

Health, growth, completion

Vision



New Apostolic Church USA

District News

www.nac-usa.org

Winter 2012

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The upcoming year, 2013 is the celebration of the beginning of the New Apostolic Church 150 years ago in Hamburg, Germany. As discussed in the lead article, I see this as a “Jubilee Year” for us; a time of renewal, reflection, and focus. This is epitomized in a Bible verse the Chief Apostle used in Johannesburg from Psalm 119:105 – *Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path*. From this we can understand that under the illumination of His word and activity, we recognize two states of being: “Where am I now?” (my feet, the present) and “Where am I going?” (my path, the future).

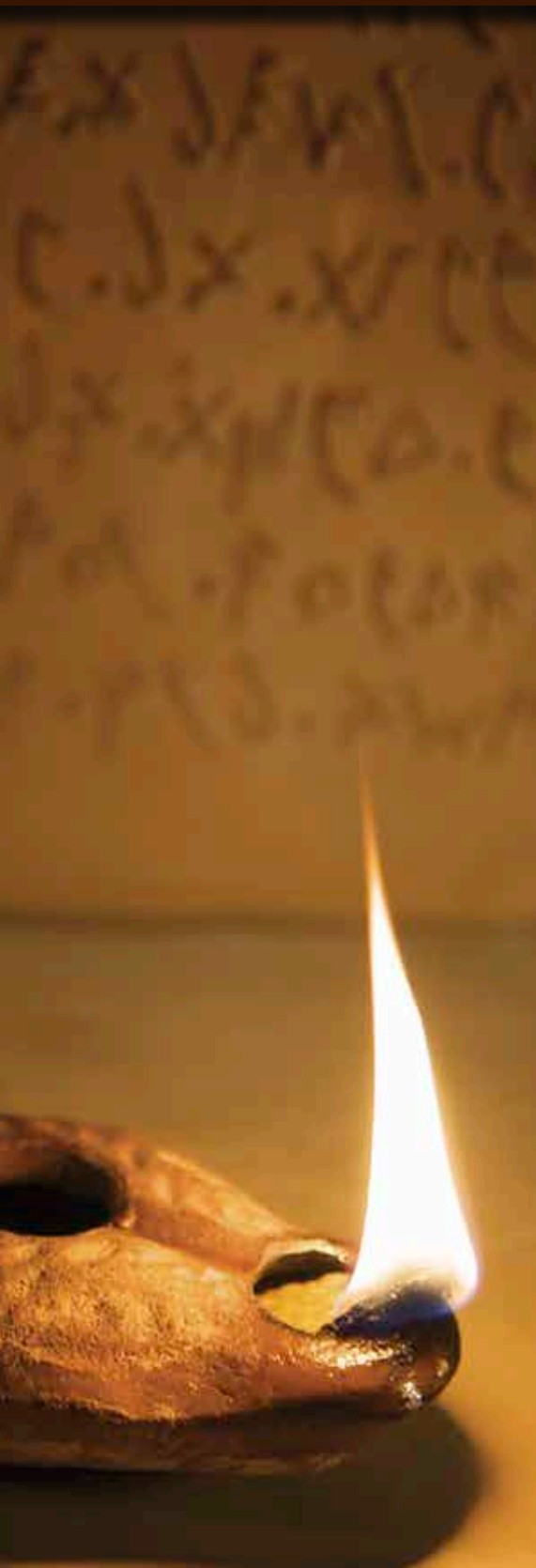
The question, “Where am I now?” implies a comprehension of where we have come from. It is important for us during this Jubilee celebration that we ponder the great engineering of our Heavenly Father in our lives and further, how He brought us into a relationship with His Son. To help us speak more openly of this great wonder, we have set a slogan for our Jubilee year – ***What’s your story?*** By speaking of our history to others in the family, congregation, and community, we accumulate the history of God’s work here in the United States. Let us bring along the good things of our heritage and also embrace the newness of Christ’s work today.

We will also use this year to renew our commitment to our strategic plan which is highlighted in this edition to further understand where we are. Later in the year, an annual report will be available to look at the USA church from a more statistical and financial perspective.

As we move through this year, we hope to gain more and more knowledge concerning our second question, “Where am I going?”. Truly the goal of our faith, the Lord’s coming, stands always before us and as we approach this great day, it is incumbent upon us to continue to grow in the mind of Christ by deepening our relationship with Him and serving according to our spiritual gifts.

