

# Televangelism in chaos

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ONCE one of the most popular televangelists in the United States, the Reverend Robert H Schuller is watching his life's work crumble.

His son and recent successor, the Reverend Robert A Schuller, has abruptly resigned as senior pastor of the Crystal Cathedral.

The shimmering, glass-walled megachurch in Southern California is home to the Hour of Power broadcast, an evangelism staple that has been on the air worldwide for more than three decades.

The church is in financial turmoil: It plans to sell more than 65million- worth (about R647.2m ) of its Orange County property to pay off debt.

Revenue dropped by nearly 5m last year, according to a recent letter from the older Schuller to elite donors.

In the letter, Schuller Snr implored the Eagle's Club members, who supply 30 percent of the church's revenue, for donations and hinted that the show might go off the air without their support.

"The final months of 2008 were devastating for our ministry," the 82-year-old pastor wrote.

The Crystal Cathedral blames the recession for its woes. But it's clear that the elder Schuller's carefully orchestrated leadership transition, planned over a decade, has stumbled badly.

It's a problem common to personality-driven ministries. Most have collapsed or been greatly diminished after their founders left the pulpit or died.

Members often tie their donations to the pastor, not the institution, said Nancy Ammerman, a sociologist of religion at Boston University.

Schuller, with a style that blends pop psychology and theology, has a particularly devoted following, she said.

"Viewers are probably much less likely to give when it's not their preacher they're giving to," she said.

"There's something about these televised programmes where people develop a certain loyalty."

Today's increasingly fragmented media landscape is also to blame, said Quentin Schultze, a Calvin College professor who specialises in Christian media.

Church-based televangelism led by powerful personalities filled TV in the 1980s, but now only a handful of shows remain, he said.

Among the struggling ministries are those of Oral Roberts and the late James D Kennedy of The Coral Ridge Hour TV show.

"I don't see a scenario for maintaining a TV-based megachurch any more. The days of doing that in the models of Schuller and Jimmy Swaggart and Oral Roberts are over," Schultze said.

"It's amazing to me that the Hour of Power was able to keep going as long as it did."

Through a spokesperson, Schuller Snr, his family members and other cathedral officials declined to comment.

The younger Schuller, 54, did not respond to an e-mail requesting an interview.

The older Schuller, who called his weekly show America's Television Church, founded his ministry in a drive-in theatre after moving to southern California in 1955.

He studied marketing strategies to attract worshippers and preached a feel-good Christianity, describing himself as a "possibility thinker" and

He studied marketing strategies to attract worshippers and produced a rock-gospel Christianity, describing himself as a "possibility thinker" and spinning his upbeat style into a 10000-member church and a broadcast watched by millions worldwide.

The church's main sanctuary, the Crystal Cathedral, is a landmark designed by renowned architect Philip Johnson, with a spire visible from afar amid Orange County's suburban sprawl.

Thousands make the pilgrimage to see where the broadcast is filmed before a live congregation.

The Schullers consider the church a family business and the younger Schuller's 2006 appointment was sanctioned by the Crystal Cathedral's parent denomination, the Reformed Church in America.

But the church announced on November 29 that Schuller Jnr had resigned as senior pastor, just a month after he was removed from the church's syndicated broadcasts.

In a news release, Schuller Snr said: "Robert and I have been struggling as we each have different ideas as to the direction and the vision for this ministry."

The church has since instituted a rotating roster of high-profile guest preachers, including Bill Hybels of Willow Creek Community Church, the Chicago-area megachurch, and evangelist Luis Palau.

Schuller Snr's daughters and sons-in-law remain involved in the church, some in key roles.

But Juan Carlos Ortiz, the interim senior pastor, hopes to appoint a senior pastor with no ties to the Schuller family within two years.

On the church website, concerned members and TV fans have posted hundreds of comments protesting the upheaval, with some indicating they have stopped giving or will leave altogether.

Several angry viewers have launched petitions to get the younger Schuller back.

Melody Mook, a 58-year-old from El Paso, Texas, said she stopped her 25 monthly donation and is looking elsewhere for her spiritual needs. She said she dislikes the guest pastors. "I feel hurt and confused and I'm not sure that I want to sit and watch when I know there's problems beneath the surface," she said.

"You feel like you're in somebody else's church every Sunday."

Others said they felt betrayed that the Schullers couldn't put God before their family spat.

"They have not been forthcoming at all," said John Dewart, an insurance agent from New Jersey who has watched for 30 years.

"Why can't a father and son work together for the glory of God? That's my big question." — Sapa- AP

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