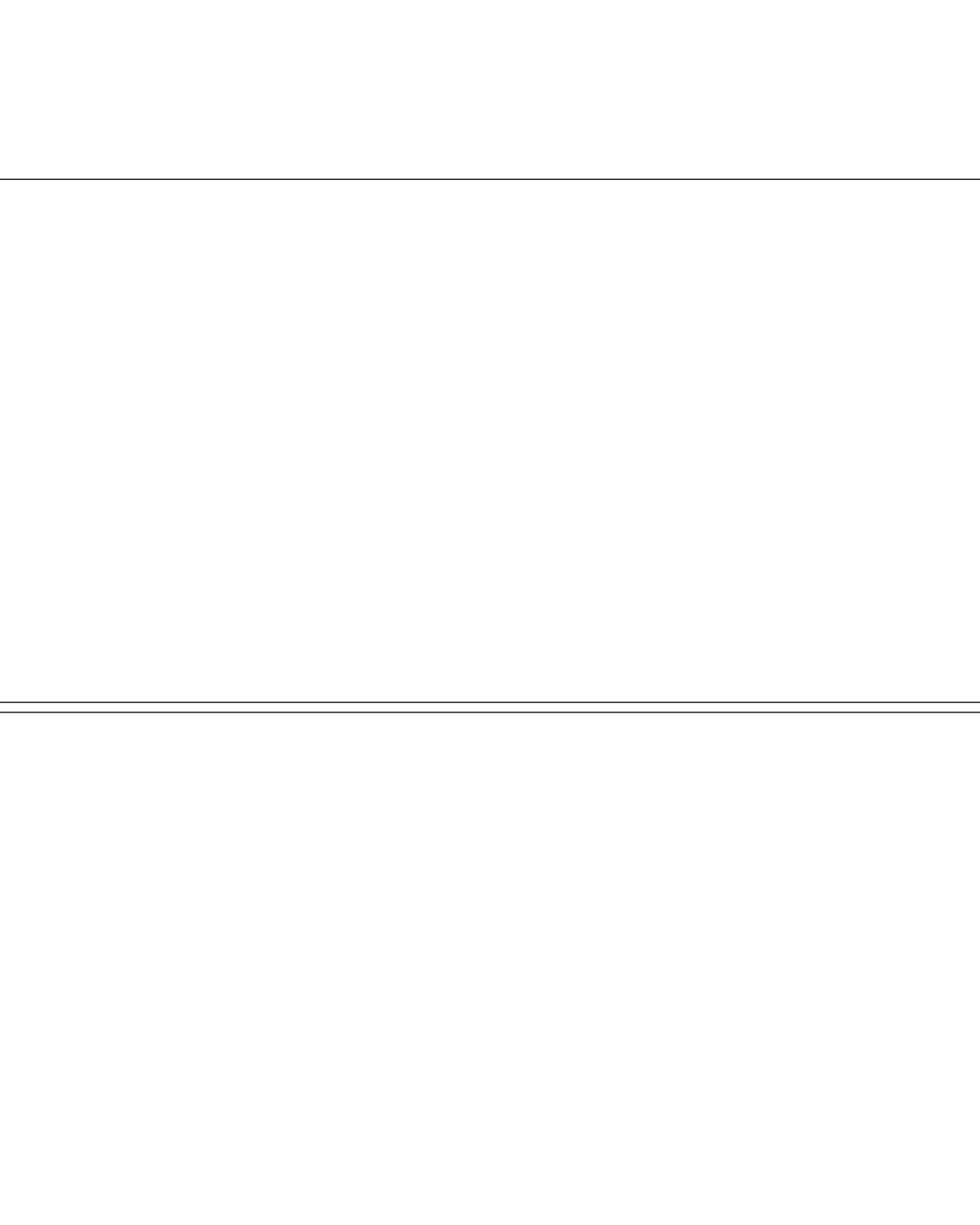


NEW APOSTOLIC CHURCH USA

VISION Journal

VOLUME 2





NEW APOSTOLIC CHURCH USA
VISION Journal
Volume 2

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PREFACE

Dear brothers and sisters,

Staying true to our strategy of Stepping Forward throughout the past years, our focus has been building both congregational and individual spiritual health. To do this, we have been encouraging everyone to put more effort into developing a deeper understanding of the will of God and His plan for us, as well as growing inwardly to become stronger, professing disciples of Christ.

Similar to the first edition of the Vision Journal, this second edition is also organized into the four aspects of health as part of our Stepping Forward strategy – culture, divine service experience, pastoral care, and structure. However, our focus has sharpened on a few different key elements over the past five years, such as giving, Faith Arc, small groups, discipleship, and so on. These more recent elements are represented in this volume, along with various spiritual and theological teachings.

