

"Great people are ordinary people with great dreams."

The Rev. Robert H. Schuller

By Ronald Yates

Cover photo by Joan Adlen

Another great dream has come true for the Rev. Robert H. Schuller. And standing inside his just-completed, \$18 million, 12-story glass church, a structure that rivals Disneyland's snow-capped concrete Matterhorn for dominance of California's otherwise undistinguished Orange County landscape, the eminent sculler can narrowly contain himself.

"At last," he booms in a voice only slightly less dramatic than Orson Welles doing a Paul Masson commercial, "we have a church that lets people see God's handiwork while still sitting in their seats." With that, Schuller turns, his light blue eyes flashing as they survey his stunning Crystal Cathedral — the glass-walled tour de force of noted New York architect Philip Johnson.

"At last," Schuller continues, spreading his arms and tilting his head to peer upward through the glass ceiling at white clouds moving through a powder-blue sky, "at last, we have a church where the heavens can do their thing."

For the 53-year-old Schuller, who began building a following back in 1955 when he pioneered drive-in religion from atop the snack-bar roof of an Orange County outdoor theater, the gala fund-raiser and informal christening of the star-shaped Crystal Cathedral in May was the culmination of what he calls "possibility thinking."

"Nothing is impossible if you believe in yourself," says Schuller in his "Hour of Power" television sermons (seen in Chicago Sundays at 8 a.m. on Channel 32). This is the philosophic nucleus of his increasingly popular ministry. It is what he calls the "systematic theology of self-esteem"—a philosophy of life similar to that of positive thinkers like Dr. Norman Vincent Peale and Chicago insurance tycoon W. Clement Stone (a \$1 million contributor to the Crystal Cathedral).

The philosophy appears to be working for Schuller. When he and his wife, Arvella, arrived in Orange County 25 years ago, Schuller, a graduate of Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Mich., had \$500 in his pocket and five years of preaching in Chicago (at Ivanhoe Reformed Church) under his belt.

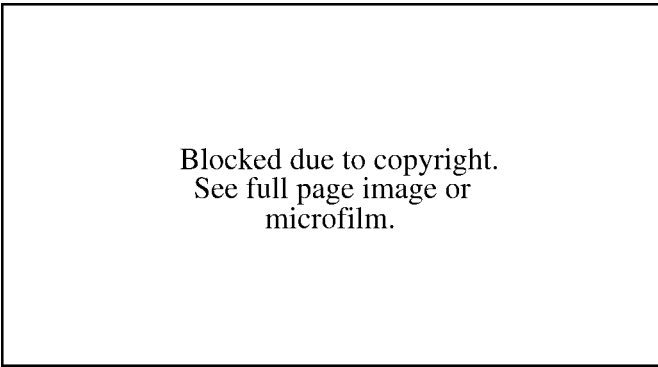
When he climbed onto the tarpaper roof of that drive-in snack bar on March 27, 1955, Schuller needed all the positive thinking he could get. There were fewer than 50 cars scattered before him, and when the plate was passed, just \$83 came back—hardly enough pay for the wooden cross he had built himself. Now, 25 years later, Schuller has parlayed that first meager offering into a \$16-million-a-year ecclesiastical empire.

Schuller's Garden Grove Community Church, about 25 miles southwest of Los Angeles in suburban Orange County, has the largest regular attendance each Sunday—about 10,000 in three services—of any "mainline" (middle of the road) Protestant church in America. (Though it operates with relative autonomy, Schuller's church is connected to the Reformed Church in America, a sect founded by Dutch settlers in 1628.)

Ronald Yates is a Tribune correspondent based in Los Angeles.

# From outdoor theater to 'cathedral'—a religious success story

The Rev. Robert Schuller began his California ministry by preaching to 50 cars in an outdoor theater. Now, 25 years later and thanks in large measure to his national television exposure, he reigns over a sprawling church complex that includes a stunning new glass sanctuary larger than Notre Dame Cathedral.



Schuller and his wife, Arvella, study plans with a workman during construction of the Crystal Cathedral.

Photo by Joan Adlen

His "Hour of Power" television broadcasts are carried nationally by some 160 stations and reach an audience in the United States, Canada, and Australia estimated at 2.5 million. Arbitron, the New York-based TV rating corporation, puts Schuller's televised sermons in the "big three" of national religious broadcasting—an exclusive club that also includes Oklahoma's Oral Roberts and Rex Humbard of Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio (see sidebar on p. 23).

