New Apostolic Church International

“We want to make people into disciples of Christ”

DS

all photos: A. Fergusson

nac.today: Chief Apostle Schneider, more and more people are calling for the New Apostolic Church to position itself clearly and take a strategic approach. In many of your divine services you have repeatedly mentioned a few points on this subject. Can you tell us once again, in a few sentences, how you wish the mission of the Apostles and the Church to be understood?

Chief Apostle Schneider: Yes, gladly. For me it is clear that Jesus Christ rules His church. He gave His Apostles the commission to preach the gospel throughout the world, to make people into disciples of Christ, and to dispense the sacraments. Their mission is to prepare the bridal congregation for the return of the Lord.

I therefore see one important task for the Chief Apostle and the Apostles in defining strategic guidelines and areas of activity so that the apostolate can fulfil this mission in accordance with the will of the Lord.

This still sounds very general. What are these strategic guidelines? How and in what direction should the New Apostolic Church develop in the years to come?

Our actions are distinguished by several objectives. Our primary goal is to preach the gospel truthfully and conscientiously throughout the world. For us as Apostles, this means the following.

- We need to be careful that Jesus Christ takes first place, and not the institution or a particular person.
- We want to define the New Apostolic doctrine on the basis of the Bible. This is the purpose of our Catechism. It describes the current globally valid doctrine of the New Apostolic Church in a clear and structured manner.
- We want to make sure that the sermons correspond to the biblical message and the doctrine.
- We want to give priority to that which is decisive for the salvation of the believers. While Church traditions certainly deserve respect, they must never become as important as the message of the gospel itself. We want to clearly distinguish between the message of the gospel, the rules of the Church, and local traditions.
- We need to make sure that all New Apostolic children across the globe receive quality religious education that is adapted to their needs and local conditions.

All of our Church-related activity must be defined by this focus on the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Religious education for children and young adults is an important aspect. What is the Church doing to meet this challenge?

That is a question which, for me, cannot be answered alone at the national or regional level. We are a global Church and there are New Apostolic congregations everywhere. I would like us to pay special attention to our work with the children and the youth. It is a worthwhile goal to dedicate our efforts to the future generation. Above all, it is essential for young believers to know the Bible so that they may become familiar with the New Apostolic doctrine, and they need to feel accepted and valued in their congregations. In our religious education classes they are made familiar with the theory, and in the congregation, they are acquainted with the practical aspects of a happy life of faith.

Making people into disciples of the Lord ... What do you mean by that?

Let me put it this way: we want people to follow Jesus Christ. As Apostles, we can make a decisive contribution to this. Love for Jesus Christ and belief in His teaching are to be spread in all directions and encouraged and promoted. Of course there are limits to such activities, but these have been set by God Himself.

- He has given man freedom of choice. Faith is a gift that God gives to man, but man must long for and accept it. We cannot force anyone to love the Lord. But what we can do is encourage our neighbour to follow the Lord.
- The gospel is the absolute truth. We cannot adapt it to suit people's tastes. God expects us to proclaim the pure, unadulterated gospel.
- And finally, we need to make sure that salvation, which God will offer until His return, remains accessible to all.

If it is so important to adhere to the ever valid gospel, is there still even room for change?

Well, there will always be changes and they happen all the time, even in our Church. No other Church has developed as rapidly as ours. And here I am talking about faith. In terms of faith, the gospel of the Lord offers everything that a believing person needs. That is why I clearly see our mission in going to people and making them into disciples of the Lord, not members of the Church.

Let us ensure that people feel at home in our Church, that they can experience the love of God and the joy of serving Him and others, and feel a desire to bring their lives into alignment with the gospel. That is our Vision! And in my opinion, that is quite sufficient.

There are also examples that show the opposite. Some denominations threaten with typical doomsday scenarios and predict a terrible future. In the same breath, they propose solutions to improve the situation. Others try to attract people to their church with music, dancing, the sensational, emotions, or material support. There is a constant stream of new offers. Experience shows that these methods can

contribute to increasing the attendance of religious worship, but only rarely do they engender a deep faith.

Why are you only emphasising this now? Was this less important in the past?

No, it has always been important. In the past, when our Church was only beginning to spread and grow around the world, we thought it was important to put the focus on unity. We encouraged believers to follow certain “apostolic patterns” in such things as music, dress, teaching methods, or even organisational aspects. Today we know that this approach was not the best, and increasingly try to take cultural differences into account. The New Apostolic faith can be practised within the most diverse of cultures.

How can such differences be concretely incorporated into strategic planning?

Let me give you two examples.

About 85 per cent of our New Apostolic members live in African District Churches. In our opinion, they face five major challenges.

1. There are hundreds of Evangelical denominations which exert a strong power of attraction on people. Miracle healers are very popular.
2. Islamic groups are also growing and are always looking for followers, often using rigid methods.
3. Especially in urban areas, there is an enormous deterioration of the social situation. The gap between poor and rich is widening rapidly. Materialism is the number one opponent of faith here.
4. On the other hand, we have to help create and promote educational opportunities for young people. Africa needs educational campaigns.
5. Not least of all, the question of financial means remains relevant. My wish is that we, as a Church, may succeed in maintaining and expanding our offers.

