“Setting the course for the future of the Church”

Photos: Verlag

Zurich. He wants to set the course for the future of the Church. That is what Chief Apostle Wilhelm Leber, international leader of the New Apostolic Church, is quoted as saying in an interview with the New Apostolic Church magazine “Our Family” (December 2006 edition). The interview is rounded off with statements on the subject of homosexuality, the European Youth Day, and missionary work. The second part of the interview will appear in the January 2007 edition.

We will reproduce excerpts from this interview here. You can read the entire interview in the December 2006 edition of “Our Family,” the magazine of the New Apostolic Church, which can be obtained from the Friedrich Bischoff publishers in Frankfurt. The magazine can also be ordered by non-members.

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Excerpts from the interview with Chief Apostle Wilhelm Leber

Topic: Homosexuality

In October’s issue of the Our Family magazine we published an article in which you responded to questions from South African young people on various topics including homosexuality and gay marriage. Your answers elicited sharp reactions from homosexual and transsexual brothers and sisters. Where is their criticism being directed?

To begin with, our homosexual brethren seem to have taken offence at my introductory remarks. I had made reference to the divine order and spoke of the fact that the order as ordained by God is man and woman. It created the impression that homosexuality was something unnatural, something that was incompatible with the Creator’s design, and that it was perhaps even a disease.

I must admit that this was a misunderstanding. I would like to set the record straight: According to current scientific knowledge, homosexuality is, essentially, a particular disposition—as one might be right- or left-handed. Homosexuality certainly has a much broader scope than this, but in principle, this seems to be a good comparison.

The term “practised homosexuality” has often been criticised. Have there been any efforts to revise this term?

This has already been considered, but so far we have not found any better wording. This term is not intended to discriminate. If we say: “The Church does not consider the practise of homosexuality to be good,” then that is a very ambiguous phrase

which might not be understood the same way by everyone. I would like to interpret this as follows: We do not make prescriptions to anyone, but we do wish to warn of certain dangers. We do not say that practising homosexuality is a sin—that would be a statement with more far-reaching consequences. From my point of view there is definitely a difference between living in a stable homosexual relationship—meaning that the relationship is founded on ethical principles—or not. Many homosexuals point out that sexuality is only one aspect of a relationship. Like heterosexuals, they too would like to share feelings such as tenderness and love with somebody else. Once again, a distinction has to be made between two people living in a committed homosexual relationship and homosexuals who behave in a sexually promiscuous manner, purely for the sake of sexual gratification with frequently changing partners.

In its position on the topic of sexual conduct, the Church states that homosexual members are not to discharge any teaching or ministerial duties. Where do you stand on this issue?

In answering this question we must not lose sight of the fact that developments have been made in society. It is not so long ago that homosexuality was largely rejected and considered unacceptable by society, and was even punished. Today things are different. In our congregations we would like to shelter our homosexual brothers and sisters. We do not want them to be at the root of controversy. That is why we as a Church have recommended that homosexual members should not engage in any ministerial or teaching function.

Where does the Church stand on marriages of homosexual couples? Would a wedding blessing in the New Apostolic Church even be conceivable?

We are a long way from that, even though this topic is the subject of much current public discussion. I would like to refer to Holy Scripture, since this is our foundation after all. Here we find a number of references which give us cause for restraint. The statements of Apostle Paul, which I already addressed in the interview I gave in South Africa, are of particular note. Certainly these statements must be considered in the context of Antiquity and we must exercise caution when applying them to our time. Nevertheless, such passages warn us to be cautious. As the New Apostolic Church we should not be the avant-garde of a development that goes in a completely different direction. That is why the dispensation of a marriage blessing to homosexual couples is not on the agenda at the moment.

Now and again the question arises as to whether homosexuals are also able to reach the goal of our faith. What are your thoughts on this?

I am convinced that no homosexual is fundamentally excluded from the possibility of reaching the goal. I have indicated that if someone deals responsibly and sincerely with his homosexual disposition in a committed relationship, this relationship is to be assessed quite differently than fleeting and constantly changing partners. The same applies to heterosexuals too. Apart from that, we are all referred to the grace of God. Therefore if someone sincerely practises his faith as a homosexual, I am convinced that he will have just as much chance of attaining worthiness as anyone else. I would like to expressly relieve our homosexual brethren of this concern.

Topic: European Youth Day 2009

Is the European Youth Day intended to merely be something for the youth to enjoy or will there also be a theological message associated with it?

