

The New Apostolic Church

The New Apostolic Church (NAC) is the largest Christian congregation outside of the mainline Churches in Germany, with approximately 370,000 members. It has considerably more members than all the Free Churches put together. Worldwide, some 11 million people today profess the New Apostolic faith. Membership figures doubled in the period from 1988 to 1998 alone. In Central Africa the NAC is developing rapidly, and it is engaged in vigorous missionary activity in Eastern Europe. In Germany, Austria and Switzerland, however, numbers are stagnating, and even declining slightly.

History and the present day

The roots of the NAC go back to nineteenth-century England, where strong revivalist movements were widespread in the 1820s. In the wake of the French Revolution and under the impacts of England's industrialisation, committed Christians were getting together in many places in order to reflect on the turmoil of their age on the basis of the Bible, and through prayer. Thus was the "Catholic Apostolic Church" formed in the 1830s. Similar to the "Mormons", who emerged almost at the same time in the USA, these congregations saw themselves as the "restoration of the work of salvation of Our Lord", as the true Church of Christ in the Last Days. Between 1832 and 1835, twelve "apostles" were appointed within these congregations. The belief was held that the "true Church of Christ" should again be led by apostles, and Christ's Second Coming was expected on an almost daily basis. After three of the apostles died in 1855, a dispute arose as to whether new apostles should be appointed, or whether the congregations should defer to the course of events.

In 1863 these disagreements led to the formation of the breakaway "General Apostolic Congregation" in Hamburg. This is the root from which, via further disagreements, the "New Apostolic Congregation" or "New Apostolic Church" sprang up.

Since its very beginnings, the history of the NAC has been characterised by disputes over teaching. In our century too, breakaway groups and congregations have parted company with the NAC time and time again. No other non-mainline Christian Church has undergone such a plethora of schisms.

For many decades the NAC lived in a state of isolation of its own choosing. Over the last ten years this picture has changed dramatically. Since 1995 internal measures for change, massive criticism expressed by former members, and not least the opportunities for exchange and information transfer offered by the Internet have set in motion an astonishing processes of

opening-up. Unmistakably, the top leadership has changed its information policy. Over the last two years information evenings have been held that were broadcast around the world, and that document the cautious opening-up of the NAC. All pronouncements can be consulted on the Internet (www.nak.org).

The doctrine

The NAC sees itself as the "continuation of the original Christian Church". As the NAC sees it, the true Church of Christ is tied to the apostolic office. In the eyes of the NAC the apostles are needed to perform the salvific work of preparing the faithful for the awaited Second Coming of Christ.

According to the New Apostolic understanding, salvation is offered in a special way to those members of the NAC sealed by the apostles. This belief is fundamental to the NAC's theological self-understanding, and distinguishes it from the ecumenical Churches, for which the Biblical apostolic office is tied to a calling by Jesus Christ, and is limited to action in a certain time.

According to a recent text the Chief Apostle is even recognised as possessing the key authority to "pronounce fresh revelations of the Holy Spirit". Critics see this as a particular weakness of the NAC, because the apostles are all laity, and possess no grounding in theological scholarship. They therefore often lack a deep understanding of how to approach the Biblical texts, and some of their interpretations appear arbitrary. The leadership of the NAC now seem to have recognised this problem. They recently began offering theological training to their officials, and encouraging them to make use of specialist literature.

A characteristic aspect of the NAC is its belief that Jesus Christ will soon be returning to earth – as a saviour for some, and as a judge for others. According to the current understanding of the NAC there will be two "comings" of Christ: One to take home His bride, and one to establish His kingdom of peace. The two together form the first resurrection, participants in which are not only the sealed bridal souls, but also those who witness Christ from the time of the great tribulation, i.e. the martyrs. When the kingdom of peace comes to an end the Last Judgement will follow, at which point all souls will receive their part of justice according to their deeds. God nevertheless also offers salvation at the Last Judgement. The NAC thus underlines the sovereignty of God, who even when taking home His bride permits exceptions, and may also grant salvation to believers who are not members of the NAC.

At an information evening in January 2006 the NAC modified its doctrine of salvation, which had hitherto been formulated in exclusive terms, by indicating that it recognised baptism performed by other Christian Churches. Nevertheless the NAC continues to distinguish

between baptism by water (a "fundamental act of grace of the Triune God"), and a baptism with the Spirit ("Holy Sealing"), which is tied exclusively to prayer and the laying on of hands by an apostle. The significance of the sealing comes into focus when we learn that it is seen as a third sacrament alongside Holy Baptism and Holy Communion.

