

Crystal Cathedral is cautionary tale for pastors

by [Adelle M. Banks](#)

November 18, 2011

(RNS) The cash-strapped Crystal Cathedral's pending transformation from a Protestant megachurch to a Roman Catholic cathedral should teach pastors not to spend millions on ornate buildings, a megachurch scholar says.

A bankruptcy judge on Thursday (Nov. 17) approved of the sale of the iconic cathedral to the Catholic Diocese of Orange, Calif., for \$57.5 million.

"They don't want to sink countless millions into building larger and more elaborate buildings," said Scott Thumma, a sociologist of religion at Hartford Seminary.

Thumma said the huge debt that led officials of the Southern California ministry to accept the sale of their 35-acre campus reflects what happens when a prominent pastor, a television ministry, or an iconic structure becomes the focal point. Leaders retire and die; television gives the congregation an unrealistic larger-than-life image; and buildings become a drag on finances.

After a bidding war between nearby Chapman University and the Diocese of Orange, the judge agreed with the cathedral board's choice to take the diocese's offer -- even though it was \$2 million less -- to ensure that the campus continues to have a religious purpose.

The diocesan deal permits worship to continue on-site for another three years and other religious activities for 18 months. Senior Pastor Sheila Schuller Coleman said

the decision "breaks my heart."

"If it's God's will for us to move, we believe it will be where he needs us most. It does not mean that our ministry will be diminished," the daughter of founder Robert H. Schuller said in a statement. "Crystal Cathedral church is not a building."

Bishop Tod Brown of the Orange diocese acknowledged the "difficult circumstances" facing the ministry founded by the elder Schuller in 1955.

"Those challenges have now enabled the Diocese of Orange to protect this wonderful structure as a place of worship and will soon provide our Catholic community with a new cathedral, pastoral center, parish school and more," Brown said in a statement.

Known for its "Hour of Power" television broadcasts and elaborate holiday pageants, the glass-walled Crystal Cathedral has been mired in family, leadership and financial turmoil in recent years.

Thumma said the trend of large churches using multiple satellite sites instead of one large edifice is validated by the outcome of the bankruptcy deal.

"To fill this space and maintain this space takes over the effort to spread the gospel and to live out the Christian mission," he said.