From humble beginnings in rural Iowa, Schuller has risen to superstar status in what has come to be known as the "electronic church" and, via television, now reaches more people in a

single hour than Jesus Christ talked to during his entire earthly ministry. Schuller has become a tycoon in television religion—a world of slickly packaged evangelism that often includes lavish sets, sophisticated camera equipment, and — according to media statistics — \$600 million worth of paid television time each year.

If that sounds like a lot to spend on TV air time, consider the following: The Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability, formed last year to promote voluntary financial disclosure among religious groups in the wake of government probes into the finances of several churches, estimates that televi-

sion evangelists this year will generate as much as \$2 billion in tax-free income from the estimated 129 million viewers who watch them in each week.

They also will generate landslides of criticism from the more staid and traditional mainline churches in America who accuse TV's smooth-talking fundamentalist preachers and faith-healers of dishing out little more than simplistic theological Plabum.

TV preachers, some critics say, are siphoning money and members, from already beleaguered local parishes, with a brand of showmanship few mainline pastors can or care to emulate. The electronic church, according to a recent symposium in New York City attended by several mainline Protestant and Catholic leaders, is distorting the "true message" with its constant plea for money and its emphasis on its own "gospel superstars" rather than on Jesus Christ.

"Electronic church is not a valid term; we are more a corporate colony of caring persons," insists Schuller. "That's what we are. What you see on television is not a church. Don't call that a church. Call it emotional therapy, or a ministry or ecclesiastical activity, but don't call it a church."

"This," he says, gesturing at the 10,661 silver-mirrored glass windows set into a honeycomb of lacy white girders and trusses that make up the walls and ceiling of the Crystal Cathedral, "is a church."

Indeed, and few of the 3,000-plus guests who pushed into the standing-room only sanctuary on its gala opening could fail to be impressed.

The Crystal Cathedral looks positively intergalactic—the kind of structure one would expect aliens to arrive on earth in from someplace beyond Andromeda. Sitting near the Lewis offramp of the Santa Ana Freeway, Schuller's glass church is glowing from within, creating a kind of mini-aurora borealis.

Architect Johnson calls this light "subaqueous," meaning that when one is inside the building, the optic sensation is similar to swimming with open eyes in a sunlit pool. "I think that architecture should really be done *ad majorem dei gloriam* — to the greater glory of God," says Johnson, whose other architectural achievements include the New York State Theater at Lincoln Center, Houston's Pennzoil Place, and the IDS Center in Minneapolis.

"Religious buildings are really what architecture is all about," Johnson says. "A church has no purpose except to back up the ritual of the liturgy. You don't have to worry about where to put the kitchen or the toilets; you just have to make the space as moving as you can. To me, architecture is the design of interior space. And, oh my God, this is the most exciting space I've ever done. I'm overwhelmed by it."

Johnson's space is indeed overwhelming. Spanning an area larger than two football fields, the Crystal Cathedral, ("cathedral" may be a misnomer because in the strictest definition a cathedral contains a bishop's throne — *cathedra* in Latin — and serves as his official or principal church) is, according to publicity material, "longer and higher than Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris."

It has also been paid for with the kind of creative financing the bishop of Paris could never have imagined when Pope Alexander III laid the cornerstone for Notre Dame in 1163. Each of the 10,661 2-by-6-foot windows as well as each of

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See full page image or  
microfilm.

Schuller in the pulpit: "I don't jam the Bible down people's throats. I believe in the Bible, but if people want Bible preaching, they can get it elsewhere."

PHOTO BY JOAN ADLER

the 11,000 "crystal star" light bulbs that hang over the pulpit were donated by the faithful. Total donations, including a contribution of \$1 million from Chicagoan Stone and a \$2 million gift from another Chicago resident (anonymous), put the total raised for the church at \$14 million. Then, in a marketing stroke, Schuller hit upon a brilliant plan to pay off every dollar of the cathedral's final \$4 million construction costs—thus ensuring that the structure will be totally mortgage-free when it formally opens Sept. 14.

First, he invited opera star Beverly Sills to sing at the fund-raiser. Then he sent letters not only to his 10,000-member California congregation, but to the 800,000 families on his mailing list and to admirers and occasional guest speakers that include Frank Sinatra, Doris Day, Glenn Ford, and The Rev. Jesse Jackson. He asked each to contribute \$1,500 for a seat at the event. In return, Schuller promised, each would have his or her name engraved in gold on the back of the chair he purchased.