Welcome though this process of rapprochement may be, it remains the case that the NAC continues to adhere to a number of special teachings that prevent it from being categorised as one of the Free Churches. The theological differences in its understanding of Church and Church offices, or in its view of the administration of the sacraments to the deceased by proxy, are simply too fundamental.

For a number of years a dialogue was conducted between representatives of the NAC and representatives of the Council of Christian Churches in Baden-Württemberg. This resulted in a set of "guidelines" on how to deal with the NAC on a practical, local level (<http://www.ack-bw.de/dateien/NAK-ACK.pdf>). Nonetheless: The Council of Christian Churches in Germany is not engaged in a dialogue with the NAC on the issue of its possible admission. For the time being the focus is on the two sides getting to know each other better at the local level. Nor is Holy Communion shared with the NAC. It is not possible to share services or acts of blessing.

The apostolic office

Worldwide, there are currently just under 360 incumbent apostles. The apostolic collegium is hierarchically structured. It is headed by the so-called "Chief Apostle", who is based in Zurich. Jesus Christ is considered the head of the Church, while the Chief Apostle is considered the "head of the apostles", the "supreme spiritual authority". His office and words are held in the highest esteem. For many decades the Chief Apostle was referred to as the "representative of the Lord on earth". Since 1998 this designation has no longer been used; instead, an effort has been made to find a more refined description of the office.

In the 1950s the problematic nature of this distinguished office became particularly evident. In 1951 the 80-year-old Chief Apostle Johann Gottfried Bischoff proclaimed that Jesus Christ would come again in his lifetime. This message was not presented as a personal hope of the Chief Apostle, however, but was elevated to the rank of a salvific truth. Anyone expressing reservations was expelled. Today it is possible to say that this ill-judged message caused a great deal of confusion and suffering. It resulted in the expulsion or breaking away of individual congregations. When Bischoff died in 1960, the leadership of the NAC returned to business as usual with astonishing speed. Although Bischoff's error is obvious, the congregations take the following view: "We remain convinced that the Chief Apostle was not

mistaken." It is remarkable that in its report of November 2007, the "history of the NAC" working group skates over the scandal of the false message proclaimed by the then Chief Apostle.

Assessment

Within the NAC a marked ecumenical opening has become evident in recent years. This is demonstrated for instance by the Bible translation (Luther 1984) used at New Apostolic gatherings, or by the harmonisation of the Our Father with the wording of the text used by the EKD (Protestant Church in Germany). Nevertheless, from a Christian point of view it is appropriate to draw attention to a number of problems.

The practice of a contemporary apostolic office is questionable, because no Biblical rationale can be found for it.

Of major importance to the NAC is its organisational structure as a family (of faith), in which everyone has his or her place, and job to do. Yet critics and those who have since left the NAC have been particularly outspoken since the 1990s, and have reported that the NAC "keeps its members under surveillance, keeps tabs on them and suppresses them". The "family-like" nature of the NAC is evidently perceived in different ways. Some see it positively, as an experience of Christian fellowship and commitment. Others see it negatively, as a form of control and authoritarian pressure. Former members report major conflicts that may result from an internal dependency on the NAC. They criticise the fact that the way in which the NAC communicates its doctrines becomes both an internal and an external problem for many of the faithful, and report how officials who do not carry out the instructions of the apostles to the letter have been reprimanded.

The claim of exclusive salvation and the (menacing) expectation of the Second Coming of Christ (in judgement over the world) have also caused conflicts time and time again. This is because according to the understanding of the NAC, Holy Baptism constitutes only a "first relationship of closeness to God". Only in conjunction with the New Apostolic sacrament of sealing does the believer attain rebirth through water and the Spirit. Only together do these two sacraments make the recipient a child of God. Indirectly, this implies that all other Christians do not enjoy full status as children of God.

The sacrament of "sealing", and the eschatologically-based exclusivism, is ultimately responsible for the fact that the NAC is often seen as a "sect". Yet there has been a great deal of movement within the NAC in recent years. The NAC is reconsidering its relationship to the ecumenical Churches, and its own claim to exclusivity. It is not yet possible to say finally

where this path will lead. It will be possible to say more when we have had an opportunity to read the new catechism, into which the more detailed expositions of the New Apostolic doctrine of salvation are currently being incorporated, and which is due to be published in 2010.

Dr. Andreas Fincke/Dr. Michael Utsch, April 2009

Translating: Dr. John Cochrane