In all things, we work towards our mission and vision, and I hope that this Vision Journal helps you trace our steps towards our ever-present goal: **to create 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.**

With my deep gratitude and love for all of your dedication to the Lord's work over these past years,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'R. K. M.', is positioned below the text. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial 'R' and 'K'.

	Culture	

LOVE FOR GOD

Our Heavenly Father loves us with a love that can never be measured. This love is unlike anything we know or can understand. It is limitless and yet still righteous. Jesus Christ is the manifestation of this love. He is patient with us and supports us as we try to grow more and more into His mind and spirit.

God wants to bring us together with Him for all eternity – that is His prime objective. Everything He has done and does is directed to this goal. This is the highest goal obtainable for any human being and we are called to it. Of this, we must be convinced. It is interesting to note that Christ used the image of a bride when describing those who will be ready for His coming. The image of a bride brings us to the understanding of one who is deeply in love with the bridegroom. This is the leading characteristic of those souls who wait for Christ. Because of this love, they do not seek rewards nor entitlement; they realize they deserve nothing. Nor are they interested to be with the Lord simply to escape the destruction. They understand all is grace and they are overwhelmed in joy because they feel the love of Christ. This is their sole motivation and they strive to serve and love one another as the outward sign of their love for Jesus.

As we celebrate Christ's entry into the world, let us kindle more and more love in our hearts for Him and for one another. Let us leave old things in the past and emerge to embrace the new understandings that He wants to teach us.

I am thankful for each of you. I know the apostles and ministers are thankful for your love, prayers, and support. We wish for you much joy, not only in this season, but a fuller, more robust joy in Christ as we enter the year ahead. We will come closer to the Lord!

Reprint of District Apostle's introduction letter from Autumn/Winter 2014 Vision Newsletter

LASTING JOY

For those in northern climates, approaching spring brings us the unique joy of warmth, revival, and light! For all Christians, the approaching celebration of Passion Week, Easter, Eastertide, and Pentecost also brings great joy; joy in the inner warmth of more deeply perceiving the love and sacrifice of Christ, the exultation of resurrection and the revival of spirit during this wonderful season. In such a beautiful environment, our young brothers and sisters can confirm their vow to Christ and seek His blessing.

Our Chief Apostle recently mentioned that we should search for wisdom in order to perceive the things that actually create lasting joy. Sometimes it may be worthwhile to first become aware of things that do not bring joy, simply so that we do not pursue them. Wisdom causes us to understand that satisfied wishes don't necessarily bring us joy and that we cannot buy it. If we become selfish instead of selfless, how can we truly find joy? Further, we recognize that we cannot really be joyful if our neighbor is unhappy, when our focus is on our "our own," and when we don't care about others outside our fellowship or even the next generation.

Wisdom shows us the right things to pursue, things aligned with our Heavenly Father's will which truly bring lasting joy. We realize a lot has to do with our relationships with Him and also with one another. We read of this in Acts 2:42-47. Here we see vital, vibrant congregations, brimming with bliss and excitement in the knowledge that Christ died and resurrected for them. They joyfully shared in deeper fellowship celebrating the fact that He made the treasures of heaven available to all.

May this be a good template for us to follow in our pursuit of joy.

Reprint of District Apostle's introduction letter from Spring 2015 Vision Newsletter

CULTURE SHIFT

One of our fundamental objectives while on the journey toward healthier congregations is to create a culture of living and leading like Jesus Christ. This idea of congregational cultural change has been difficult to define and I would like to provide some additional clarity. Firstly, the use of the word itself may seem unusual. What do we mean by culture and why are we using it within a spiritual context? Here is an interesting definition:

A culture is a way of life of a group of people - the behaviors, beliefs, values, and symbols that they accept, generally without thinking about them, and that are passed along by communication and imitation from one generation to the next.

From this definition we can see that for something to become part of a group's culture, it must be understood and embraced by all the members of the group. It must be at their very core; it creates a common platform for communicating and making life decisions. It shapes their language, their way of seeing the world, their hopes and dreams and their way of doing things. Culture is not casual or superficial knowledge, but deeply felt.

What should be at the core of our New Apostolic culture? We believe we are part of His church. The Gospel of Christ is the common theme of both our New Apostolic Mission and Vision statements. Theoretically, how could our culture be based upon anything other than Jesus Christ and His Gospel?