All of the cathedral's 2,862 seats were sold out well before the concert. In one night Schuller had managed to raise more than \$4 million and silence critics who have labeled the cathedral extravagant. "I had a private prayer with God," Schuller says. "I said: 'God, if you want it built, provide the cash and I'll take the criticism.'" On the pulpit Schuller has pointed out that the Crystal Cathedral weighs 24 million pounds, which, divided by its \$18 million price tag, comes out to 75 cents a pound—cheaper than hamburger.

It is almost 7 p.m. the night of the concert, and atop the 14-story "Tower of Hope," the rectangular brick church steeple that serves as Schuller's office and supports a 90-foot-high neon cross, tonight's VIP guests have gathered and are demurely sipping grape juice from plastic glasses.

In an hour the VIPs, who are mostly big donors (Sinatra couldn't make it, but he did buy a few seats and send a telegram of congratulations), local music critics, religion writers, and other journalists, will descend from the tower, walk 50 feet to the Crystal Cathedral, and listen to Sills belt out two hours of Vivaldi, Schubert, and Rossini.

While advance promotion of the event said that Sills was performing because "she is a friend and admirer of Dr. Schuller and realizes the significance of the opening of the Crystal Cathedral," reporters later were told by Sills that she had received her customary \$15,000 fee for the evening's *bel canto*.

Sills appeared in fresh voice for what she had announced would be her final performance anywhere of solo music. But her performance brought groans—especially from the critics. As Sills stood atop the 185-foot-long red Spanish marble altar singing into a microphone beneath a cluster of suspended loudspeakers, it was sadly evident that acoustically, the Crystal Cathedral is a 10,000-window echo chamber.

To the horror of those who paid \$1,500 to hear Sills' farewell *bravura*, what was coming from those loudspeakers (a temporary system installed for the night's

festivities) was, as one local critic put it, "a sonic Kafka nightmare, a surreal bath of echoes."

There was a lot of squirming in those \$1,500 seats. Sills was sounding more like the prima donna of an open-air rock concert than a woman whose famed voice can fill most auditoriums without amplification. The words were distorted and blurred and were bouncing off all that glass into the cathedral's three triangular balconies, eventually drowning in the 12 fountains (representing the apostles) that run the length of the building.

The sounds coming from the eerily glowing cathedral reminded one of the "alien-meets-man" scene in Steven Spielberg's film "Close Encounters of the Third Kind." Traffic on the two streets that pass the church slowed markedly as rubber-neckers looked at the shimmering sight before them.

Most who passed were familiar with the 22 acres of grassy, tree-dotted land surrounding Schuller's Garden Grove Community Church and have watched the Crystal Cathedral take shape over the past two years. But few had seen the cathedral "turned on," as one 12-year-old in Schuller's congregation aptly put it.

Schuller's religious complex has become a fixture in Orange County. The cross atop the Tower of Hope (the tower is connected to the old 1,700-seat sanctuary, which will be turned into a dining hall in September) can be seen for miles and is as familiar a landmark in the area as nearby Anaheim Stadium,

home of Gene Autry's California Angels baseball team and future home of the Los Angeles Rams of the National Football League.

There is also the familiar 1,000-car drive-in church attached to the old sanctuary — a feature that will continue after the Crystal Cathedral opens. Two 90-foot-high glass doors will swing open at Schuller's command, revealing the bespectacled leader to the al fresco faithful as they sit outside in their Rabbits and Winnebagos.

A visit to the Garden Grove Community Church is something like walking into a vast theistic factory. Schuller employs 190 full-time staff, including 10 assistant ministers, on the campus and in the \$1.3 million "Hour of Power" communications center across the street. More than 50,000 letters are received by the center each week, many asking for prayers or help with a personal problem. Almost all contain donations. Each is answered by the "Hour of Power" computer banks, which contain scores of pre-written paragraphs geared to deal with any specific problem. The computer quickly assembles the appropriate paragraphs in readable form, and the letter is imprinted with Schuller's signature and mailed. Fast, and efficient, a kind of "Action Line" for the soul.

Also scattered amidst the greenery and gurgling fountains of the church grounds are a day-care center, a psychological clinic, a 24-hour telephone counseling center (dial 714-NEW-HOPE), and a board room in which one

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# 'I don't stand up in the pulpit and preach down to people.'