And so, in 2013 our journey continues. I am thankful to be with all of you on this journey. Wishing you much blessing and joy on your way and extending greetings from our Chief Apostle, Chief Apostle Helper, and apostles,

With love,



2013

A JUBILEE YEAR

I'm thinking about 2013. It is the 150th anniversary of the New Apostolic Church International and this fact is significant for us as we make our future plans. The following impulses have been moving within me and I would like to share them with you as we begin a new year.

I'm reminded firstly of the Old Testament concept of a jubilee year occurring every 50 years. God instituted this concept in the very beginning of His original plan to divide the Promised Land among the 12 tribes of Israel. Every tribe had a region assigned to them and every family within the tribe had also their plot of land (Book of Joshua). But God foresaw that with time and human frailties, this plan could become unbalanced. Some families would lose their land due to debts they could not pay. Some would be sold into servitude along with their children to satisfy the judgments of the law; perhaps even unjustly.

So God remedied this and brought His plan for the habitation of Israel back to its original balance via the jubilee year (Leviticus 25). Every 50 years marked a time of renewal and restoration. Homesteads were returned to their original owners, debts were cancelled and families were reunited from servitude. We should really stop for a moment and try to personalize this experience. Can we fully understand the power of this moment to those who were restored? Can you imagine the emotions that welled up as this year approached?

But how did God rationalize this redistribution of wealth to the rest of His people? It would be quite controversial by today's standards. I'm certain that some were critical of His solution. How did He answer His critics? Quite simply! The right to prosper within the Promised Land was His gift to His people. The land and His people belonged to Him and it was His right to return everyone to their original state of blessing and belonging.

In this way, I see 2013, our 150th year anniversary, as a year of jubilee. It can be a year when our joy is renewed as congregational health is pursued. It can be a time when families that were divided or separated from their congregations can be restored and reunited when greeted by a renewed sense of inclusion and belonging. Salvation through Jesus Christ is God's greatest gift to mankind and He alone determines the breadth and height and depth of His love and grace. In Philadelphia this past year our Chief Apostle reminded us of the words recorded in Revelation - *See, I set before you an open door and no one can close it.* Let us remove all humanly imposed divisiveness and judgment and seek to love one another unconditionally as He has loved us. This is a culture of living like Christ and it will be the first indication that our congregations are becoming healthier.

So renewing our commitment to our plan for congregational health in 2013 can bring us much reason to celebrate. As you know, our plan is called Stepping Forward. We have included a special section with this 2013 "beginning of the year" edition of the Vision to clarify our plan and to give an honest report card of our progress to date. As you can see, there

is room for all of us to renew our commitment. It must remain the single central theme for this year and for our foreseeable future.

The 150th anniversary also reminds me of our New Apostolic beginnings. We were a people of fervent renewal in 1862; we see it in our very name. Our forbearers pleaded with God for a renewed outpouring of His Spirit and a restoration of the apostolic ministry which testifies of the Gospel of Christ, and teaches and baptizes all nations in His name and with His Spirit. Thereby the church of Christ was restored to its original fullness in an authentic manner according to God's salvation plan.

Since then, our church has grown by the testimony of souls whose lives were transformed by the power of the Gospel.

OUR HISTORY IS THE SUM OF ALL OUR STORIES

The many and varied testimonies of hundreds and then thousands of everyday people drawn by God to His Son. In this year, we should share our stories with each other. Let us be witnesses of the marvelous grace of God and account for how we found this "open door" and came into the fellowship of believers and followers of Jesus Christ. There is great power within the testimony of lives that are transformed by His Gospel. We will celebrate our common history over the course of 2013 with a special initiative called **What's your story?** and I encourage you to contribute.