But theory is not always reality. Take a moment to think of your own experience; your life, your family and your congregation. Can you and I honestly say that the Gospel of Jesus is so deeply understood and embraced that it has become our way of life? Does it shape our attitudes and form the basis for our decisions, actions, speech, and relationships? Has it become so instinctual that we react out of the Gospel without having to think about it? Is it so fundamental and enduring that we can pass it from one generation to the next despite an ever changing "pop culture"? Where God has called us to congregational leadership roles, do we lead others as a servant like Jesus did?

I hesitate to make broad generalizations because everyone's situation is different, but I feel it safe to say that we have room to grow further and that changes to our culture are needed.

Changing culture is difficult and time-consuming. It is an ongoing process requiring spiritual discipline, teaching and patience. Let me address two things that will help us.

We must identify the barriers that dilute, replace, or distract us from the Gospel of Christ.

What could they be? Certainly many things, but here are some common ones.

- Personal preferences: Sometimes a congregation will be influenced by a strong personality; perhaps that of a minister. Their likes and dislikes become generally accepted as though part of the Gospel. To conform to human preferences is an unnecessary obstacle to salvation. Jesus made it quite simple: I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father but by me. That's pretty definitive.
- Ethnic values: Every ethnic group has its own cultural preferences. They celebrate certain character traits that can be quite admirable. However, the danger exists once again when they become a pseudo requirement that is superimposed upon the believers. Growing up in a German household I learned to appreciate cleanliness, order, punctuality and respect for authority; all good traits! But they do not appear in the Gospel as requirements for salvation. I must be careful not to expect them from my brother and sister or to judge them if they see life differently than me. Jesus caused quite an uproar when He intentionally broke cultural norms and embraced all sorts of socially unacceptable people. He loved messy people with dysfunctional lives. He sacrificed His perfect life for them.
- Old Testament Values: This one can be confusing at times. We venerate the God fearing patriarchs and heroes of the Old Testament. We teach our children how they were blessed by God for their faith, loyalty and obedience. But their culture was not ours and we must make certain distinctions. In our Covenant, the New Covenant made possible by the merit of Jesus Christ, grace must replace judgment and love must replace (become) the law.

To change is not wrong; it's fundamental to salvation and to the church!

I'm often asked some variation of these questions: Why do you want the church to change? Does that mean we were wrong in the past? I thought that God is perfect and unchangeable? Think about the rich young man. He wanted to follow Jesus and have eternal life, and he seemed to be doing everything right in following all of the commandments. Yet, when Jesus asked him to sell his possessions and give to the poor, he could not do it and that was the thing that barred him from heavenly treasures. The rich young man still had some changing to do.

Let's start with God. He is perfect and He is unchangeable. He created the perfect plan to deal with our imperfection. His Son won the victory over sin and death and offers us eternal life through His church. His Gospel proclaims this truth to all mankind. He is the perfect part of His church as described in our Catechism.

But now it becomes complicated. He placed His church into the hands of human beings, and as our Catechism also explains, we are the imperfect part of His church. But God wanted it that way. We struggle with our imperfection every day and continually work to adjust ourselves to the eternal truth of the Gospel and the urgings of the Holy Spirit.

Therefore, change within the church should not be surprising, it is a requirement. For over 2,000 years the imperfect church has drifted from the Gospel and returned again, and it will continue to do so until the Lord returns. Despite this, in faith we cling to His church as the path to our salvation AND we strive to align ourselves to the Gospel as described in our Vision statement.

Let me conclude with an example from the early Christian church. Please read the story of Apostle Peter and Cornelius in the 10th chapter of Acts in its entirety. It is very entertaining reading and highly relevant today. When you have read it (no short cuts), please think about these observations:

- The first church retained Old Testament cultural beliefs that limited the Gospel.
- Christ's teachings on inclusion were clear from the beginning, but still misunderstood.
- God intervened and clarified His intent to Peter in an unmistakable fashion.
- The apostle had to help the church come back to the teachings of Jesus Christ; and it didn't happen easily or immediately.
- Cultural change is not new or unexpected; it is an ongoing task and a fundamental responsibility of the Apostle Ministry to the church.

Reprint of Spring 2015 Vision Newsletter

DIVINE CONNECTION

Human beings have a strong need to be connected: To form relationships and experience emotional contact, to learn and to communicate. In a fast paced, increasingly anonymous society, people struggle to form these connections. It's possible to be surrounded by rushing crowds of people but still feel alone and isolated. As a response, more and more we create connectivity through technology and this phenomenon impacts our lives in such a visible way.

Take a look around you. If you are in a public place, how many people are at this very minute connected to someone else via a smart phone, computer or tablet? How many of you at this moment have some device within reach which creates a portal to share information and experiences? Many of us have multiple devices, and they can be connected or synchronized so that we are always available. People and information follows us seamlessly wherever we go.

