

Everyman, Sunday 10.15 BBC1

The Tower of Hope is a five-million-dollar drive-in church which rises high over Orange County, near Los Angeles. From it The Reverend Robert Schuller preaches 'Possibility Thinking' to thousands every Sunday morning. He has pioneered a unique form of family worship and is the first subject of *Everyman*, a new series which examines religion around the world. Here James Fox reports on the riches of Schuller's philosophy

Man with a driving mission

FOR AN EXCEEDINGLY ambitious man, it was galling for the Reverend Robert Schuller to be preaching outdoors in Orange County, California, for five years and nine months, a prey to the winds and weather of Santa Ana. He has never forgotten it. 'It did something to me,' he says. 'It would do something to you.'

Now, as we are lifted heavenwards in the glass elevator of the Tower of Hope, overwhelmed by vertigo, towards Schuller's inaccessible office in the sky, it became very difficult to imagine the former version—down-at-heel, trying to get the edge over his competitors, dragging a portable organ around from chapel to drive-in theatre in a trailer with welded wheels.

Schuller's ambitions were either truly fantastic, or what has happened to him in 22 years since he came to Orange County to start his ministry at the age of 28 has outstripped his own dreams. The Tower of Hope and its gigantic illuminated cross stretch 200 feet into the sky. Through the transparent walls of the elevator, Disneyland and the tacky suburbs of Garden Grove recede below—each garage with its basketball net above the door; each patch of lawn neatly mown and trimmed. Ordered, suburban, white, conservative, model America.

Orange County is the land of Nixon. Schuller may be right when he says the community is suffering from emotional starvation. He now rules its spiritual life, aiming to cater for every need from cradle to grave. But down there, on his 22 acres, is the nerve centre of his world-wide ambitions, including the communications building where his televised Sunday broadcast—*The Hour of Power*—goes out on a total of 150 stations each week, at an annual cost to the Garden Grove Community

Church of three million dollars.

From there, the 'Listen and Live Club' cassettes of Dr Schuller's sermons are mailed to millions of disciples; so are the books—12 of them—written by Dr Schuller, expounding his philosophy of Possibility Thinking; and the pamphlets and handouts which proclaim 'that he lifts his fellow men to greater heights than they had seen before'; the computerised answers to 40,000 letters each week—most of them 'major thrust' replies, with pre-written paragraphs. Here also is the working area for the Robert H. Schuller Correspondence Centre for Possibility Thinkers. Proposals for the new curriculum include: Creative Writing, Home Decorating, Flower Arranging, and Simplified Auto Care.

Automobiles have been Schuller's secret, his *coup de grace* over what he calls 'the cheesy little programmes' that the smaller churches had to offer. Disneyland and Schuller started in the same year, and both saw the beauty of the freeway—in this case the Santa Ana freeway which runs north to Los Angeles for all of 35 miles. Why was the Church not growing in America?

'Lack of surplus parking,' Schuller told members of the Robert H. Schuller Institute for Successful Church Leadership, over 5,000 of whom have thereby had 'life-changing experiences at Garden Grove'.

He became the pioneer of drive-in entertainment worship, and the families could come in their pyjamas, if they liked, on Sunday morning. The rake of the car park slopes gently upwards towards the pulpit, where the Rev Schuller can slide a huge glass panel in the sanctuary with the press of a button, and turn from the congregation to bless the car park.

He can also turn on the electric fountains—high, medium, low—one for each apostle. It all goes out on *The Hour of Power* and you can see it in Hawaii. The growth has been phenomenal.

The bedrock of Schuller's growth programme has been the personality cult of Robert

Schuller and his ability to raise vast sums of cash by what he calls 'communication', and what others might call salesmanship. Secondly, there are the 6,000 members of the Garden Grove Church.

For them Schuller finds—and fulfils—needs. 'I derive my joy in watching someone's eyes mist up, because we gave them what their heart needed emotionally.' He hopes the community will depend on the church. (Somewhere in the Tower of Hope you can have psychoanalysis.) Apart from the permanent paid staff, 275 volunteers are an enormous help in achieving the growth goals. All of them are Possibility Thinkers. Are you?

Possibility Thinking means out with guilt and in with self esteem. Schuller's images are concerned with upward movement, with Everests, peaks and summits. The Possibility Thinkers' Creed says, 'When faced with a mountain I WILL NOT QUIT. I will keep on striving until I climb over, find a pass through, tunnel underneath—or simply stay and turn the mountain into a gold mine, with God's help.'