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chair is always left empty for Jesus. In addition, there is the Robert H. Schuller Institute for Successful Church Leadership. The Institute provides four four-day seminars each year for struggling ministers in the red. One of the features of the seminars, which have attracted some 7,000 clergymen from all over the world since being set up in 1970, is Schuller's return to the very snack-bar roof in the nearby Orange drive-in theater where it all began 25 years ago. There, Schuller tells the assembled ministers that it is God's will for churches to grow.

Another feature of the Garden Grove Community Church is the Possibility Thinkers Bookstore, which sells everything from Schuller's 15 books and cassettes to T-shirts and Frisbees emblazoned with religious messages and Schuller-isms.

Schuller has been quoted as saying his complex is "a 22-acre shopping center for Jesus Christ." However, the 6-foot tall, well-tanned minister disclaims that one-liner. "I called it a service center where you can go and get almost any service you might need in one place," Schuller insists.

One thing you can't get at Schuller's church is what he calls "doom and

gloom" preaching.

Schuller's services are laced instead with humor, upbeat stories of personal triumph, and celebrity guest speakers such as born-again Charles Colson of Watergate fame and Ruth Carter Stapleton, the President's sister. There is also plenty of music (the church's theme song is "Morning Has Broken") with trumpets, guitars, violins, and a choir.

**A** typical Sunday will find Schuller dressed in flowing gray-and-black doctoral vestments, pacing the pulpit like a lion. This is no ordinary pulpit, however. This is a California pulpit, complete with a forest of potted palms, ficus trees, and other indigenous flora.

And what you hear is no ordinary Bible-thumping sermon. There are no references to Satan, sin, or damnation. Nor is there any mention of such social ills as racism, sexism, crime, or corruption. It's all strictly noncontroversial. And references to the Bible itself are rare.

Instead Schuller offers four principles for dealing with life's problems: "One, don't curse them; two, don't rehearse and nurse them; three, disperse them; four, reverse them."

He talks about being a true leader,

whom he describes as a person who: "Thinks, tests, talks, tries, tackles, and triumphs."

All of which sends his detractors into frenzies of criticism. "Schuller," said one local minister, "offers a crown without a cross. And he doesn't preach the Bible."

"That's baloney," answers Schuller. "They aren't listening. I admit I don't hold up a Bible. I don't deliver biblical expositions. I don't jam the Bible down people's throats. I believe in the Bible, but if people want Bible preaching, they can get it elsewhere. I don't want to be competitive. I was taught to preach in the seminary. But preaching is not communicating. What I do is communicate with people. I don't stand up on the pulpit and preach down to people. I don't kick their teeth in and slap their face."

"And if they say I offer a crown without a cross, they still aren't listening," Schuller says, his voice rising angrily. "There is no crown without a cross. There is no success without sacrifice. Everything that's nice has its price. I believe in success. Why? Because the alternative is believing in failure, and many of my critics are failures. They have their defense up. Their churches are failing. Their num-

bers are going down. The mainline church in America is in a phase of death, and it still has a lot of dying to do. That is not bad news. It's not bad news if a grain of wheat is dying on the ground because its death must come before it can sprout new life."

If Schuller sees electronic religion as the salvation of the dying American church, there are others who see it as a parasite draining the life blood from traditional Christianity.

Critics say Schuller and the other evangelists who make up the so-called "Big 8" of the "electronic church" (Roberts, Humbard, Pat Robertson, Jim Bakker, Jerry Falwell, Billy Graham, Jimmy Swaggart) are co-opting right-wing political activism in the name of theology. They say there is a "holy war" brewing between evangelistic fundamentalists and mainline liberals with nothing less than the definition of Christianity at stake. They charge television's ecclesiastical elite are comparable to one-issue politicians who produce clientele instead of congregations.

The Rev. Richard P. McBrien, professor of theology at Boston College (and who will become head of Notre Dame's theology department in Sep-

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# Critics claim television preachers are right-wing political activists.

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tember), says Schuller and several others dwell on the importance of the individual in an age when people need to be more oriented toward social problems.

"The sins that people like Schuller, Humbard, and Falwell talk about are always personal sins," McBrien says. "They are never the sins of racism, militarism, sexism, or the rape of the environment. The electronic church is simply a collection of right-wingers who offer too narrow an experience, too narrow a vision of what Christianity is all about."

