

The New Apostolic Church: The GDR's Third Largest Religious Community

ARVAN GORDON

Many inner city areas in the German Democratic Republic are extremely shabby. However, the street along which the enquirer has to pass in order to reach the New Apostolic Church building in Dresden-Neustadt seems to surpass almost everything in its standards of grimy decay. The roadway is so full of obstacles that the passer-by has to use extreme care; the woodwork of windows and doors is in part rotten; the facades on both left and right are crumbling and covered with layers of dust. Presently the enquirer sees what he is looking for — a well-kept notice bearing the words “Neuapostolische Kirche” and the church’s distinctive symbol,¹ a cross planted in water against the background of a rising sun. Having crossed a courtyard, the enquirer finds himself in a totally different world — in a well-lit, well-warmed oblong hall, dominated by a much larger version of the New Apostolic Church’s symbol. It is a sizeable church building, holding when full seven or eight hundred people; it is in good decorative order and equipped with excellent electronic equipment.

Having been greeted in a thoroughly friendly manner by the stewards, the enquirer takes his place in a pew and looks about him. There is a curiously traditionalist — some might say old-fashioned — atmosphere about the style of worship. Although there is no standard attire for the women, nearly all the men present (certainly all the church officials) wear well-cut black suits. The hymn-book, dating from 1924, is printed in the old Gothic script. The singing of the first hymn is impressive, as all members of the congregation lift up their voices with vigour. There are two speakers, or preachers, who in turn occupy the pulpit — a centrally placed podium at the “east” end of the building, very much in the Reformed tradition. The preachers deal with such themes as the heavy responsibility of New Apostolic people

¹The New Apostolic emblem consists of three symbols joined into one, suggesting the Trinity: the Cross, the rising sun, and the waves of the sea. The waves form the shape of a chalice. From the sun come ten rays. *Neue Apostelgeschichte* (New Apostolic Church, Frankfurt-am-Main, 1985), pp. 245-47.

in making the Gospel known; the impending visit of an "apostle" (obviously an exceedingly important event for the congregation); an insistence that the New Apostolic Church possesses living apostles, appointed under the authority of the Holy Spirit, who preach the imminent return of the Lord. Then an anthem is announced, and it becomes clear that a choir is present when seventy or eighty members of the congregation massed in the front pews stand up. Their unaccompanied singing is quite beautiful, responding readily to the conductor in the quiet passages as well as in the *fortissimi*. The impression is given that choir training is a vital feature of New Apostolic Church life. Another preacher is called to the pulpit. The choir sings again. The Lord's Prayer is said by the congregation, with an intensity and feeling for *ensemble* that savours of well directed choral speech. Before the end of the service church members come forward to partake of the eucharist. The communion appears to be something of an appendix to the worship, in the Reformed rather than the Catholic tradition. When he leaves, the enquirer is greeted as warmly as before by the stewards, and he passes out into the night — stumbling on the uneven roadway.

History of the Church

The serious enquirer is moved to look into the history of the New Apostolic Church. In the early years of the 19th century the feeling was fairly widespread among certain circles of Christians that the churches had grown lax and badly needed renewal; a few were convinced that a New Age was about to begin, which would culminate in the return of the Lord. The New Apostolic belief is that at this time the Holy Spirit fell upon certain believers in Scotland, England and Southern Germany, and that — by divine guidance — a total of twelve "Apostles of the Endtime" were consecrated between 1832 and 1835; they were all Englishmen, and had Albury Park near Guildford, the seat of one of the "Twelve", as their centre. Members of the new movement gave no recognition to the doctrine of the Apostolic Succession, as held to by the Roman Catholic, Anglican and Orthodox communions; their conviction was that the Apostolic ministry had died out with the deaths of the original Twelve during the first century AD. Now the priestly orders of the early Christian Apostolic Church were re-established. Every apostle was assisted by three priests — a "prophet", an "evangelist", and a "pastor". As the new movement spread, each congregation was headed by a bishop (or "angel") who had a staff of 24 priests in the four grades of elder, prophet, evangelist and pastor, as well as a group of seven deacons.