The Tower of Hope itself soars upwards, its 'fire escape' unmistakably suggesting platforms ascending towards paradise. At the top is Schuller's own platform, outside his office. Will he appear, one day, above the Fords and Chevys, like the Pope? Richard Neutra, architect pupil of Frank Lloyd Wright, designed it. First he balked at the height of the tower and then caved in. A plaque at the base says that the tower is 'the inspiration of Robert Schuller'.

His latest and most ambitious inspiration is the Crystal Cathedral, soon to be built for ten million dollars—already underwritten—a gargantuan construction of glass, based on Schuller's idea of resurrecting

the Crystal Palace in Orange County. It will dwarf the Cathedral of Notre Dame. It will seat 8,000 people, including 23 choirs. The local press calls it 'God's Greenhouse'.

Schuller collected the money in nine months. 'I don't think you can find such a successful funding effort of any religious enterprise in the history of the world,' he says. 'It's fantastic. I consider it a miracle.'

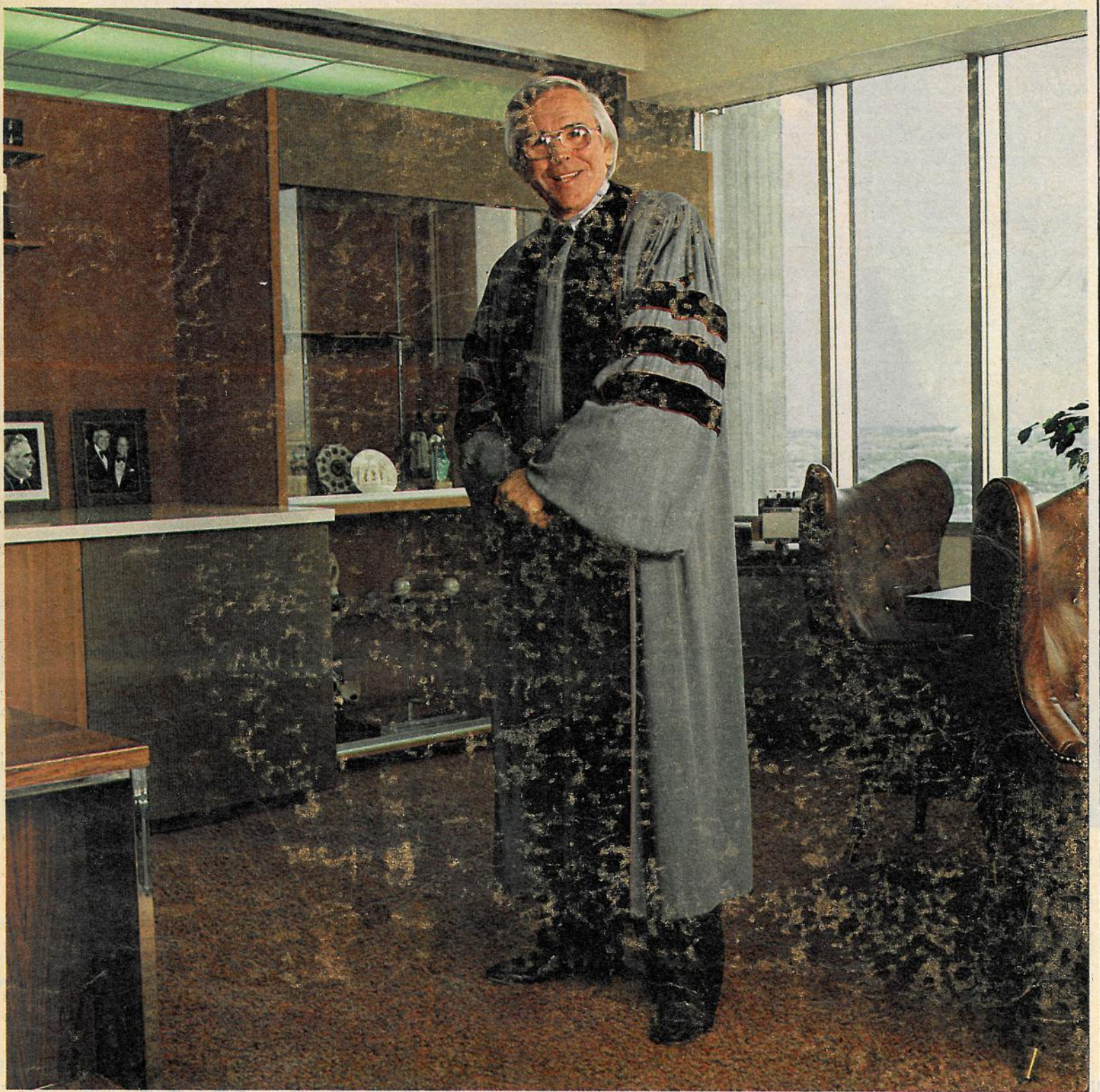
One anonymous couple donated one million dollars. Schuller called them up and said, 'I'll call you next week. Right now I'm crying.'