Lastly, can we say that a longing for a continuing renewal still lives within our congregations today? Do we still plead for the activity of the Holy Spirit in every divine service? Is there a burning within us to be taught the Gospel of Christ, to become empowered by His victory and resurrection within Holy Communion, and thereby be transformed into a new creature? *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.* (2 Corinthians 5:16-18) Is there a revival each day of our hope for the return of Christ? If not, then let us become a people of renewal in 2013. Returning to our New Apostolic roots and living joyous lives that testify of His presence within us does not take us backwards, but is the foundation for Stepping Forward. - LRK

New for 2013! Divine Service Journal



As first mentioned in the Autumn 2012 VISION, the devotional journal for 2013 has taken on a new look and purpose. Previously there was a weekly exposition of a Bible verse and a contemplative question associated with it. For 2013, the journal has been focused around the divine services for the year. The intent of this journal is twofold. First, it guides you through the divine services for 2013, utilizing the topic series and focal points from all of the 2013 divine service guides. Second, it gives you the opportunity to journal your thoughts during divine services and reflect on them afterwards, either in personal devotion or in a small group setting.



This 2013 divine service journal, titled **Seek Him**, is now available at www.nac-usa.org.

Scan this QR code to watch the commercial and place your order.

Chief Apostle Visits

January 27, 2013

Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic

April 14, 2013

St. Louis, MO - Ticketed event

Check www.nac-usa.org for more details.

May 19, 2013 - Pentecost

Hamburg, Germany - Transmission service

October 13, 2013

Niagara Falls, Canada - All of USA invited

Stepping Forward: Now and looking ahead

As we enter 2013 our focus will remain squarely on Stepping Forward, our strategic plan for congregational health and growth. This plan is designed to help us stay on course with our International Mission and Vision and to employ our God given resources; the spiritual gifts, energy, time, offering, and efforts of each soul as effectively as possible. The successful implementation of our plan depends upon clear understanding and our collective willingness and ability to measure our results with honesty and objectivity.

Our Vision statement reads: A church in which people feel at home and, inspired by the Holy Spirit and their love for God, align their lives to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and thus prepare themselves for His return and eternal life. Our Mission: Reaching out to all people in order to teach them the Gospel of Jesus Christ and to baptize them with water and the Holy Spirit. Providing soul care and cultivating a warm fellowship in which everyone shall experience the love of God and the joy of serving Him and others.

4 OBJECTIVES OF CONGREGATIONAL HEALTH

As described previously, we believe that the Mission and Vision Statements can be summarized as follows:

CREATE **HEALTHY** CONGREGATIONS.

HEALTHY CONGREGATIONS CAN BECOME **GROWING** CONGREGATIONS.

HEALTHY, GROWING CONGREGATIONS WILL LEAD TO OUR **COMPLETION**; SOULS FULLY TRANSFORMED INTO THE IMAGE OF CHRIST AND THE CHURCH PREPARED AS HIS BRIDE.

We began our strategic plan called Stepping Forward in 2009. Where we have seen positive results, let us bring God the glory. Where we have made missteps, let us be accountable and in Christian love hold each other accountable. And finally, where we have “followed at a distance” for a time like Peter (Luke 22: 54), let us renew our commitment to Him.

In the following pages we will elaborate on our plan, which is organized by the four objectives of congregational health, so that we can be clear on our future direction. It is followed by an assessment of our progress to date organized in the same manner. This assessment is meant to be objective and honest beginning with the admission that implementation, modification, and renewal will always be necessary but very difficult to accomplish in lock step across all congregations simultaneously. While each location has its own unique circumstances and personalities we encourage every member to embrace this vision for the future and continue Stepping Forward.

Improving Culture

Culture is often defined as “the way we do things around here”. And if we are truly disciples of Christ, then we ought to do things the way He did and taught. Our congregations should support each member and minister in their personal, life long struggle to become Christ like; to transform our very being into His nature and image and to change our lives to reflect His teachings. Christ led by being the servant of all and commanded that we love each other and refrain from judgment. He lived a life of compassion, kindness and tolerance and thereby created the template for our own healthy lifestyle.

Improving the Divine Service Experience

What is this experience? It is everything a soul sees, hears, and feels before, during and after the divine service. This is the moment and the place when we meet with God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit within the community of fellow believers. It is divine Word and Sacrament. It includes the message, the music and intentional worship segments inspired by the Holy Spirit. This integration of these components within the divine service is the product of prayer, preparation and communication between those who voluntarily share their gifts with the congregation. While we accept that we are flawed and imperfect vessels, we reject the notion that we can't aspire to the highest possible level of quality; all to the honor and glory of God and for the edification of the body of Christ.

The experience should comfort, strengthen, inspire, teach, and testify of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It should bring each soul to the complete readiness to share Holy Communion with Him. It communicates a sense of welcoming and belonging to every person who enters the church regardless of their circumstances.