Technology alone is certainly not the magic solution that automatically brings human beings into a better life and richer relationships with each other. However, let's focus on the new possibilities that connectedness brings already into our natural lives. This understanding can then be the foundation for a richer spiritual appreciation for the divine connectedness that God offers. I see four trends that can be very powerful in our lives. Connectivity creates:

- **A virtual community.** In essence we are never alone. Someone is always "present" with us in real time.
- **Unlimited access to information and experience.** Today, no one needs to feel distant or uninformed.
- **Abundance.** Everything we need is a just a click away. Food, clothing, transportation, medicine and entertainment can be researched, ordered and delivery arranged right to our front door.
- **Direction and orientation.** No one needs to be lost! We can even avoid traffic jams, accidents and bad weather that are not visible but lie ahead of us.

In summary, this natural connectedness brings us a world of unlimited possibilities. The potential is almost too much to process. It can be life changing.

Now let's transition our attention to the spiritual connectedness possible for those who love the Lord, who live in Him and who share the Holy Spirit. Just as we need human relationships, emotional contact and communication, even more so we need and have the potential to

experience the divine connection. God gave us the gift of an eternal soul that exists within our physical being. It has the capacity to perceive, communicate with and love God. It can learn, retain and respond to the teachings of Jesus Christ and even becomes the dwelling place for God's Holy Spirit.

It's certainly possible to choose a life that is unconnected to God, but without His presence both now and eternally, it is a life unfulfilled. We may reach the pinnacles of human experience during our lifetime; knowledge, wealth, good works and relationships.

But without experiencing the Divine, we are incomplete. Compared to both the current and eternal possibilities that God intends for us, we are still lost, uninformed, alone, and living in spiritual poverty. This is described so powerfully in Revelation 3:17, *'I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing' - and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked.*

What possibilities does divine connectedness bring to our lives?

God is always present "in real time". Is God relevant to you right now? Is He real in your life? Sometimes it is easier to think of Him as a historical figure. I'm reminded of Jesus' bold confession to the Pharisees in the 8th chapter of John who rejected the living God in human form standing right in front of them in favor of the historical God of Abraham. Christ finally declared to them: *Before Abraham was, I AM!* This seems like a grammatical mistake. We know that Jesus was intentionally using the term "I AM". It was the way God described Himself to Moses, generations prior, to make a point. But it also reflects an important truth for us. Because He is God, He is always here in the present. He is available everywhere to everyone who seeks Him.

God offers us a continuous connection to Him through Jesus Christ. In every aspect of our lives, He shares Himself with us in "real time".

Divine connection provides everything we need in abundance. Let's continue with the theme of "I AM." Throughout the gospel of John, we find the seven I AM statements of Christ.

Jesus says, I AM:

- The bread of life (John 6:48)
- The way, the truth and the life, (John 14:6)
- The living vine (John 15:1)
- The Resurrection and the life (John 11:25)
- The door (John 10:9)
- The light of the world (John 8:12)
- The True Shepherd (John 10:11)

Please take a quiet moment to reflect on each of these statements and the possibilities they bring to you and me. Perhaps dig deeper into each Bible reference for context and elaboration. Each one is unique and together they are overwhelming in the fullness and completeness they create within our lives, both now and for all eternity.

Divine connection provides direction and orientation. We have the gift of the Holy Spirit within us. Jesus promised that He would be “the helper” and would lead us into all truths. Once again, take a moment to fully ponder what is all included in these two words, “all truths.” How much knowledge, information, and experience do they contain?

If engaged, the Holy Spirit can be quite powerful in our lives. But like the GPS in our smart phone, we can choose to ignore His counsel or turn the volume down within our consciousness. Engaging the Holy Spirit requires trust and practice. It is an intentional act.

Divine connection creates community. So God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, are present in our lives in real time. They bring fullness, abundance and the possibilities of life eternal within the Kingdom of God. They provide guidance and truth. But there is one more dimension. Our connectedness to Him also connects us to one another. Our relationship with God was meant to be shared and experienced within a community of believers. Community is created during the divine services where we worship God and experience His Word and the real presence of Jesus Christ in Holy Communion together. It is enhanced all during the midweek when we learn the Gospel together, profess the power of God in our lives and support each other pastorally. Community is built when believers pray together.

Every week, we hear new evidence across the district that these divine connections are multiplying despite all the human barriers; work and school scheduling demands, traffic, location, health and age. Let's use every tool at our disposal to expand the ways we connect to God and each other continuously. The possibilities are limitless.