This disciplined church structure went side by side with the Gifts of the Spirit: prophecy (which included the authoritative interpretation of difficult passages of Scripture, especially those which were held to deal with the appointment and duties of the new apostles), speaking in tongues, the interpretation of tongues, spiritual healing and the experience of visions. The daily offices, sacraments, ritual, holy objects and church festivals were all based on Roman Catholic models.

Another noteworthy point about the new movement was its missionary zeal. Each apostle was assigned a district or "tribe", corresponding to the twelve tribes of Israel. In this way the known world was parcelled out among them. There was some success in spreading the Apostolic message on the continent of Europe, especially in Germany: congregations were established in various parts of the British Empire and in the USA. The *raison d'être* of the Catholic Apostolic Church, as it became known, was to unify and instil new life into the divided Body of Christ, in readiness for the imminent return of the Saviour. This church did not see itself as the "only true church", or even as a permanent structure; it was but a temporary measure to meet the needs of the last days. There was, therefore, no need or intention to replace the Twelve as they died. Die they did; by the spring of 1861 only six were left alive, and it could be foreseen that the church would in due course be left leaderless, and eventually priestless.

There was a strong feeling, particularly in Germany, that the missing apostles should be replaced, but suggestions of this kind met with no approval in the Apostles' College at Albury Park. In 1862 one Geyer, a prophet from North Germany, took the decisive step: he felt impelled by divine guidance to designate Rudolf Rosochacki, an elder from Königsberg, as an apostle. The leader of the Hamburg congregation, Bishop Schwartz, recognised Rosochacki's authority. Francis Woodhouse, the English apostle whose district included North Germany, refused to recognise the new apostle, and as a result Rosochacki, Geyer and Schwartz were all excommunicated. From this North German schism sprang what is now known as the New Apostolic Church. The latter claimed, and has always claimed, to be the true heir of the Catholic Apostolic Church. For its part the Catholic Apostolic Church, which even today (without apostles, priests or deacons) continues to exist in a state of suspended animation, denies its offspring any kind of legitimacy.²

The new schismatic movement faced a number of difficulties. They

²In 1987 a few scattered Catholic Apostolic congregations still exist. Services are still held, though — in the absence of priests — there can be no eucharist. See *Neue Apostelgeschichte*, pp. 151-60.

did have apostles; by the year 1888 there were already thirteen (all but one of them of German birth). The problem of authority was a worrying one. The leadership was well aware that the lack of a central authority had caused difficulties for the original twelve (English) apostles. Friction arose between the "new" apostles responsible for Holland and Germany,³ and in 1878 Geyer himself, with a small body of followers, left the movement. ⁴ Schism, it was remembered, begets schism. Besides, the various Catholic aspects of the worship offended not a few.

The new movement, which came to be known in Germany as the "General Christian Apostolic Mission" (*Allgemeine Christliche Apostolische Mission*) and in the Netherlands as the "Re-established Apostolic Missionary Congregation" (*Hersteld Apostolische Zending Gemeente*)⁵ had the good fortune to have a man of great energy and undoubted leadership qualities as one of its apostles during the first 30 years of its independent existence (1863-95): none other than the above-mentioned Friedrich Wilhelm Schwartz. He was the third of the new group of apostles to be called, and the Netherlands was assigned to him as his apostle district. By 1870, no doubt influenced by Reformation principles, he secured the abolition in his district of vestments, incense, altar-candles, and other aspects of Catholic worship; during the '80s the other apostles followed his lead. Following Schwartz's example, the sermon became the central feature of the service. Under Schwartz order and discipline were the rule, rather than enthusiasm and speaking in tongues. The characteristic style of what was to become the New Apostolic Church, which is apparent in the Dresden service described above, was already apparent in the 19th century. Schwartz was never formally designated even as *primus inter pares*, but his ministry already shows clear signs of the office of "Chief Apostle" (*Stammapostel*) which was soon to emerge. Apostle Schwarz is claimed by New Apostolic sources to have done much to achieve a complete oneness among the apostles; to have become more and more the centre of God's work, and to have been recognised in his lifetime as the highest authority in matters of faith.