These challenges require a different approach than, say, the circumstances in Central Europe. In Europe and North America we are confronted with a decline in service attendance, something that really worries us. The causes are manifold. I will only mention a few here. The societies around us are developing more and more into communities of individuals. However, individualism is contrary to the idea of community, in which all are equal. Also people’s willingness to commit themselves to a church and a congregation is diminishing. It is no longer fashionable to take on responsibility on a voluntary basis without receiving any payment. And there is much more.

Even at the risk of displeasing some, I will say again: there is no easy solution. Neither regular changes to our liturgy, nor door-knocking drives, nor large-scale ad campaigns will reverse this trend. These and other ideas have been thoroughly tested in our Church and other Christian churches. Some of these measures may work well locally and for a limited time, but they cannot halt the general decline in people’s interest in what churches have to offer.

That sounds menacing. What should we do then, in your opinion?

We must concentrate on that which is essential. After all, we are talking about the salvation of the soul. When we drafted our Catechism, we had to define terms such as “church of Christ” and “work of redemption” more precisely. We say: the church of Christ is comprised of all believers who through baptism, belief, and profession of faith, belong to the Lord Jesus Christ. On the one hand, it is the vocation of the church of Christ to make salvation and fellowship with God accessible to human beings, and on the other hand, to create a space where people can worship God.

The work of redemption is that part of the church of Christ in which Apostles are active. It is their mission to gather and prepare the bride for the imminent return of Jesus. The return of the Lord is an event of paramount importance, and the goal of our belief. However, it is not the end of God’s plan of redemption or of the church of Christ. In the thousand-year kingdom of peace, the church of Christ will continue with its mission so that all people can attain salvation through belief in Jesus Christ.

It is on this basis that we want to develop our relationship with other Christian churches. We believe that all Christians should stand together in solidarity and fulfil their mission, namely to profess their belief in Christ and to testify in word and deed of the benefits they receive from God.

The close reference to the gospel is part of your spiritual authority as Church leader. But as Chief Apostle, you are also the highest representative of your Church. Where do you see your tasks? And do you see any room to manoeuvre within this strategy?

One of the tasks of the Chief Apostle is to lay down the order within the Church and consequently adapt the structure and organisation of the Church to the present needs.

In today’s world it is no longer conceivable for a global church such as ours to be led by a single man. Rather, decisions must be made in a collaborative fashion. Like my predecessors, I feel it is important to shape the District Apostle Meeting into a true governing body of the Church. Every member of this board must be able to express himself freely and contribute to collective solutions. We have already made progress in this area, and I am very pleased.

However, shared leadership also requires certain rules, including the number of District Apostles. You cannot lead the Church with a board of fifty District Apostles. If the District Apostles are to be fully involved in the governance of the Church, their number cannot be too large. That is why we have started to reduce the number of District Apostles in Europe, for example. In addition, we have established the Coordination Group and the Finance Committee. These consist of several District Apostles who act on behalf of the District Apostle Meeting and support the Chief Apostle in his work.

There are similar approaches at the level of the District Churches. Over the last few years, the role and the decision-making power of the governing bodies (boards of

directors, national assemblies, etc.) have been clearly defined and, where necessary, reinforced. Some congregations have even established congregational councils and committees in order to involve the members in organising the activities in the congregation. We will likely see more such solutions in future.

The New Apostolic Church is also a "church of ministry". Ministry plays a vital role in it. Are there any fundamental strategic considerations for a continuing development also in this respect?

Yes, the Apostles are currently reflecting upon a new way to organise the ministerial hierarchy in the Church. Our goals are

- to define our understanding of ministry on the basis of biblical record, without allowing ourselves to get carried away with interpretations that have more to do with tradition than actual exegesis.
- to clearly distinguish between organisational responsibilities and the exercise of ministerial authority conferred by God through ordination.
- to enhance the competence of the believers irrespective of ministry.
- to adapt our structure to the current needs, by making it more efficient, more comprehensible, and more flexible.
- to introduce instruction and training in general.
- and—generally speaking—to put emphasis on the notion of serving.

The Church is faced with many challenges and big tasks. Will it be able to manage this financially? What is the financial situation of the Church?

We are currently doing a thorough study of our global finances. We are determined to optimise our operation in order to reduce costs. And where possible, we will pool administrative services. In the same vein, we have adjusted our church building policy. In Africa, for example, we have stopped building big churches because future generations will hardly be in a position to raise the money to pay the maintenance costs. In other regions we have adapted the number of church buildings and congregations to our current needs. After all, construction and maintenance are becoming more and more expensive everywhere.

The European and North American District Churches are the donor churches. They support most of the congregations around the world. How will this develop?

Very well, I hope. In contrast to past practice, we would rather structure our subsidies to financially dependent District Churches on a project-related basis. The financially strong donor churches will thus finance clearly defined projects rather than subsidising dependent District Churches as a whole. Even if financial autonomy is not foreseeable in a number of countries in the medium term, we must continue with our endeavours to bring expenditures at the local level into line with the income.

Chief Apostle Schneider, thank you for this interview.

Here is a summary of the four essential aspects of our Church strategy:

Jesus Christ has given his Apostles the commission

1. to preach the gospel throughout the world;
2. to go to all people and make disciples of them, and to dispense the acts of salvation to them;
3. to prepare His bride;
4. to exercise His rule in the church.

An interview on strategic questions with Chief Apostle Jean-Luc Schneider

24 June 2018

