

Ethics reform bills may restrict or ban travel gifts: Lobbying opportunities during travel at issue

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When Representative Walter Jones (R., N.C.) made a one-day trip to speak to a Columbus, Ohio, congregation in 2005, he and aide William Moore didn't have to spend time in airports waiting for connecting flights.

Instead, the two boarded a private plane leased and operated by a church. They reported the total cost of their travel as \$7,240—the equivalent of two first-class tickets, the formula allowed under House travel rules. The trip was paid for by the Center for Moral Clarity, an offshoot of the 12,000-member World Harvest Church, which is based in Columbus and headed by charismatic pastor Rod Parsley.

Paying for travel is a legal way for groups—including nonprofit religious organizations—to get the attention of lawmakers and possibly gain support for their causes. Trips may also give politicians a platform to promote legislation.

But trips paid for by tax-exempt religious groups may be a thing of the past. Proposed ethics reforms in the new Democratic-controlled Congress could make gifts of travel more transparent or eliminate them altogether.

“This is actually going to be fought out in the ethics rules when Congress comes back,” said Meredith McGehee, policy director of the Campaign Legal Center, a nonpartisan watchdog in Washington. “You have to ask, does [a tax-exempt organization] do any lobbying? . . . It should not be paying for trips because these trips provide an opportunity to have one-on-one face time. Other people don't get that chance.”

Under some proposed changes to House travel rules, members would be required to report who traveled with them or with a member of their staff. Members also might be required to pay charter rates for flights on private planes. At present members

are asked only to pay or report a gift in an amount equivalent to first-class tickets. Privately sponsored travel may be eliminated entirely.

Jones's pet issue is a bill that would amend IRS rules to effectively allow religious leaders to support candidates for elected office. Currently, members of the clergy can support candidates on their own but not in their capacity as leaders of tax-exempt religious organizations.

The bill has been introduced several times without success, but Jones plans to reintroduce a version of it in the 110th Congress that convenes in January, said his spokesperson, Kathleen Joyce. The legislation had the enthusiastic support of Parsley as he introduced Jones at the launch of Parsley's new venture—Reformation Ohio—during that trip.

Jones's bill "would restore to every pastor, every cleric, every bishop and every priest in the United States of America their First Amendment rights, which were infringed upon in 1954," Parsley said, according to a recording of the event made by Marley Greiner, a reporter for an alternative news outlet, the Columbus Free Press.

The presence of Jones and a few other Republican politicians before the crowd of about 1,000 in front of the Ohio statehouse provided some high-profile support for Reformation Ohio. According to the organization, its efforts include saving 100,000 souls and registering 400,000 voters.

"Freedom without religion is dangerous and unstable," Jones said. "God, please help this reformation effort in Ohio, and then, God, help us bring it across the nation."

Senator Sam Brownback (R., Kan.) was also there, courtesy of the Center for Moral Clarity. The center paid \$620 for transportation and about \$650 for lodging, according to a database of congressional travel records compiled by Medill News Service.

But the guest who may have garnered some unwanted attention was Ohio secretary of state Ken Blackwell, this year's unsuccessful Republican candidate for governor of Ohio. While the Center for Moral Clarity states on its Web site that it abides by IRS regulations prohibiting churches from supporting candidates—regulations that Jones's bill would change—some say Blackwell's presence at the launch of Reformation Ohio crossed the line.

In January and April of 2006, coalitions of religious leaders filed IRS complaints against the World Harvest Church and its affiliated Center for Moral Clarity and Reformation Ohio along with another Ohio church for allegedly supporting Blackwell's bid for governor.

Blackwell was the sole gubernatorial candidate to appear at last year's launch of Reformation Ohio. It was one of several appearances cited in the complaint filed by the religious leaders.

"The complaints filed by that consortium of liberal ministers . . . are baseless and without merit," according to a written statement from the church provided by its spokesperson. "Contrary to media reports, at their inception these entities were organized according to IRS guidelines, and have consistently operated in full compliance with federal tax law."

When asked if the IRS is investigating the claims, the response from the church was that "these matters are private in accordance with IRS rules and we choose not to discuss them publicly."

The World Harvest Church statement said only flight crew were on the plane with Jones and Moore. "At no time during Congressman Jones's visit to Columbus . . . did World Harvest Church, CMC or Reformation Ohio lobby him on any issue."

Jones's spokesperson declined to comment when asked why Jones took a private jet instead of a commercial flight. The church's statement said the plane is used when commercial flights "would be more time-consuming or otherwise impractical."

-Tara McLaughlin, Religion News Service