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Schuller ousted from Crystal Cathedral board

July 03, 2011 | By DEEPA BHARATH

GARDEN GROVE – The Rev. Robert H. Schuller, who started his ministry in an Orange drive-in theater more than five decades ago, has been voted off the board of **Crystal Cathedral Ministries**, which has been **tor**n apart by debt and familial disharmony for the last several years.

The church has not released information about the board meeting where Schuller, 84, was ousted, but his son **Robert A. Schuller, who was himself forced out of the cathedral** by his sisters and brothers-in-law three years ago, confirmed it Sunday.

He said his father wanted to enlarge the board, which was not received well by the others.

"A majority of that board consists of paid employees of the church and that's a serious conflict of interest," Robert A. Schuller said.

None of the board members or church officials could be reached for comment Sunday.

Schuller said his mother, a board member, voted against it, but was in the minority.

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"It's a very sad day and unfortunately, I know how that feels," the younger Schuller said.

The church's financial travails, including a significant drop in donations and dwindling membership, culminated in its **filing for Chapter 11 bankruptcy**. The church still owes about \$7.5 million to unsecured creditors, many of whom are vendors for the cathedral's "Glory of Christmas" pageant. According to a **reorganization plan filed by church last month**, they have an offer from Irvine developer, Greenlaw Partners LLC, to buy the core buildings for \$46 million.

Under the proposal, the church would have a 15-year leaseback agreement with the developer and the option to buy the properties back for \$30 million in four years. In exchange the developer will be able to build hundreds of apartment units in a portion of the 30-acre campus.

In 2008, two years after he received his father's gold medallion, a symbol of the church's leadership, Robert A. Schuller quit as senior pastor and his sister, **Sheila Schuller Coleman, took control of the ministry**. The **younger Schuller says his departure** was spurred by a vote on July 9, 2008 by the board. That vote, too, shot down Robert A. Schuller's proposal to bring in new board members and end conflict of interest issues, he said.

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Robert H. Schuller has been at odds with his daughters over how they have chosen to run the church. The cathedral recently switched over from a traditional worship format to a Gospel-style choir – much to the chagrin of many long-time members. **Coleman also required choir members to sign a covenant** acknowledging Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior and the belief that marriage should be between a man and a woman.

The **older Schuller publicly lashed out at the contract** saying everyone is welcome in the church. Phillip Johnson, the architect who constructed the cathedral's iconic glass sanctuary, was an openly gay man.

At the time, Schuller's daughter, Carol Schuller Milner, said her father's time in a leadership role was over and that her sister, Coleman, was in control. She said her father was having a tough time relinquishing control of a church he had built from the ground up.

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Dory Bauler, a member of the cathedral since 1972, said she was shocked and saddened to hear about Schuller's removal from the church board.

Bauler said she and her husband met Schuller when he came to Philadelphia in the 1960s, when he was still preaching from the drive-in theater.

"Both Bob and Arvella Schuller were so sincere," she said.

Robert A. Schuller said the issue is no longer about his father being able to relinquish control. The question, he says, is who is running the church?

"Anyone with a brain knows it takes income and expenses to get a balanced sheet," he said. "You cannot run a church by slashing and burning."

He said his mother, although still on the board, will not go to the board meetings.

"It's absolutely horrible what has happened to the church," he said. "I know that my father is disappointed, but he is detached. I have also emotionally disconnected from that place a long time ago."

He called his father's dismissal from the board "one more step in (the church's) demise."

Bauler says she believes entrusting the ministry to his children who had no experience with running a church is the mistake the older Schuller made, which led to his ministry's downfall, Bauler said.

"The children were not qualified to run it, they've abused it," she said. "We, as members, are heartbroken."

Contact the writer: 714796-7909 or dbharath@ocregister.com

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