

# CRYSTAL

FROM PAGE 4

staff members and slashed air time by 50 percent. Its congregation has shrunk to about 5,000. According to bankruptcy filings, donations fell by 24 percent in 2009. The church owes money to about 550 creditors. The cathedral lost \$16.8 million in the past three years on total revenues of \$70.8 million.

The mortgage includes the cost of two more buildings on campus – the Family Life Center and Welcoming Center, which were added in 1990 and 2003, respectively. The mortgage also covers the cost of refurbishments on campus, a parking-lot expansion and acquisition of neighboring properties, said Jim Penner, teaching pastor and Robert H. Schuller's son-in-law.

For the past two years, the church has unsuccessfully tried to refinance its mortgage to a manageable level. Penner said the 10-acre property in Garden Grove is valued between \$55 million and \$60 million.

The bankruptcy was the direct result of the cathedral not having sufficient liquid cash flow to pay vendors, Penner said. Most of the church's money is tied up in assets, he said.

Church administrators, predominantly the daughters and sons-in-law of the founding pastor, now 84, have said the bankruptcy filing is a direct result of the tough economic conditions.

But documents obtained by The Orange County Register, interviews with Schuller's only son, Robert A. Schuller, and longtime pageant vendors indicate that the church's financial troubles could have been reasonably anticipated. The gap between the cathedral's revenues and expenditures consistently shrank between 2005 and 2008.

A major financial debacle – according to the younger Schuller and many congregants who were interviewed – came in 2005 when the cathedral spent between \$13 million and \$15 million on a lavish production called "Glory of Creation." The show lost about \$5 million and was never staged again.

According to Waltz and other church elders, Schuller's empire



FILE PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE CRYSTAL CATHEDRAL

## Construction of the Crystal Cathedral in Garden Grove gets under way a few days after groundbreaking ceremonies in 1977.

began and flourished because he preached a positive message of a loving God – a message of hope for the hopeless. He prided himself on being a "possibility thinker," a man of faith who dwelt on the unlimited possibilities before him. He did not believe that Jesus viewed all of mankind as "sinners." This new, uplifting message inspired hundreds of young people.

But a church that had its humble beginnings in the dreams of one inspired man soon became a symbol of wealth and power, lacking an equally charismatic successor to take over leadership of what it has become – a megachurch.

### THICKER THAN WATER

The Crystal Cathedral is in turmoil today, but not because it lacked a "succession plan," says Robert A. Schuller, the founder's son. The younger Schuller says it was always a given that he would succeed his father.

His first memories of his father's ministry go back to the drive-in where he remembers sitting at a picnic bench drawing pictures in his Sunday school book and listening to the pastor preach to families in rows and rows of cars.

In 2006, Schuller symbolically handed over his gold medallion and his senior pastor title to his son. But in 2008, Robert A. Schuller abruptly stepped down from his senior pastor position and quit the "Hour of Power" program.

Speaking for the first time to

the Register about the reasons for his departure from the cathedral, Robert A. Schuller gets to the crux of the issue. His father simply could not let go, he says. The same personality, strength and conviction that helped the idealistic pastor raise a glass tower from the ground also made him reluctant to hand over "his baby" to a successor – even though that successor was his own flesh and blood, a Schuller.

"Energetic, successful, bright individuals have a hard time relinquishing power," the younger Schuller, 56, says with a laugh. "Such individuals did not succeed in life by letting go."

Robert H. Schuller did not respond to requests for comment.

The son's ideas for the future direction of the cathedral were drastically different from the father's. Robert A. Schuller wanted the cathedral to reach out to communities. He wanted to expand missions. Most important, Robert A. Schuller says, he was for better governance, more accountability and better financial control.

Schuller says he wanted a completely autonomous board without family members and individuals who had contracts with the church. He believed board members should have "no conflict of interest."

