find it a hateful phrase. But I'm afraid the perception that there are a lot of these types of preachers will only increase in light of Grassley's probe.

Grassley has asked six high-profile ministries to detail their expenses, compensation and perks. He announced that he was undertaking the investigation to determine if any donations were misused. He said that his request is part of a long-standing look at tax-exempt 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 in launching the inquiry. "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."

In letters to the six nationally known ministries, Grassley demanded reams of documentation to back up ministry activities and the use of tax-exempt monies, including certain transfers of church assets to for-profit companies run by the ministers. The letters were sent to:

¿ Randy and Paula White of Without Walls International Church in [Tampa](#). Among other things, Grassley demanded that the Whites explain why the church allegedly bought a Bentley convertible for Bishop T.D. Jakes, who runs the Potter's House in [Dallas](#).

¿ Benny Hinn of World Healing Center Church in Grapevine, Tex. Hinn has been asked for details of his personal use of assets owned by the tax-exempt organization.

¿ David and Joyce Meyer of Joyce Meyer Ministries of Fenton, Mo. In addition to supplying other documentation, they were asked to explain why the ministry spent \$23,000 on a toilet with a marble top, \$30,000 for a conference table and \$11,219 to purchase a French clock.

¿ Kenneth and Gloria Copeland of Kenneth Copeland Ministries of [Newark, Tex.](#) They were questioned about their travel expenditures.

¿ Bishop Eddie L. Long of New Birth Missionary Baptist Church of [Lithonia](#), Ga. Long has been asked to detail "love offerings," or direct donations from members.

¿ Creflo and Taffi Dollar of World Changers Church International of College Park, Ga. The Dollars

were asked to list all vehicle purchases. In a television interview, Creflo Dollar indignantly disputed claims he owns two Rolls-Royces.

"That's not true," he said. "First of all, we don't have two Rolls-Royces. And secondly, the one [Rolls-Royce](#) that was purchased was purchased by the donors."

Here's the thing. I don't care what the Dollars drive. I'm not outraged over the couple's opulent lifestyle. The ministers in question haven't taken a vow of poverty.

In statements, the ministers said they comply with the laws that govern church and nonprofit organizations. Most said they would have their legal counsel review the requests from Grassley.

The pastors who run these mega-churches minister to tens of thousands of people. These leaders oversee an amazing amount of community outreach efforts. They're often on call round the clock. They are overworked and often overstressed trying to bless others.

There's nothing sinful about ministers being compensated on a par with chief executives who oversee for-profit operations with just as much revenue. As long as the ministers serve as examples of good stewardship and live within or below their means -- even if those means afford them a mega lifestyle -- it's none of our business what they buy with their own earnings.

However, it certainly is our business if they are abusing their positions of power and misusing tax-exempt donor money. If the ministries involved in this investigation have been operating above board and all donations have been properly handled, the leaders ought to welcome the scrutiny.

It's not as if donors haven't been misled in the past by charismatic spendthrift religious leaders. Let's not forget the televangelist scandals of the late 1980s. Remember [Jim Bakker](#)? He was sent to federal prison for misappropriating \$158 million in ministry funds.

"Any organization that refuses to openly share their financial information lacks the kind of financial transparency that many donors are likely to expect," said Kenneth Behr, president of the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability.

If nothing else, I hope Grassley's probe forces all churches -- large and small -- to put in place tight financial controls and an independent board of directors to oversee the ministry operations and expenditures. The ministries and leaders should provide an accounting of the donor dollars they collect.

As for their personal expenditures, should these private-jet-flying, bling-wearing, Rolls-Royce-driving, mansion-owning preachers live less large?

Some restraint might be in order. The Bible certainly warns about the accumulation of wealth. Greed often accompanies prosperity.

A 2007 Rolls-Royce sells for nearly \$340,000. When you're ministering to the masses, it just doesn't bode well to own a vehicle that costs more than any home many of your parishioners will ever live in.

¿ On the air: [Michelle Singletary](#) discusses personal finance Tuesdays on [NPR](#)'s "Day to Day" program and online at <http://www.npr.org>. She also has a personal finance [call-in show that airs Sundays on XM Satellite Radio, Channel 169 "The Power," at 8 to 10 p.m.](#) Senator Grassley will join Michelle at 9 p.m. tonight to

discuss the probe.

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