After Schwartz the "Apostolic Mission" had three leaders of inflexible determination and vigour. These were: Friedrich Krebs (a close associate of Schwartz, who in 1895 was accorded the formal title of "Chief Apostle", and continued in this office until his death in 1905); Hermann Niehaus (Chief Apostle from 1905 to 1930); and Johann Gottfried Bischoff (Chief Apostle from 1930 to 1960). It was

³See *Neue Apostelgeschichte*, pp. 179-81.

⁴See Kurt Hutten, *Seher — Grübler — Enthusiasten* (4th edition; IM Quell-Verlag, Stuttgart, 1954), p. 454.

⁵See *Neue Apostelgeschichte*, p. 200.

in Niehaus' time that the title "New Apostolic Church" came into use. The name is held to be based on a scriptural prophecy, being derived from the 16th century German translation of the preface to chapter 2 of the Fourth Book of Ezra (II Ezra as it appears in the Apocrypha): "Ezra teaches how the New Apostolic Church should conduct itself and how it should serve in a manner pleasing to God". Bischoff ruled the church for thirty extremely difficult years; after him came Walter Schmidt, another German. Then came two (German-speaking) Swiss leaders: Ernst Streckeisen (1975-78), and the present Chief Apostle, Hans Urwyler (since 1978).

The Church's Creed

In any assessment of the New Apostolic Church, its Creed must be considered carefully.⁶ It has ten articles, as follows:

1, 2, and 3. Belief in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This section reflects for the most part the text of the Apostles' Creed, with one significant exception: for "one Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church" the words "one Holy Apostolic Church" are substituted.

4 and 5. The role of the Apostles. God rules His church through living apostles. Their task is to teach, to forgive sin in God's name, and to baptise with water and the Holy Spirit. All authority in the church proceeds from the apostles; all officers of the church are chosen and consecrated by them.

6, 7, and 8. The three sacraments of the church: baptism, the eucharist and "holy sealing". The latter is described as follows:

"I believe that those baptised with water must receive the Holy Spirit through an apostle to become firstlings, whereby they become members of the Body of Christ."

9. The return of the Lord Jesus in glory, the establishment of His Kingdom, the reception of the firstlings — both living and dead — into it, where they shall reign as kings and priests. The Last Judgement.

10. The church's attitude to the state. "I believe that the higher powers are God's servants for our good, and whoever opposes the higher powers opposes God's order, as it is ordained by God."

Much of this Creed is self-explanatory, but some comment may be necessary. Firstly, the exclusive claim of the New Apostolic Church should be stressed. It is not *a* church, but *the* church. By the same token, the apostles represent the *only* valid apostolate. Likewise, the sacrament of "sealing", which must be carried out by an apostle, is

⁶The Creed is given in full by Hutten, *op. cit.*, pp. 460-61.

the only divinely appointed road to salvation. Secondly, the stress on Romans 13 has always been, and still is, of vital importance. Further reference will be made to this point. Thirdly, there is silence in the Creed about the essential role played by the Chief Apostle. The New Apostolic Church is an absolute monarchy: all authority proceeds — in the name of Jesus Christ — from the Chief Apostle. He may in no circumstances be dismissed by the church. He alone has the responsibility for appointing and — if need be — for dismissing church officers (including the other apostles). He is the leader of the faithful; the anointed of the Lord; the keeper of the keys of Heaven; the supreme interpreter of the Scriptures; the bridge between God and man (to quote only a few of his titles).⁷ All members of the church owe him absolute obedience. Without the Chief Apostle, the life of the present-day New Apostolic Church would be quite unthinkable.

Church membership and activities

Such, then, is the nature of the church which occupies third position, as far as numbers are concerned, among the religious communities of the German Democratic Republic. New Apostolic numbers seem to be growing, albeit slowly; it is almost certain that a total of 100,000 full or "sealed" members has recently been exceeded.⁸ There are rather more than a thousand separate congregations in the country. The church in the GDR is divided into four districts, each under the direction of an apostle: Thuringia with the Kingdom of Saxony (including Dresden, Leipzig and Karl-Marx-Stadt); Anhalt (centred on Dessau) with the ecclesiastical province of Saxony (including Magdeburg and Halle); Brandenburg (including Berlin); and Mecklenburg (including the Baltic coast).⁹ The highest concentration of membership is in the southern part of the country, especially in the big cities; thus Leipzig has five congregations and Halle four. There is a considerable body of members in East Berlin. Some smaller towns are also the centres of quite large congregations. Indeed, in a few places the New Apostolic Church is seen by local people as the main Christian denomination.

