

After public family feud, another Schuller steps up

by [Lilly Fowler](#) in the [September 7, 2010](#) issue

Christian author Carole Lewis stands at the front of the congregation, sharing her tale of woe—bankruptcy, a daughter's death, a husband's prostate cancer, a home destroyed by a hurricane. Pastor Sheila Schuller Coleman stands nearby, listening attentively.

Neither Coleman nor the congregation seems particularly fazed by Lewis's litany of tragedies. Instead, they wait for what everyone seems to know is coming: a positive message. Then, as if on cue, Lewis delivers. "God has been so faithful to our family," Lewis says, as Coleman and others nod in agreement.

It's an ordinary Sunday at the Crystal Cathedral, the gleaming Southern California megachurch built on a message of transforming misfortune into blessings. The hundreds of parishioners seem to crave the optimism. It's also a philosophy the Crystal Cathedral needs now more than ever.

Coleman, 59, who was formally installed as senior pastor on July 11 after nearly a year as interim pastor, is the latest member of the Schuller clan to lead the landmark church, which is down the road from Disneyland. Her tenure follows a bitter and public family feud.

Her father, Robert H. Schuller, 83, founded the church in the 1950s in his three-bedroom house where the choir rehearsed in the living room. "I was the first receptionist for the church at the age of four," Coleman recalled, laughing.

Coleman said growing up in and around the congregation made her feel loved and inspired to help people. Church leadership wasn't always in the cards; her parents explained that women could not be ordained. Her younger brother, Robert A. Schuller, was the heir apparent.

The younger Schuller took over as senior pastor in 2006. But the new arrangement didn't last long, as reports surfaced of a simmering father-and-son rivalry. The all-

smiles megachurch that reached millions of viewers worldwide through the weekly *Hour of Power* program and exuded confidence through "possibility thinking," one of the founder's many slogans, had some troubles at home.

"I'm just glad I didn't grow up feeling that pressure," she said, referring to the father-and-son tensions. "People don't expect me to be just like Dad."

Coleman, like her father and brother, attended Hope College, earning a bachelor's in organic chemistry. When she wasn't accepted into medical school, she settled into a life as a writer and educator.

She married and became the mother of four, and she helped edit her father's books and wrote some of her own, including *Mommy Grace: Erasing Your Mommy Guilt*. She taught in public schools and served as principal at the Crystal Cathedral's primary and secondary schools, and she recently finished a doctorate in administrative leadership at the University of California, Irvine.

"My passion is for children," she said. "I feel my calling is to reach, teach." But Coleman says she couldn't help saying yes to her father, who first eased her into administrative duties at the church as her brother looked elsewhere for ministry opportunities.

Tensions remained in the Schuller family. For her part, Coleman said she and her brother were never terribly close, given their four-year age difference. But she added that there has never been any animosity between them and that she has always loved him. "We are as in touch as we ever have been," she said.

In an interview last year with *Christianity Today*, Coleman's brother said he was squeezed out of the *Hour of Power* broadcast when church leaders "decided to no longer air my messages. I was disappointed, sad, hurt, and angry," he continued. "It was a very difficult time, and quite frankly remains a difficult time."

Young Robert, who studied for the ministry at Fuller Theological Seminary, was publicly criticized by his father, who said his sermons had too much Jesus talk.

Longtime member Augustine Remlinger, 83, says the son relied on the Bible for his sermons. By contrast, the senior Schuller was an admirer of Norman Vincent Peale, known for "positive thinking" sermons. Under Coleman, Remlinger said, people are slowly drifting back to the church. "She knows what she's doing now," she said.

Coleman's father attributes her success at the church to a shared vision: "Sheila will be doing what I would be doing if I were in her shoes," Schuller said in a recent phone interview. "Focus on the positives."

That's not been an easy task amid crippling budget troubles. In May, the Crystal Cathedral sold its Rancho Capistrano property to Rick Warren's Saddleback Church, which plans to use it as a retreat center. The sale reduced Crystal Cathedral's mortgage to \$35.5 million, Coleman said, but recent reports indicate a \$55 million budget deficit and a 27 percent drop in revenue.

Coleman says the church has done what it can, given the economic climate and a diminished congregation, though she says the cathedral's Hispanic ministry has seen a huge boost in numbers. "Things are turning around slowly," she said. "I've had a huge, huge mess to clean up."

Some vendors and ex-employees waiting to get paid have sued but recently agreed to a longer grace period. In an August 5 e-mail to staff, the church announced that founder Robert H. Schuller, who has not retired, will take a 50 percent pay cut for the next two months, as will his immediate family members. Employees face 5-to-10 percent pay cuts, but no layoffs are planned in this cutback.

Coleman added: "We are thankful that our financial situation is looking up and we can begin to take positive steps toward repaying our debts," specifically to vendors, a total said to be about \$2 million. —Lilly Fowler, RNS