Improving Pastoral Care

This is how the congregation helps each soul experience the love of God within the unique circumstances of their life. From birth to death, the church can be a source of care and support that is relevant to our age group and individual journey of faith. It can help us cope with the stresses of contemporary daily life. It is also an admission that “we are the church” and all can be equipped to serve and minister to each other based upon our God given gifts.

Improving Structure

The resources of the church; all the goodness and value of a healthy congregation described above as well as it's physical assets must be distributed and managed in the most effective and sustainable manner. This includes the time, spiritual gifts, offerings, and efforts voluntarily contributed by each ordained minister and member. We are all stewards of His church and accountable to Him and each other. This means that where possible we must create congregations of sufficient size and strength that have the power, future vision, and health to grow.

In addition, our future plans must address an important reality for all our congregations: The proclamations of the Word of God and the Sacraments, and likewise many aspects of leadership, are supplied by ordained ministers serving in a voluntary capacity. Our structure must support this irreplaceable asset and guarantee that their efforts are sustainable in the long run.

Culture

Over the past few years a number of specific programs and initiatives have come our way to help us on our continual journey to live our lives and serve each other in the mind and teaching of Christ. These programs build upon each other incrementally to form a new foundation of understanding.

In 2009, a yearlong perspective on **self-responsibility** was introduced. This is a fundamental building block for our future and hinges upon a powerful understanding. Our salvation is not guaranteed merely by attending church or developing a close relationship with our minister. While these are good and necessary, the central purpose of a New Apostolic Christian life is much deeper. It must always be the very individual and life long struggle to become transformed by the Gospel of Christ into a new creation. The sacraments of Holy Baptism and Sealing are singular events and gifts from God that bring us a rebirth; childhood in God! Then each soul must shoulder the continuous and ongoing self-responsibility to know Christ, to follow Him and to be changed by Him. Healthy congregations support this journey of transformation.

Also in 2009, another pivotal concept was introduced called **iServe Christ**. It began as a youth initiative but has come to include us all. It established for us the understanding that as disciples of Christ we learn to serve others as He did. Specifically, we have the opportunity to serve Christ in our families, congregations, and communities.

In 2010, the concept of **Work of Ministry** was first introduced. Through multiple communication channels we have gained familiarity, then personal revelations, and finally practical experience in better edifying the body of Christ via our spiritual gifts, passions, and life experiences. As mentioned in the Autumn Vision, a lively Work Group specific to Work of Ministry has been established that has proven very effective in helping congregations reach new milestones. This concept has required a sustained investment of time and effort with a long learning curve but thankfully we are seeing powerful testimonies of changed lives. The Work of Ministry will remain a focal point of our cultural efforts in 2013.

In 2011 and 2012, sections of the **New Apostolic Church Catechism** were introduced to all ministers and teachers. Its integration into all teaching and church ministrations will be ongoing. Likewise in 2012, a Perspective series on offering, tithing and sacrifice was begun that will also continue into 2013.

Finally, a Work Group for **leadership** has recently been formed and is tasked with supporting the personal development of all those who serve their congregation in a leadership role. Healthy congregations require a culture of shared leadership with engaged and missional members. The Work Group Leadership will mainly focus their short term efforts on finding resources that support existing leaders and emerging leaders of the church.

Divine Service Experience

A successful divine service experience is the product of various individual efforts woven and integrated into one under the direction of the Holy Spirit. It demands the highest level of preparation and quality as is possible given local circumstances.

Altar serving team: Across the country, our ordained ministers who bring the message from the altar are engaging in an ongoing effort to improve the quality of the sermons. This task has many components; sermon preparation, engaging the Holy Spirit, effective prayers, public speaking, a heightened preparation for Holy Communion, and knowledge of our liturgy are all key elements. Training and ongoing education are essential to equipping our ministers for this daunting task. To date, much of this training has been designed and implemented at the regional level with varying degrees of success. We are in the middle of a process to standardize this training support via multiple learning paths called Minister Development Institute (MDI) that is described in greater detail in the section on Structure which follows. This effort will be a high priority in 2013. A team of apostles has been tasked to lead this project.