Reprint of Summer 2015 Vision Newsletter

GOD, OUR PHYSICIAN

“The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved!” Jeremiah 8:20

Such was the agonizing mourning of the prophet Jeremiah. Further he asked in verse 22 - *Is there no balm in Gilead, Is there no physician there?*

Such thoughts may also plague us at times...time passes, the good season is behind us, the road is difficult, losses occur, and the Lord has not yet come!

Dear ones, let us take heart! We are not lost; we remain resolute in our belief and knowledge of Jesus Christ. He also lived through such seasons in His life. Many did not understand His teachings and turned away from Him. He suffered rejection, persecution, betrayal, denial, and often, He was alone...

Yes, there is a balm in Gilead and there is a physician here. We know Him in every divine service experience in His holy word and in His earnings. It is the victorious and resurrected Lord! How wonderful are the healing effects of Christ’s absolution and the blessing in the benediction. Just as Christ was strengthened by His Father through intensive prayer, so also can we foster such a connection to receive strength and fresh impulses from His Spirit. The Holy Spirit who dwells in us “nudges” us and gives us new perspectives, if we give Him room and call upon Him. We enjoy intimate fellowship in the deep conversations we have in our midweek experience, giving new insights to Jesus Christ and also in “discovering” one another in a new light.

Yes, we live through difficult moments, but we find our joy in Christ, as the first apostles did, that we are *counted worthy to suffer shame for His name* [from Acts 5:41]. The Lord’s promise of His return still shines brightly for us, and in the meantime, we continue preparing, constantly knowing and feeling His presence in so many ways. After all, as our Chief Apostle voiced, from Isaiah 44:21 - *I have formed you...you will not be forgotten by Me!*

With such a spirit, let us approach Thanksgiving once again this year with hearts brimming with adoration, praise, and thankfulness.

What abundance, to be a child of God!

Reprint of District Apostle’s introduction letter from Autumn 2015 Vision Newsletter

PASSING ON OUR HERITAGE

Welcome to 2016!

In preparing this Winter VISION I came across a message from our Chief Apostle that he expressed recently in Cape Town, which I would like to share with you.

*My brothers and sisters, we have a wonderful heritage, a wonderful capital we have received from our ancestors, from our predecessors and we are thankful for that, but never forget that now it is our task to pass it on to our children. That is our task today. The story must go on and as the Christian faith, the New Apostolic faith is part of our heritage, we have to pass it on to our children. It is our responsibility – yours and mine – that our children receive a **living faith**, not just a tradition. We want them to receive a **true love** with deeds, not only with words. We want them to receive a **joyful hope**, not just a hope of, “Yes, one day the Lord will come.” I cannot wait for the return of the Lord Jesus Christ without being joyful. If there is no joy in my heart, then there is something wrong with my hope. Let us transmit to our children **a living faith, a true love, and a joyful hope**. That is our task and responsibility. Let us think about the way we speak about our faith, the way we love, the way we speak about the future; these things teach them our living faith, our true love, and our joyful hope.*

Therefore dear loved ones, let us ensure that we strengthen these important traits in ourselves and pass them on to the next generation in preparing ourselves for the Lord's return.

Reprint of District Apostle's introduction letter from Winter 2015 Vision Newsletter

PRAYER

I have occupied my thoughts recently with the important topic of prayer. In one of our old hymns, we used to sing – “Did you think to pray?” If we understand prayer as breathing of the soul, would we ask – “Did you think to breathe?” It is essential for life! We learn this concept from Jesus when we see in the scriptures the regularity and the intensity of His prayer life. He was both true God and true man, yet His communication, through prayer with His Father, was paramount to Him. A number of times it is said of Jesus that “He went to pray”. Could this also be said of me...that I went to pray? Or have I relegated my prayer life to one in the morning when I awake, one before each meal, and a few final thoughts before I sleep? In today's world, how could I follow Jesus' ways and “go to pray”?

It seems with our increasing technology and media that we are inundated with and sometimes addicted to sounds, pictures, videos, and words, as well as a plethora of methods to communicate. Yet, none of these ways create a connection with Our Father. Am I also “addicted” to communicating with Him, the One who not only listens, but who offers solutions for all things in my life? Could “going to pray” mean that I try from time to time to isolate and insulate myself from all the other sounds and influences around me to focus my thoughts and feelings to God and express my praise and thanks to Him, to search for His advice, to find His strength, to know His comfort and peace? This could be done at anytime and any place, no electric outlet or charger is necessary, only the solitude of my thoughts directed toward the Lord.