It's all a long way from the farm at Alton, Iowa where Robert Schuller was born and where, just before his fifth birthday, his missionary uncle Henry who had spent six years in China said, 'Robert, you're going to be a preacher when you grow up.' Schuller saw this as an authentic call from God Himself.

His theological grounding was thorough from then on. He went to a college in Michigan, run by the Reformed Church of America—the oldest Protestant mission in the land—and then to Western Theological Seminary, and after graduation to a parish in a suburb south of Chicago.

He came to Orange County in 1955, 'to bloom where I am planted'. It was a rapidly growing area—on the verge of a real estate boom. The Reformed Church had only three members in the whole County. But the ecumenical council of churches wanted to open it up. The Methodists were busy, so were the Presbyterians. The RCA agreed, and they asked Schuller, 'and,' as he puts it, 'it happened to fit in with my life-long game plan.'

Schuller's mentors were Billy Graham and Norman Vincent Peale. Along the way he has picked up some influential friends, and treasures their compliments which are now enshrined in the press kit. Hubert Humphrey, Glenn Ford, John Wayne, W. Clement Stone, Mr and Mrs Jerry Lewis: 'We are so glad Dr Schuller has touched our lives.' Behind



David Montgomery

Schuller in his office atop the Tower of Hope. Behind his desk is a photograph of him and Frank Sinatra inscribed 'To the Reverend "Bob"'

Schuller's desk is a picture of Frank Sinatra inscribed 'To the Reverend "Bob"', from his friend, Frank'.

A secretary has forgotten David Montgomery will be taking pictures. When we enter the office, Schuller, dressed in an electric-blue

nylon pullover with an open-necked shirt and shiny alligator shoes, is chewing purple gum. He is rattled by the oversight. He is perhaps sensitive to photographs. His nose is a testimony to an unfortunate early experiment in plastic surgery. His glasses resemble goldfish bowls, and when he smiles his eyes don't show it. He will allow pictures he says, if it is known that normally in his office he wears a shirt and tie. 'I wouldn't want people to think I'm so crass, so crude and so

unsophisticated that I don't wear a shirt and tie. 'The pictures will have to be done up here,' he says, 'I can't go downstairs. People are liable to recognise me and want autographs and all that business, you know. I need the shelter of this place.' Schuller's *Hour of Power* works to a formula. It contains his philosophy, and pumps 'communication.' I had switched on Channel 40 in Los Angeles and watched 'The Reverend Bob' in action. First

he promotes tranquillity. 'I feel a quietness within my spirit.' Schuller tells the congregation. 'There are no distractions. Only God and me talking together.' Then he introduces one of his 'inspirational publications'. It's called *Beautiful Possibilities for Today*. In it is Schuller's basic message. 'It's what I call the theology of self respect, self dignity, self worth, self love.' Out goes the shameful, guilty concept of original sin. Schuller tells the congregation ➤➤➤



Reminiscent of a fire station, the Tower of Hope rises high above the rich suburbs of Garden Grove. Schuller began his mission from a trailer

← that it contains Bible verses, 'very carefully selected', which emphasise only positive emotions, 'because there are many verses in the Bible that are negative, and God would never intend for you to misuse His word. Unfortunately,' he muses, 'many people who understand theology remain insensitive to negative and positive appraisures.'

The texts are selected to 'amuse, inspire, enlighten, educate, challenge or motivate', he says. 'They are not the kind

of stories which will unlock negative emotions, which means make you feel angry, fearful, suspicious or weepy and teary-eyed. Every one is designed to give you that UP-beat.'

Schuller shouts the word, and smiles. He says there is 'no inspirational, therapeutic

tool ever offered in Church devotional literature like *Beautiful Possibilities for Today* and it's yours. Simply write to me. No cost, no obligation.'

Schuller fixes one eye on me from behind his desk. As he talks he heels over to the left and the right, the voice rising almost to a shout, then dropping to a pin-drop whisper. David Montgomery's face has turned marbeloid white. The hand gestures are infinite, chopping, waving, pounding and tapping the desk, climbing an

imaginary ladder to heaven, hand over hand, guiding shafts of divine light on to himself as the clouds part above him.

'I am preaching deeper messages than any theologian, including the Pope,' he says, 'but I put it in such simple terms that people don't understand the depth and profundity of it. Even the entertainment - call it what you like - meets a profound theological need... But shallow people don't understand this, because they haven't been taught it in college.'