Music and Worship team: We continually discover in new ways that the message can be powerfully enhanced by integrating it with creative methods of music and intentional worship. While this may include our traditional choirs, there are many additional techniques that can deepen our experience. To date, congregations have moved in this direction by individual experimentation based upon local talent and initiative. Again, we have experienced varying degrees of success. Often, there is the concern: "What is allowed?" There is a fine balance between pushing the envelope for the sake of novelty and creating an effective, quality driven complement to the spoken word of God. Our focus in 2013 is to share more completely the best ideas that have been developed across the country as well as resources and worship templates via the Music Companion Website. A national Work Group for music has been created to coordinate this effort.

Audio Visual team: Likewise the experience can be enhanced using creative audio visual techniques. Some congregations have installed wide screens and augment the message with Bible texts and short bullet points to enrich understanding. This also requires a fine balance so that the audio visual does not overpower the message and that the technology costs are realistic given local finances. With time we will share more standardized guidelines.

Greeter Program: Our Vision and Mission speak of reaching out to all people and a church in which people feel at home. To the new visitor, our services are quite structured with a liturgy that could be intimidating. We must consider how the experience will be for them as well. A greeter program is designed to overcome this discomfort and create a more welcoming first time experience. Some congregations have created or adopted good techniques.

Divine Service Journal 2013: The preparation of our members is also critical to this experience. Please see the announcement regarding the 2013 Divine Service Journal within this edition of the Vision for information on a unique new tool designed to help each member participate in the experience more effectively.

Pastoral Care

To understand our plan for improving the quality of our pastoral care is to grasp the concept of a “*faith arc*” that connects a soul to Jesus Christ through all phases of their life and provides the teaching that will be foundational to their personal spiritual discipline. While every age group needs pastoral care and Gospel teaching, our children, youth and young families are of particular concern as they have unique challenges. Currently we see learning gaps at certain age bands. Likewise, we have age gaps where the church loses its relevancy and thereby the ability to support our youth in a life of discipleship and security in Jesus. In 2013, we will focus our pastoral efforts on remedying these gaps.

The *faith arc*:

- **Parenting:** Parenting is an extraordinary responsibility requiring skills not often taught in a formalized way. The foundations of faith created in children ages 0-4 are irreplaceable. Currently we have no formalized Christian parenting program to support our young families. We recognize this deficiency and are researching solutions.
- **Children/Youth:** The Work Group Children and Work Group Youth are formed and functioning. Resources to support the teaching of our children are being continually developed. Efforts to make the divine service experience more positive and meaningful for our children have been created in many locations with success. However, from confirmation age forward the church struggles to provide age specific teaching and spiritual development that is relevant. College age youth have unique needs and challenges not easily solved by our traditional methods.
- **Pillars:** This is a new piece of the faith arc. Pillars are souls over the age of 21 and are either single, or recently married, and without children. While more loosely organized than the traditional youth group, they are enthusiastic workers engaged in mentoring the youth, missionary work and inspiring new ideas and perspectives.
- **Seniors:** Active senior groups have been organized with great success around the country. Their enduring zeal, ministry to each other and fellowship is a wonderful template for all ages.

Our Singles group is an ever expanding group of our members found within a broad age band. Their common characteristic is often their aloneness. The church has a decided focus on family life and singles may struggle with feelings of isolation or non-inclusion at all ages. In 2011 meetings were held with representatives of this group to better understand how the church can support them.

While not age based, it is noteworthy that our lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered members have established a chapter of Rainbow-NAC International to provide support to each other and supply resources to enhance understanding and promote tolerance and acceptance.

In addition, every soul experiences seasons of trials, stresses, and vulnerabilities. The church must be equipped to support and embrace each one during these moments. Here are some of the special pastoral programs that we are currently offering or supporting. You may learn more by contacting your local congregational leadership.

Programs:

- Pre marriage classes: PREPARE/ENRICH ®
- Understanding Grief and Grief Support
- Conflict Resolution: Peacemaking

Structure

We have dedicated a significant amount of time and resources to upgrade the professional management systems of the church as an organization. Enhancements have been made in all areas of finance, information technology, property management, and communications. The efficiencies gained in these areas have allowed us to significantly reduce our cost structure. In addition, a number of unused buildings have been sold and the proceeds earmarked to directly support the future vision of the church as described in this plan.