The main services are held at 9 a.m. and 4.30 p.m. on Sundays (an afternoon service in late October was described earlier). One weekday service is also universal; it is normally held either on a Wednesday or a Thursday evening. It is usual for services to be concluded with the

⁷Titles selected from a number quoted by Hutten, *op. cit.*, pp. 465-66.

⁸Information taken from Christian Pietsch, "Im Benehmen mit dem Staate", *Kirche im Sozialismus*, March 1986.

⁹Information taken from Pietsch, *op. cit.*, pp. 117-18.

eucharist. Experience of services in different cities in the GDR, as well as outside the country, makes it clear that worship follows a formal rigid pattern. A high proportion of church members attend services with conscientious regularity. Choir practices and weekday prayer meetings are held as a matter of course. A noteworthy feature of congregational life is the regular visiting of church members by church officers.

Church membership conferred by the sacrament of "sealing", always mediated by an apostle, is gained only after a longish period of probation. Missionary work is very significant, and is always a person-to-person affair; the distribution of publications, as undertaken by Jehovah's Witnesses and others, is not a New Apostolic practice. The mission field consists in the main of the relatives, friends and acquaintances of members. In this way not a few fringe members of the provincial Protestant churches, who have lost touch with their own congregations, come into the New Apostolic Church. Various members of the secularised majority have also been won over. Nearly every New Apostolic congregation has a circle of "adherents", mainly elderly and lonely people.

The visitor notices the absence of a collection plate; contribution to church funds is a vital feature of church membership — perhaps in the region of the Biblical tenth, or even more. The extent of funds from the West, which presumably exist, is not made public.

Attitude to the State

It is a remarkable achievement for a religious community to have maintained good relationships with the state over a century and a quarter during four different regimes — the Prussian monarchy, the Weimar Republic, the Third Reich and the Democratic Republic. Before 1914 the monarchical structure of the church seems to have appealed to the Kaisers. To Chief Apostle Bischoff must go the credit for discreet policies between 1930 and 1960. In a sermon preached on 21 March 1933 Bischoff greeted the newly installed Führer as the divinely appointed Leader predicted in Ecclesiasticus 10:5; furthermore, he took the precaution of sending the text of his sermon to the Reich Chancellery.¹⁰ Five weeks later he issued a directive to all officials of the New Apostolic Church: applications for church membership from people who had been involved in organisations dissolved on political grounds were to be submitted in doubtful cases to local Nazi officials, and only those individuals acceptable to the

¹⁰Hutten, *op. cit.*, p. 456.

Party were to be accepted as members.¹¹ In these circumstances it is not surprising that the New Apostolic Church survived the Third Reich with the minimum of complications. As was the case with several smaller communities, the New Apostolic Church gained a generous measure of freedom during the Soviet occupation. Ever since 1949 (the year of the proclamation of the GDR) relations with the state have on the whole been strikingly cordial. Even the removal in 1952 of the regulation (introduced during the Nazi period) forbidding the acceptance into the church of people who were in conflict with the civil authority caused only minor embarrassment.¹²

The monarchical structure of the church, which seemed so appropriate in imperial and Nazi times, might at first sight seem likely to give rise to conflict, but this has not been so. For one thing, the GDR state has always recognised the right of religious bodies to run their own affairs — and hence to choose their own form of government. Moreover, the fact that the church is run by an absolute ruler, to whom the GDR apostles are unflinchingly loyal, is from the state's point of view a great advantage; the state leadership can be sure that any understandings between themselves and the New Apostolic Church will be honoured, and that dissident church members will be suitably disciplined by church leaders. Surveillance on the part of the Security Service is therefore not a prime necessity.

Another feature of the church which draws state approval is what might be called its "old-fashioned morality". In a state where ethical values are crumbling, a sizeable religious community whose members follow well-defined commandments is a tremendous asset. The church in the GDR is said to frown on drink, smoking, abortion and extra-marital intercourse; it certainly stands for a strict family structure, with the father as head.¹³ In this way the New Apostolic community provides an element of stability in society.