I further considered, is my prayer only like a blanket that I cover myself with? Do I instruct God what He should do to help me and others, telling Him what I need, somewhat like a child that wants simply to be sheltered from the cold world? Truly this is necessary at certain times. However, could my prayer also be a weapon, a sword and shield? When I affirm the power and love of God to Him, when I intone my deep thankfulness for His goodness, can I feel His strength in me? In 1 Samuel 17:45, we can read the battle cry of David. While not a prayer, it is a profession of reliance on God's help. I can imagine this profession may not have impressed Goliath, but by invoking the name of God, it inspired David himself to do what he was destined to do and God provided the other necessary aspects to his victory.

Could my prayer life also be a profession of my reliance on the power of God's love? In professing His praise, do I feel that He can convey to me the courage and confidence to be victorious? In such a way, my prayer becomes a two-way communication, not only to tell my Father what I need, (remembering Jesus' words – “your Father knows the things you have

need of before you ask Him” in Matthew 6:8), but more so to express to Him what He is and what He means to me and thereby open myself to His inspiration and thoughts. In such a way, prayer can be a wonderful means to celebrate and give thanks for the many victories with Christ.

As I approach the celebration of Jesus Christ in Passion week, Eastertide, and the celebration of His Spirit in Pentecost, I want to deepen, expand, and increase my prayers.

Thanks for allowing me to share my thoughts with you...

Reprint of District Apostle's introduction letter from Spring 2016 Vision Newsletter

THRIVE

Transform your nature, using Jesus as your example

Each day we strive to become more Christ-like. He is our example for everything that we think, do, and say. Our relationship with God has been compromised because of sin, but transformation from this condition can be accomplished in cooperation with God by the power of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Help spread the Gospel

As Christians, we want to help share the message of Jesus' life, death, resurrection, and ultimate return. How we live our lives is a testimony and profession to all around us that helps spread the Gospel message.

Respond to the call to serve

Each one is equipped with different passions and gifts, which we are called to engage by serving Jesus in our family, our congregation, and our community. Jesus' life was based on serving and showing love for others, and we desire to have a similar lifestyle.

Invest in your spiritual health

Taking the time to build and maintain your spiritual health through spiritual disciplines strengthens your relationship with God and can be a tool of comfort and confidence when going through trials in life.

Value the Church

The Church provides a place of fellowship and worship with other believers and we can participate in the church of Christ together. In the Church, we can experience unity with one another as we share our spiritual journeys and hear God's word.

Embrace the promise of Jesus Christ's return

We live and hope for the return of Jesus Christ. Waiting for His return should not be a passive waiting, but rather an active preparation as we learn more and work to apply the Gospel to our lives.

Hopefully you have had time to go through the THRIVE Membership Booklet, released in January, and have started to familiarize yourself with the concepts revealed in the THRIVE acronym. In order to provide a fuller picture of the membership booklet, let's talk about where it came from and how it was developed.

Towards the end of 2014, a project group was assigned the task of putting together a booklet for new members. This booklet was intended to be something that introduces new members to the history and beliefs of the New Apostolic Church. The project team researched different booklets that congregations in the USA and other countries had used in the past for this purpose, and also looked at samples from other Christian churches, discovering how they have welcomed new members into the church. With this research, the content began to come together for the booklet and it underwent multiple revisions. Then came the creation of the THRIVE acronym, outlining member expectations based on Bible passages. This also provided the name for the booklet. From this point on, it was decided that THRIVE was not just something for new members, it was something that every member, whether new or a lifelong member, needed to know. It would help contribute to the Stepping Forward plan of creating a positive culture and improving congregational health. Upon approval from the Apostles and the international church theologian, Dr. Reinhard Kiefer, the THRIVE Membership Booklet was ready for the design and layout process, and was finally released in January 2016, more than a year after the project began.

The THRIVE acronym, though at the back of the book, is the focus of the membership booklet. It states that we, as Christians, have been given expectations by God that we are called to live by and fulfill. The Church wants to teach and provide these expectations so that the member can embrace them as their own personal expectations. Each member is responsible for their own self, and by laying out these expectations, they can take charge of their self-responsibility by living a life that is pleasing to God. By receiving the sacraments, you have committed yourself to the expectations of being a Christ-follower. However, you are not alone in trying to fulfill these expectations. The Church equips you through the word of God, the partaking of the sacraments, and the small group teachings and discussions.

