

Schuller's glass act: Passing the baton at the Crystal Cathedral

by [John Dart](#) in the [April 10, 2002](#) issue

The ever-effervescent Robert H. Schuller—who says he invented the megachurch—was bubbling about the architectural atmosphere of the Crystal Cathedral, which is replete with statuary, greenery and fountains. He said the architectural plan ensures that the nearly 10,000-member church he founded will last for years, regardless of who is in the pulpit.

“After I am dead and gone, the development will outshine the preacher,” he said. “The real preacher that attracts people and ministry is going to be the structures, the grounds and the landscaping.” Never one to shilly-shally about his projects, Schuller added that once a final building is completed the complex will be unique in architectural history and something that none of the other megachurch pastors ever thought of doing.

Pointing from his 12th-floor Tower of Hope office to the mirrored, 236-foot-tall steeple that houses a carillon and prayer chapel, Schuller said, “That tower has emotional intercourse with the sun . . . It’s different every five minutes of the day. Architecture for humans . . . that’s biorealism,” he said, citing a term used by architect Richard Neutra. You can’t communicate with people unless they feel relaxed enough to listen, Schuller explained.

Bronze statues representing “four of the greatest communicators of the Word of God” stand in the glass-walled, nearly 3,000-seat Crystal Cathedral. The four are Bishop Fulton Sheen, Norman Vincent Peale, Billy Graham and Schuller himself.

Schuller claims that the idea of the megachurch began with him. “I have been credited or blamed—both are correct—as the founder of the megachurch.” He began a Reformed Church in America congregation modestly by preaching from atop a snack stand at an Orange County drive-in theater in 1955. The next year, Schuller said, he outlined a megachurch concept of some 6,000 members “to generate enough revenue” to support a staff of ten to 12 people. It was revolutionary, he said,

because in those days mainline denominations planned only small churches—“no more than 400 members because that was all one pastor could accommodate.”

“I launched the megachurch movement through the Institute for Successful Church Leadership in 1970,” he said, referring to his annual pastors conference at the Garden Grove church. “There were no megachurches 32 years ago—we were the closest thing to it.”

Veteran author and consultant Lyle Schaller disagrees. “Historically, that’s simply not true,” he said. If the megachurch started anywhere, he said, it was in Akron, Ohio, “where in the early 1960s there were at least three of the largest Protestant churches in America”: Akron Baptist Temple, the Chapel and Rex Humbard’s Cathedral of Tomorrow. In addition, downtown Dallas of the 1960s with First Baptist, First Presbyterian, First Methodist and First Christian “were among the largest churches in their denominations” and typically drew 2,000 or more attendance at worship, he said.

Schaller acknowledged that Schuller invented certain ways of doing church differently. “He was the first to have a surplus of off-street parking that the church owned. Among parish pastors he was the first to really recognize the power and impact of television. The whole concept of a teaching church for other pastors was his. Again, I don’t know of anyone, among pastors, who has the kind of world impact that he has.”

The Iowa-born Schuller surely would want history to add another first: a megachurch sustained by foresight and “biorealism.”

“In three years, we celebrate our 50th anniversary,” he said. “Then, you’ll look and see the first 50 years of our church required a unique kind of leadership, and I had those abilities that are not necessary ever again in history. That would be art, architecture, land development and creating an international platform.”

Schuller said that before he dies, a planned endowment fund will be generating income “to keep everything going as it is, even if there is a dip in following and finances.” Schuller admires the Marble Collegiate Church in New York, another fabled RCA congregation that will be 400 years old in 2008. “So I dream in hundreds of years. These structures, the biorealistic designs [of the Crystal Cathedral], will never die. Impossible. It’s built around the sun, the sky, the water, the mountains. It meets the deeper emotional needs of people.”