He was against spending money on the "Glory of Creation" in 2005. Church administrators say the extravagant show with giant digital screens and elaborate sets, a red carpet premiere, envisioned

SEE CRYSTAL • PAGE 6

## Chronology of events

**1955:** The Rev. Robert H. Schuller moves to Garden Grove from Chicago with \$500 to found a Reformed Church in America congregation. He delivers sermons from the rooftop of Orange Drive-in's snack bar.

**1970:** Schuller starts "Hour of Power," which goes on to become one of the most popular religious TV programs in the U.S. He also founds the Robert H. Schuller Institute for Successful Church Leadership.

**1980:** The glass-and-steel Crystal Cathedral opens. Designed by American Institute of Architects gold medal winner Philip Johnson with partner John Burgee, it has more than 10,000 windows of tempered, silver-colored glass. It is the home base for international Crystal Cathedral Ministries, including a congregation of more than 10,000 members.

**1990:** A celebration of the 10th anniversary of Crystal Cathedral includes the dedication of a bell tower of highly polished stainless-steel prisms and a 52-bell carillon.

**1991:** Schuller undergoes two surgeries to remove blood clots from his brain after striking his head on a car door.

**1996:** Schuller designates his son, Robert A. Schuller, as his successor, but plans to remain active in ministry for at least 10 more years.

**1997:** Schuller denies allegations that he placed a flight attendant in a headlock on a flight from Los Angeles to New York. He later settled the case, completed six months of federal supervision and paid a \$1,000 fine.

**1997:** Schuller suffers a minor heart attack and undergoes angioplasty at UCI Medical Center to remove blockage from his left ventricle artery.

**June 2000:** Arvella and Robert Schuller celebrate their 50th wedding anniversary by renewing their vows in the Crystal Cathedral.

**December 2004:** Orchestra director Johnnie Carl takes his own life Dec. 17. Carl, a Yorba Linda resident who suffered from bipolar disorder, wrote more than 3,500 musical arrangements for the cathedral.

**April 2005:** Schuller celebrates his 50th anniversary of preaching in Orange County.

**January 2006:** Schuller announces that he will step down from leadership of his ministry and that his son, the Rev. Robert A. Schuller, will be installed as senior pastor.

**November 2008:** The Rev. Robert H. Schuller tells his congregation that his son, the Rev. Robert A. Schuller, would no longer be the preacher of the church's weekly "Hour of Power" syndicated TV broadcast.

**January 2009:** In an attempt to raise funds for its ministry and consolidate its assets, Crystal Cathedral Ministries puts a four-story office building on the church campus up for sale.

**January 2009:** Several Crystal Cathedral pastors, including executive pastor Jim Poit and his wife, Linda, director of children's ministries, are laid off because of financial issues.

**March 2009:** In an e-mail seeking donations from members and sponsors, church CEO Jim Penner announces the "Hour of Power" will go dark on local stations in 25 markets nationwide because of severe financial problems.

**June 2009:** The Rev. Robert H. Schuller announces that his eldest daughter, Sheila Schuller Coleman, will take over leadership of the entire ministry at the cathedral.

**January 2010:** To make up for a 27 percent decline in revenue in 2009, the Crystal Cathedral cancels its "Glory of Easter" pageant and announces it will shut down its 20-acre Rancho Capistrano retreat in San Juan Capistrano.

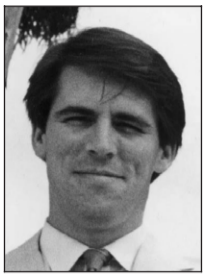
**March 2010:** Church musicians and vendors for the Crystal Cathedral's "Glory of Christmas" and "Glory of Easter" pageants say the megachurch has failed to pay them tens of thousands of dollars they are owed for past performances.

**May 2010:** Crystal Cathedral Ministries sells its 170-acre property in Rancho Capistrano to Hobby Lobby Stores Inc. of Oklahoma City, which leases it to Saddleback Church.

**June 2010:** The Rev. Robert H. Schuller announces he is retiring from his lead pastor duties after 55 years and passing the reins to his daughter.

**October 2010:** Crystal Cathedral Ministries files for bankruptcy protection.

Compiled from Register reports by Michael Doss



Robert A. Schuller in 1981

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