While the Church is here to equip you to live out THRIVE, there are things you can do to help yourself follow these expectations. There are resources that will help you discover your spiritual gifts, so that you can find out how to best utilize them. There are devotionals that can help you contemplate different spiritual subjects. Apps exist for your phone that can help you financially organize your life so that you have enough to tithe and offer. There are different apps or self-study Bibles that will guide you through reading the Bible. Taking notes during the divine service can help further in studying God's word and making it applicable to your life during the week. THRIVE is a way of life and is a lifelong, spiritual journey. We have the opportunity to grow and flourish every day. This is the life God wants for us – a thriving life for Him.

Reprint of Spring 2016 Vision Newsletter

BENEVOLENCE: HELPING OUR NEIGHBORS

We have the special privilege to live in a society where the care of those in need is recognized as an imperative. However, the motivation for Christians to help those in need is more than a social imperative. It is a fundamental aspect of Christ's teaching. He provided perspective on this topic in Matthew 25:31-46. Here we read about feeding the hungry, providing a drink to the thirsty, etc. The Chief Apostle has made it clear that while the main focus of the Church's activity is the preparation of the Bride of Christ, our calling as Christians also includes helping our neighbors with their material needs.

Currently, the benevolence program of the New Apostolic Church USA is a mix of providing help in times of need and giving on a routine basis. We wish to move more towards an approach that mirrors the Biblical example of providing in times of need. In past decades, programs of routine giving to everyone in a certain group were established because those in the group generally faced similar economic challenges. A current evaluation of such programs has shown that such a generalized approach is no longer effective in providing help to those who truly have a need. As a result, it is planned that these programs will be changed and a system for evaluating needs locally is being developed.

As we seek the proper structure for the benevolence program for the future, a number of factors must be taken into account.

- First, it is important to remember the Church's fundamental purpose, which is clearly delineated in our Vision statement – we are a church where *people prepare themselves for Jesus' return and eternal life*. I, along with the Apostles and administration of the Church, am responsible to ensure that the Church's resources are primarily focused on accomplishing its vision.
- Second, the same as any other organization, the Church's resources are limited. For this reason, it is not possible to provide help to everyone who finds themselves in a financial bind. An overview of the sources and uses of funds in 2013 and 2014 was published in the Spring 2016 Vision newsletter, which can help in understanding these limitations.

For these reasons, we will transition to a model where the majority of benevolence is focused on helping those experiencing a short-term need; the intention here is to provide a first step towards a more permanent resolution and/or support from other sources.

The changes discussed here are intended to move the Church towards a benevolence program that more closely fits the Biblical model, as these funds will be made available for the church's new need-based program. For those participants on our current programs, who feel that they are in need of the current support, we will provide for an option to continue receiving this support.

As with all other developments of the past years, the outlined adjustments to the church's current benevolence approach serve our core focus – to serve one another as Christ taught and constantly work to transform ourselves with Him as our example. Thank you for continuing to help and support, so that together, we can continue to advance forward.

Reprint of Summer 2016 Vision Newsletter

OUR RESPONSIBILITY TO CREATION

For the fruits of all creation... for His gifts to every nation... for the ploughing, sowing, reaping, silent growth while we are sleeping, future needs in earth's safe keeping, thanks be to God.

As we approach autumn, the harvest season, I would like to bring your attention to the thoughts laid out in this well-known, old English hymn (#37 in our hymnal). We, as a church, don't often talk about the earth and nature. We have a tradition that tends to disdain the material world, contrasted with our views of the spiritual world. However, we cannot conclude that the invisible, spiritual world outranks the visible, natural world because all was created by God and, as He said, was "very good." The earth is part of the plan of salvation. This planet is a gift from God to us and it is one that continues to provide for us, even in our misuse of it.

Gratitude and appreciation for what God has given us must be forefront for us as Christians, as we can see from the lyrics of the hymn. One of the definitions of the word appreciation is "thankful recognition." To be thankful and appreciate, we must first recognize what we have been given. And when we truly recognize, then thankfulness and gratitude lead us to the next step: stewardship. Stewardship is the responsible overseeing and protection of something considered worth caring for and preserving. So what should we be stewards over? I would suggest three relationships that were laid out in the Garden of Eden: our relationship with God, our relationship with each other, and our relationship with nature. All of these relationships are interwoven and it's important that they stay in balance with one another.

Our relationship with God

Then God saw everything that He had made, and indeed it was very good. (Genesis 1:31)

Genesis 1:31 brings to expression the positive relationship God has with His creation and that it was originally created in perfection.

We can read in Jeremiah 1:5 (NIV), "*Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart.*" God not only created us, He knew us before we even existed. Each of us is the result of a thought of God. Each of us is willed, each of us is loved, each of us is necessary (Pope Francis, Encyclical on Climate Change & Inequality – 24 May 2015). We have a beautiful relationship with our Creator and we want to continue to deepen that relationship with Him.