The national church is organized as a not for profit, 501(c)(3) entity. As voted upon at the 2010 Synod in Detroit, the organization's governance was restructured and a new constitution adopted. The Synod has been reorganized and an Executive Committee has been created to review financial reports and independently authorize large expenditures. The result of these changes is to improve the quality of our governance with greater oversight, accountability and transparency. This process is incremental and will continue into the future.

A number of technological and communication tools have been developed and released to improve the structure and management of healthy congregations. In addition to our main website, www.nac-usa.org, individual websites have been developed with dedicated resources for our music and worship teams (www.musiccompanion.org) and our ordained ministers (www.ministercompanion.org). Similar websites are being developed for our youth ministers and Sunday school teachers.

Our main website will shortly roll out individual congregational pages. Each congregation will be able to manage their own page directly and load local content. The first pages are being developed with pilot congregations currently and will be visible in early 2013.

In addition, www.nac-usa.org contains the eOffering component first introduced in the Autumn 2010 Vision whereby offering can be sent directly to the church via a secure internet link. For many members this is the preferred way to handle all their financial transactions and has been embraced with success.

The www.ministercompanion.org website contains a wide array of resources to support our ordained ministers and is a continual work in progress. It has a section called Minister Development Institute (MDI) which contains training and continuing education modules to equip our ministers with skills to serve in all areas. New courses, articles, seminar material, and small group material are being researched and developed continuously. The ongoing commitment of our ministers to continually improve themselves is an investment that is central to our four objectives. This commitment is often made quietly behind the scenes but should be understood by all our members.

At the congregational level, there are two major developments taking place across the country. The first is the creation of flagship congregations in key locations where possible. The first locations are beginning this transition currently. We will describe this far reaching structural change and report on our progress in greater detail in an upcoming Perspective within the Vision.

Likewise, the concept of shared leadership within a congregation is an important building block to our future health and will be described in an upcoming Perspective as well.

AFTER THE WATER RECEDES...

It has been about 2 months since Hurricane Sandy devastated the eastern coast of the United States. The amount of shattering damage from this hurricane, both physical and emotional, is incalculable. Many people lost everything as floods rushed into their homes. Buildings crumbled after being pummeled for hours with persistent rain and wind.*

Although some of our members experienced damage to their homes in the form of floods and trees falling, none of them had any physical injuries or required medical attention. Immediate assistance was provided from the World Relief Fund so those affected could buy basic necessities and start time sensitive clean up.

An impromptu district service was quickly organized the very next Sunday where the New Jersey district and surrounding areas came together for a service dedicated to hope and comfort with District Apostle Kolb in Newark.

Since then, relief efforts have started in the affected areas. Roads have reopened, buildings and homes are being assessed for structural damages, and many places require mold testing. There is much clean up happening that will continue into the months ahead.

Some families and congregations around the USA have collected cleaning supplies, food, clothing, and blankets to help the relief efforts. Delivering these supplies to the affected areas has required dedication from members, some even driving from as far away as Cleveland to deliver truck loads to the Brooklyn supply center.

Additionally, through the World Relief Fund, donations have been made to the firemen of Battalion 50 in Breezy Point that lost their homes. The firemen are using these donations to clean up and rebuild.

Although the hurricane has passed, the journey to recovery has just begun and will continue well into 2013. Donations are still being collected and make all these efforts possible.

Visit www.nac-usa.org to read specific experiences from the relief efforts, to make a donation to the World Relief Fund, and to find additional ways to get involved.

New Catechism - NOW AVAILABLE

As we first introduced in the Spring 2011 Edition of the VISION, an intensive effort of many years' duration to replace the work entitled "Question and Answers concerning the New Apostolic faith" has thereby come to an end. The Catechism of the New Apostolic Church is being printed and scheduled to appear at the beginning of 2013. The book is over 500 pages in length, and will be accompanied by a CD-ROM. There will also be an online edition available for download on our website.

It will contain an exhaustive description of the New Apostolic doctrine and explain the Church's position on various topics over the space of thirteen chapters. With the publication of the Catechism, it is encouraged either individually or in a small group setting, that all New Apostolic Christians take a new and intensive look at the contents of their faith.





Pioneers of our faith

In 1903, Friedrich Wolff and his family became New Apostolic in Chicago and moved to Cleveland the following year. While working as a blacksmith, he began to nurture a small mission on the inner west side of Cleveland. Divine services were first held in members' homes and later at a rented hall. The first sealings took place in 1904 by Apostle Mierau.