One does not rule out the other. It is certainly true that we expect this event to generate some sort of impulse. It is not only to be a momentary highlight. The fact that such events have lasting results is something we can see from the experiences of other Churches. I am reminded of the Catholic Church's World Youth Day. This event is said to have had a positive impact on attendance of mass. We cannot see such a large event in isolation, but must associate certain messages with it, which will have an effect over the long term. This will also define the sequence of the programme.

So the youth day is intended to give the youth direction, motivate them, and counter the growing trend away from church, and make them feel that they are being taken seriously?

The youth constitute an important component of our Church. They are the future. We want to win the youth over. Societal developments have given rise to many concerns and problems in our day. With the European Youth Day we want to let the youth know: We are ready to tackle these issues and wish to help you!

How do you justify the costs of such an event given the fact that the Church is cost-conscious?

That is a subject that is being very carefully considered by the committee in charge of planning the event. The youth days in the district churches also cost money.

If we put all this together, we arrive at a certain budget. There are two more years before the European Youth Day. The youth are to utilise the time till then to raise their contribution for this youth day. We will give suggestions as to how a little money might be raised. I think that if this is announced in good time and associated with the right concepts, it will be accepted by the young people.

Topic: Congregational amalgamation

Now on to another aspect that relates to the image of the Church. There was a regional reform in North Rhine-Westphalia. District Apostle Brinkmann has in the meantime announced that further congregations will be amalgamated over the next few years. Similar reforms are underway in Berlin-Brandenburg, and District Apostle Klingler has hinted that some locations in his working area will be abandoned. In general, this creates the impression that the New Apostolic is shrinking its way back to health.

I do not see it that way. We must react to present circumstances. We are seeing a population decline in Germany. Beyond that, our congregations are over-aged. There are projections for the year 2020 for certain regions that show that if we keep going at this rate, we will have to contend with a considerable decline in our membership. We cannot ignore such prognostications. In addition there are migrations within the larger cities. Some quarters are overpopulated by immigrants of another confession, where we as a Christian association have no chance. In this respect, many congregations are simply thinning out.

On the other hand we want to have lively congregations with children, youth, a sufficient number of ministers—and these in turn need a minimum of active members to function properly. Otherwise we will not be able to keep up our liveliness over the long term. That is why we have no other choice but to amalgamate congregations and set a different course for the future. This is being done strategically in many districts, but in other districts it is happening more or less quietly. But the situation is the same everywhere. I think it is better to have one powerful congregation than two weakening congregations. Naturally each case must be given careful consideration. Distances and the overall infrastructure also play a role, as do the future of the congregation or the age composition. But we cannot escape this trend.

Some churches such as Berlin-Charlottenburg or Dortmund-North which have a long tradition are also being closed. Is the Church's image not going to suffer?

Certainly this hurts. I concede that and understand very well. But we must take a look at how this congregation and its surroundings will look in the future. I know Dortmund-North very well myself and I know the church is in the middle of a city quarter inhabited by many non-Christian citizens. In other words, there is no chance for us to have a congregation of substance in this location any more.

In addition, we must remember that the members today expect decent church buildings. There should be opportunities for church life to unfold. All this costs money. And every year, whenever greater investments are proposed, we must certainly ask: "How does the future of this congregation look?" Can we justify these investments if we expect to suffer drastic losses over the next five years, and if it is impossible to maintain the membership? This must be brought into harmony with financial considerations. And then we have no choice but to close one or the other church, regardless of whether it is a congregation with a rich tradition or not.

Topic: Missionary work

Let's turn to another point that has to do with the financial situation of the Church. How long do you think the New Apostolic Church in Europe and North America will still be able maintain and finance the missionary work in Africa?

That is also a weighty question. We have noticed that a small group of district churches are financing large regions and that this is causing a financial imbalance. For quite some time now, serious efforts have been underway to attempt to balance this. There are some very positive developments going on in Africa. In some regions the offerings are rising. If this tendency is maintained, several regions will be able to take financial responsibility for themselves in the foreseeable future.

And the district church in charge can then reduce its costs for missionary trips or even withdraw altogether?

That is a trend that will push its way through more and more. If the regions are able to look after themselves, then the ministers from Germany or North America will withdraw. That is already true for the majority of cases in Africa. Today the ministers often only travel there to conduct seminars or training sessions. Everything else lies in the hands of the local ministers.

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