"And anybody serious about being a Christian is aware that you should not be in it for personal gain," Rev. McBrien adds. "Yet there is obvious personal profit. Oral Roberts, Humbard, Schuller, and the others live as

very wealthy men. They would have a lot more credibility if they were to live like Mother Teresa (the Catholic nun who won the Nobel Peace Prize last year for her work among the poor of Calcutta). "These TV preachers can't tell me they're serious about Christianity when they're driving around town in limousines. The money is their Achilles' heel."

**S**chuller, the father of four sons and a daughter, all grown, lives with his wife on 1.8 acres in a three-bedroom house valued at about \$150,000. He says his annual salary is \$38,000 — a sum he supplements with speaking engagement fees (\$1,500 per appearance) and his writings, which include a daily column called "It's Possible" distributed by Newspaper Enterprise Association to

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# 'Religion is a business. We need money to operate,' says Schuller.



In 1968, the Rev. Norman Vincent Peale (right) present Schuller and his Garden Grove Community Church with the Guideposts Church Award for "imaginative use of modern techniques to further the work and word of God."

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more than 700 newspapers.

"I don't pitch for money on television," insists Schuller, "I've completed the Crystal Cathedral debt-free because we've committed all our income to missions and ministries we operate around the world. What we've built here is a house that doubles our audience, doubles our income potential — with no mortgage to pay off, no interest. That means all the money we take in can go to the hospitals and schools we help around the world.

"Now that's just good Christian business sense, and I'm a good businessman," Schuller says. "A lot of churchmen are not good business people. They don't even know how to market their own product. Religion is a business, after all. We need money to operate."

Schuller stops, leans back in his chair, and looks out over his Garden Grove empire with the Crystal Cathedral shimmering in the late afternoon sun like a giant diamond. "What my critics should ask is, 'Does he do a lot of good for a lot of people?'" Schuller says. "That's how I would answer the question about raising money. If the answer is 'Yes' the second question is, 'Does he pocket the money he gets?'"

Schuller stops again and looks me straight in the eye. "The answer to that question is 'No, absolutely no.'"

"The last question, then, is, 'Is our fund-raising strategy morally upright?' The answer to that question is 'Yes.' I'm judged in the marketplace every week by my viewers — just like any other merchant who's accepting money for a product or service. Like the universities; they accept money. They're out for money, they collect it and in turn they give you an education. Hospitals, health-care people, the same thing. Psychologists and psychiatrists, same thing. The question is, 'Are you meeting a legitimate need, and is your billing system ethical?' The public will judge you, that's No. 1. And, on top of that, we have the judgment of the TV stations who carry 'Hour of Power.' And they say Robert Schuller is in a class by himself."

According to Olan Hendrix, executive director of the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability, not all evangelists are as sure of their image as Schuller is.

"There is a great wave of concern among evangelists about financial accountability," says Hendrix, whose organization represents more than 100 evangelists including Billy Graham and Jerry Falwell. Earnings of E.C.F.A. members last year totaled more than \$400 million, but because IRS disclosure laws don't apply to evangelists and churches, the coffers of many electronic gospel stars are as lost to scrutiny as the Dead Sea Scrolls once were.

"There are a lot of people out there suspicious of their leaders, whether they be in politics or the church," Hendrix says. Indeed, it's what some churchmen call the "Elmer Gantry" syndrome — Elmer Gantry being the high-living hypocritical evangelist portrayed on film by Burt Lancaster some 20 years ago in an adaptation of the Sinclair Lewis novel. If one evangelist goes bad, they all must be the same, goes the theory.

"I don't like McCarthyism," says Schuller. "Persons should not be guilty by association. Distinctions have to be made. There is unethical, illegal, immoral activity that has happened under the aegis of 'the church.' That's true. Some indiscretions, some outright terrible acts. Look at Jim Jones and the People's Temple.

"The difference between me and these others is that my church is part of a mainline denomination," Schuller continues. "I'm accountable to the board of the Reformed Church of America. I turn in a financial report each year. I can be called on the carpet at any time. I wouldn't want it any other way. They say power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. I don't want power."

Then, leaning forward in his chair, Schuller reduces his voice to a loud whisper: "I want to have a good name. My goal is to come to the end of my life with pride behind me, love around me, and no vanity anywhere." ■