As this small mission started to grow, Friedrich Wolff (center) was ordained a Priest and became the first Rector of the Cleveland congregation in 1919. He soon received ordained ministry help through Pr. Fred Siegman and Pr. Carl Hussing. (pictured left and right)

In 1925, the Cleveland congregation became part of the District of Detroit, and it didn't take long for this humble congregation to grow to over one hundred. Therefore, work began on a new church building. On September 2, 1928, Apostle Erb of Chicago held the first divine service and dedicated the new Dover Avenue church.

A few years later in 1936, Apostle Erb asked District Elder Rettberg and his family to relocate from New Jersey to Cleveland in 1936 as Pr. Friedrich Wolff was retired. From his new residence in Cleveland, District Elder Rettberg oversaw the entire Detroit district. With the ambitious help of Pr. Fred Siegman, Pr. Carl Hussing, young Priests Fred Wolff and Carl Strang and a handful of others, God's work continued to blossom. In 1940, the Apostle asked Elder Rettberg to move his family to Detroit and newly-ordained Shepherd Carl Strang became Rector of the Dover Avenue congregation which he served for approximately four years.

During the late 1940's and early 1950's the Cleveland district began to expand. In 1947 two very ambitious sisters moved to Akron from Wisconsin. Together with their husbands and families they willingly opened their homes for divine services, choir practices, and fellowships. They invited many guests. This pioneer work in Akron took root and quickly grew. From there Pr. R. Vovak and his family started a congregation in a neighboring city of Cuyahoga Falls, with some members from Akron that were living there.

It also branched to the city of Kent. Both congregations were combined and moved to Stow when a church was purchased in 1964. With some families and German immigrants that settled in Massillon, another congregation was established in 1952.

About the same time, pioneer work began in East Cleveland by the youth. Services were held in an American Legion hall and the youth canvassed neighborhoods in the area. The congregation grew and became known as Highland Heights when a church was built and dedicated in that city.

In the late 1960's many families began to move out towards the suburbs in both the greater Cleveland and Akron areas.

Today, the Cleveland district consists of seven congregations that continue to step forward and employ their spiritual gifts towards health.



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Women's Ministry in Kalamazoo

The following report was submitted by our members in the Kalamazoo, Michigan area describing a trend that has been taking shape in many locations across the USA District.

Over the course of the last several years, the Holy Spirit has prompted many wonderful programs and initiatives in our district as part of the Stepping Forward plan. One of the blessings in our Kalamazoo congregation has been the implementation of a women's ministry which incorporates sisters from our Paw Paw, Vicksburg, Otsego, and Kalamazoo congregations working together to grow closer to Christ, closer to one another, and closer to our communities!

These sisters come together the last Monday of every month to have a spiritual discussion that brings them closer to Christ through Bible study, prayer, and small group support. Sometimes this is done at one of our church buildings, other times the meeting is held in one of the sister's homes. Wherever it is held, a wonderful spiritual discussion takes place that highlights Christ centered principles and looks at how these principles can be incorporated into their personal lives and daily walk of faith.

The group has also enjoyed coming closer to one another...it's been wonderful to see new and old friendships develop, new understandings experienced, and mutual respect formed. Conversations are open and yet confidential and bond the participants into a wonderful spiritual family that encourages them in their daily walk and inspires them to be a greater blessing in their homes, families, congregations, and communities.

Finally, the sisters strive to use this opportunity to grow closer to our communities through compassion, outreach, and prayer! From sending cards to the sick, making blankets for children in the hospitals, hygiene packs for the homeless, shoe collections for an area Christian camp, to making warm hats, gloves, and scarfs for the gospel mission our sisters have found joy in serving our community and reaching out to those in need by being a living testimony of the love of Christ.

In conclusion, they really enjoy learning more about our amazing God and His wonderful Son while growing in their love and appreciation for them. This is their greatest joy and highest priority! They treasure the friendships and sisterhood that has developed through personal testimonies and compassionate conversations that these evenings have inspired. And perhaps the greatest blessing that has come from this beautiful ministry has been the passionate prayers that have been shared in the midst of their gathering...prayers for a greater oneness with Christ, prayers for each other, and especially the prayers for those in need within their families, their communities, and our church! We thank God for this very special ministry.