Various public statements are on record from GDR New Apostolic leaders calling for church members to play their full part in society. Thus in 1964 Bishop (now Apostle) Pusch said: "We know ourselves to be citizens of our state, and we have here a place assigned to us by God."¹⁴ In 1974 Bishop Simon used similar language.¹⁵ The attitudes of ordinary lay people are more difficult to assess. All the same, this extract from a letter written in 1986 to the Head of State by a ten-year-old girl (despite possible advice from teachers) may be significant.

¹¹ Hutten, *op. cit.*, p.456

¹² Pietsch, *op. cit.*, p. 122.

¹³ Pietsch, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

I would like to thank you, my dear Comrade Honecker, for the fact that we — that is to say my mother, my brother, my sister and I — are able to live in a fine new apartment block. Ideas like poverty, homelessness and the rest are quite foreign to our experience. I want to promise you that we shall do all we possibly can to uphold peace. That is our response to the benevolent policies of the Republic! It is a splendid thing for all citizens, whatever their philosophy of life, to have the same rights and duties. Everyone in the country has religious freedom. This policy means that we, as Christians belonging to the New Apostolic Church, enjoy recognition and support from the state. Hearty greetings from us all!¹⁶

The impression given of a church that goes on its own solitary way is, in general, an accurate one. Members of the other Protestant communities have few contacts with the New Apostolic Church, which is not a member of any ecumenical fellowship. True, there have been occasional conversations with the provincial Protestant churches, but the exclusive claims of the “new” apostolate rule out any effective co-operation.

Slow But Steady Growth

It remains to analyse the reasons for the special appeal of the New Apostolic Church in the GDR. After all, it continues to gain members, even if at a slower rate than in the '50s and '60s.¹⁷

The term “New” is important. Most of the church buildings are *new* — or at least refurbished — and equipped with modern technology. The church is *new* in the sense that it represents a break with all the historic baggage of the Reformation as well as the Catholic churches, while it claims to be a return to the early essentials of the Christian faith.

The New Apostolic Church provides a sense of certainty and stability in a confusing world. Both faith and morals have a sure foundation. The basis of this certainty is the existence of “living apostles”, seven of whom live and work on the soil of the GDR. They represent a living and immediate link with the first century apostles, while the — German-speaking — Chief Apostle stands as the direct representative of the Lord. This sense of order and discipline is vital. The Apostles, who have the sole responsibility for interpreting the Bible, define the true meaning of difficult passages for ordinary

¹⁶ Letter published in the GDR newspaper *Neues Deutschland*, 19 March 1986.

¹⁷ Pietsch, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

church people, and make the Bible relevant to everyday life. The endless debates over moral questions which torment so many Protestant (and not a few Roman Catholic) people do not worry New Apostolic members, who have the apostles as their guide.

Finally, the New Apostolic Church has the almost perfect answer to the nagging sense of tension which besets so many millions of Christians in communist countries: the difficulty of reconciling their role as citizens with their lives as members of the Body of Christ. It is a dilemma which leads many to act and speak on two quite different and contrary levels, the secular and the sacred, and has driven some to despair. For the New Apostolic believer there is almost no tension. In his everyday life he works on a farm, in a factory, as a manager or a railway official or technical researcher, speaking when necessary in Marxist terms and always labouring for the "victory of Socialism"; he does this because the existing authorities have been put there by God, and whoever opposes the existing authorities opposes what God has ordered. If God chooses to install a monarchy, or a parliamentary democracy, or a Fascist dictatorship, or a Marxist-Leninist regime, that is His business; who can search out His inscrutable purpose? All human efforts to structure society are in any case doomed to oblivion. The New Apostolic Church members' activities as citizens conflict in no way with their religious life. As church members, they praise God and receive the sacraments, especially holy communion; they listen to the voice of the apostles, their guides to the Scriptures; they are "sealed" by one of the apostles, as a guarantee of eternal life. More especially, they wait for the imminent coming of the Lord, the passing away of the earthly order of things in accordance with Biblical prophecy, and the establishment of Christ's heavenly Kingdom in power and glory.¹⁸

¹⁸This last paragraph reflects the standpoint of *Divine Promises and their Fulfilment* (New Apostolic Church, Frankfurt-am-Main, 1983), pp. 29-31.