

Robert Schuller, Crystal Cathedral founder, dies at 88

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(RNS) Televangelist Robert H. Schuller, who attempted to integrate the teachings of John Calvin with the positive thinking of Norman Vincent Peale, and lost his famed Crystal Cathedral to bankruptcy, died today (April 2) at age 88, according to the Hour of Power ministry he started.

He was diagnosed with esophageal cancer in the summer of 2013.

After becoming one of the nation's best-known pastors, Schuller watched his megachurch empire—started in a drive-in theater—crumble amid huge debt and family squabbles over leadership.

In 2011, a bankruptcy proceeding reached a \$57.5 million deal to permit the Catholic Diocese of Orange to purchase the iconic glass sanctuary in Garden Grove, California. The remaining Protestant congregation, Shepherd's Grove, moved to a Roman Catholic church building with half the seating capacity of its former home, led by Schuller's grandson, Bobby Schuller.

"I have the incredible honor of carrying on my grandfather's legacy by teaching people that they are not what they do, not what they have, and not what people say about them. They are the beloved of God," Bobby Schuller said in a statement.

In 2012, Robert H. and Arvella Schuller resigned from the ministry they began more than 50 years before, citing differences with its board. Their only son, Robert A. Schuller, onetime heir apparent, had served as senior pastor for two years, resigning in 2008 after disputes about the ministry's direction. Sheila Schuller Coleman, their oldest daughter, then took on the pastoral role, but she left in 2012 and started a church nearby.

Despite the “tragedy” of family dissension that marked the end of Schuller’s career, evangelical scholar Richard Mouw said Schuller was “one of the great church leaders in the 20th century.”

“The very idea of the original congregation in Anaheim, of a drive-in church, was very innovative,” said Mouw, former president of Fuller Theological Seminary. “It was, I think, motivated in great part by a desire to reach people who ordinarily would not come to a church.”

But as other large church leaders took megachurch ministries and religious broadcasting in new directions, Schuller had a devotion to the Protestant tradition and maintained the “dignity of worship,” wearing a clerical robe on international television and having a renowned choir and “one of the finest organs in the world,” Mouw said.

The author of more than 30 books, including five *New York Times* best-sellers, Robert H. Schuller was best-known for his four decades of televised Sunday services, *Hour of Power*. From his soaring Crystal Cathedral, Schuller’s program was broadcast in five languages and 50 nations, with a worldwide audience of 20 million per week. Along the way, his popularity in America surpassed the likes of Oral Roberts and Pat Robertson.

It was a distinction that Schuller wore well. Earlier in his career, he had emerged largely unscathed from the “earthquake,” as he called it—the Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart scandals of the late 1980s that had rocked the world of televangelism.

Schuller was also one of the most touted leaders of the Reformed Church in America, which sometimes identified itself as “the denomination of Norman Vincent Peale and Robert Schuller.”

But like Peale, Schuller had his share of critics. Some Christians were scornful of his celebration of “possibility thinking” and attacked his “theology of self-esteem,” saying that it muted biblical warnings of sin and evil through a blend of gospel and psychology. That combination, they said, treated morality as merely a relative code of values.

Schuller dismissed the charges. “I don’t think anything has been done in the name of Christ and under the banner of Christianity that has proven more destructive to human personality and, hence, counterproductive to the evangelism enterprise than

the often crude, uncouth, and un-Christian strategy of attempting to make people aware of their lost and sinful condition,” Schuller told *Christianity Today*.

This view surfaced notably in 1998, when—at the height of then-President Clinton’s sex scandal—Schuller tempered criticism of Clinton by saying “we all share part of the shame.” Schuller argued that the nation’s stubbornly high approval ratings of Clinton had enabled the president to avoid confronting his behavior. The year before, Schuller had been thanked by Clinton in a State of the Union address, in which the president credited the evangelist with advising him to read Isaiah for strength in leading America.

Born in 1926, Schuller was reared in a religious Iowan family of Dutch descent. He later said he knew he wanted to be a minister. As part of his seminary studies, he wrote an index of Calvin’s four-volume *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. In 1950, after receiving his Bachelor of Arts degree from Hope College and a Master of Divinity from Western Theological Seminary, he was ordained by the Reformed Church in America.

He soon entered the pastorate at one of the denomination’s churches in Chicago, which over the next five years grew from 38 members to 400. In 1955, he was sent to Orange County, California, to establish a church.

After trying unsuccessfully to rent a facility, Schuller—with his wife, Arvella, as organist and \$500 in assets—finally settled on a drive-in theater, where he held Sunday services from a snack bar’s roof. While attracting worshippers, Schuller gravitated toward the teachings of Peale, pastor of New York’s Marble Collegiate Church, whom he credited with fine-tuning his faith and laying the foundation for the “possibility thinking” that was to come. Schuller’s congregation grew steadily.

By the 1970s, Schuller was a widely televised preacher whose Garden Grove Community Church in Orange County became a pioneering megachurch, and in the years ahead, he solicited New York architects Philip Johnson and John Burgee to design a modern cathedral. The result, a huge sanctuary with thousands of windows of reflective glass, became known as the Crystal Cathedral and opened in 1980. With the exception of Disneyland, the church—which eventually drew more than 10,000 members—became the most famous architectural work in Orange County.

In the late 1980s, reports of Bakker’s and Swaggart’s misdeeds caused greater media scrutiny of televangelists—and their finances. Schuller was among them. A

former employee accused him of deceiving followers in a fundraising letter. Then, in 1988, Schuller announced that his church was facing money shortages stemming from the “shock waves” echoing through American evangelism.

“That’s what happens when you become high-profile,” Schuller said. Still, by decade’s end, the public esteem of Schuller, along with Billy Graham and Jerry Falwell, was far less affected than that of Bakker and Swaggart.

In 1997, Schuller was again publicly shamed when an airline flight attendant sued Schuller and his church for more than \$2.5 million for what the man claimed were injuries suffered during a flight between Los Angeles and New York. The flight attendant said Schuller grabbed his shoulder and repeatedly shook him, causing physical and psychological damage.

Schuller denied trying to hurt the man and said he was only trying to get his attention. “My actions were inappropriate, considering the circumstances, and wherever he might be I want him to know that I apologize for any portion of my conduct which he found offensive. . . . I am 70 years old, but I am not too old to learn or be taught new lessons.”

Through the years, Schuller’s congregation grew, with a \$25 million structure built on the Crystal Cathedral complex in 1989. Celebrities and politicians—from Maya Angelou to Mikhail Gorbachev—visited the church.

In 2003, Schuller opened a new visitors’ center, the International Center for Possibility Thinking.

Thousands of individuals were shaped by his message over the years, Mouw said, who said he mocked Schuller’s “possibility thinking” when he arrived at the seminary in the mid-1980s until several students asked him to stop.

“That’s how we became Christians,” the students told Mouw, now a professor of faith and public life at Fuller. “That’s why we are in seminary, because we were really touched by his ministry.’ . . . These are people who have gone on to very solid ministries but they credit their initial sense of God’s very personal presence in their life and their call for ministry to the influence of Robert Schuller.”

Wes Granberg-Michaelson, general secretary emeritus of the Reformed Church in America, said Schuller was the most widely known minister of his denomination.

“As international television broadcasting opened up new markets, the *Hour of Power* was often there, and watched by those—including church leaders, kings, generals and prime ministers—who now had access to satellite TV,” he said. “While his actual ministry eventually crumbled in tragedy, the Cathedral—now Christ Cathedral—still stands, and is a testimony to Schuller’s imaginative vision.”

After dealing with bankruptcy and his resignation, Schuller made occasional appearances at his daughter’s church.

When Schuller read Scripture at Coleman’s church on Easter Sunday 2013, she recalled how he trained her as the family read the Bible around the table after dinner.

“More often than not, I’d just get started reading and Dad would say, ‘Stop. Do it again, Sheila. This time with feeling,’” she said, imitating her father’s deep voice. “So you can blame him if you think my messages have too much feeling.”

That Easter, he read from 1 Corinthians: “Oh death, where is your sting? Oh Hades, where is your victory? Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Schuller is survived by five children and more than a dozen grandchildren. His wife, Arvella, died in 2014.