The entire material universe speaks of God's love, His boundless affection for us. (Pope Francis, Encyclical on Climate Change & Inequality – 24 May 2015)

Our relationship with each other

It is not good that the man should be alone. (Genesis 2:18)

God saw at the beginning that we weren't meant to live in solitude. All throughout the Bible, God directs and urges His people to live in community; to help each other, to care for each other, and to love and serve each other. When Christ came to earth, He was the true and perfect example of this, guiding us even further to love one another as He loves us.

We are all part of this creation. All of us were made in the image of God and He wants us to see each other as He sees us: all a part of His family in this common home we have on earth.

Our relationship with nature

Then the Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to tend and keep it. (Genesis 2:15)

The earth is the Lord's (Psalm 24:1), but He has given us the responsibility to tend and keep it. To *tend* is to cultivate, plough, work, look after. To *keep* is to care, protect, preserve, maintain. When God gave man dominion over the earth, it was intricately linked to us being made in His image; for us to be a reflection of Him. We have a responsibility to the earth and are accountable to God for it. Our relationship with the earth needs to consist of more than just being thankful for it. Just as we learn that we are called to care for others, we are also called to care for our environment. Luke tells us that not even the birds of the air are forgotten by God (Luke 12:6). If we believe this, then how could we mistreat them or cause harm to them? Or to anything else that God has created and put on this earth?

Recognizing and caring for these three relationships displays our love and humbleness before God. The misuse of creation begins when we no longer recognize any higher power than ourselves, when we see nothing else but ourselves (Address to the Clergy of the Diocese of Bolzano – Bressanone – 6 August 2008). When one of these relationships is broken, it affects the other two. When we don't care for and preserve our planet, the poorest of humanity are affected the most. When we don't think of each other as being equal and loved by God, we exploit resources that should be shared by all. And when we don't give thanks and appreciation for the things that our Creator has given to us and realize that everything is in His hand, we cannot be good stewards of our relationship with the people around us or the earth and its resources.

We all need to become more aware of how our everyday decisions and actions contribute to the health of the earth. God has given us this responsibility over the earth and He trusts that we will take care of it. We are expected not to use the earth's resources for our own benefits, but rather to glorify God and to further His mission.

We know that damage has been done to the earth, but we can make a new start by taking an

honest look at ourselves and embarking on new paths, always being aware of the earth, and of the people around us. We can only be responsible for ourselves and our actions, and it is up to each one of us to determine how we want to be stewards of the creation that God has allowed us to be a part of. Let this be a thought for you to ponder and discuss as we enter this season of harvest and stand in wonder at the abundance that God has created for us.

For the harvests of the Spirit...for the good we all inherit...in the harvests we are sharing... thanks be to God.

* This article is based on the "Responsibility for the creation" presentation by Apostle Jurgen Loy

Perspective:

The notion that human beings themselves might become a threat to creation is foreign to the biblical worldview. In the process of civilization, control over nature was first and foremost a matter of survival - life had to be defended against the threat of a hostile natural world, which could strike mankind in the form of sickness, famine, and natural disaster.

It was only after scientific and technical mechanisms capable of dominating nature were unleashed that an awareness began to develop about the damage to the foundations of life that was being caused by careless exploitation of natural resources.

For the first time in history, there was a real possibility that unbridled domination of nature might even go so far as to annihilate all life on earth, and indeed jeopardize the continued existence of the world - the very habitat assigned to humanity.

Reprint of Autumn 2016 Vision Newsletter

OUR DAILY BREAD

“Give us this day our daily bread.”

Spoken by millions of Christians every Sunday, this sentence seems like a simple request. But what does it really mean?

This phrase speaks to the omnipotence of the Eternal God. Give us **this day**... There is no past or future – all things are present with the Almighty God. Perhaps, God wanted to introduce this concept to the Israelites with the manna in the desert: *don't occupy yourselves with what is to come and don't save things from the past. I will provide you with what you need each day!* And He also does this for us today. (Matthew 6:34)

From time to time, one hears the expression, “That congregation is old-school,” or “That minister is very progressive.” Using labels like these to characterize our brothers and sisters only serves to polarize and separate us. This is a danger. At times we can feel bold and want to try something new and at other times we seek the comfort of our tradition and familiarity. Depending on the topic of conversation, our upbringing, or our stage in life, we can experience both extremes. Let us not lose sight that no matter what the situation is, God will always provide *today* what we need *for today*.

What is vital is that we focus on growing into the nature of our Father by accepting each other *in the present*. Jesus also gave indication of this when He said, “...the hour is coming, and now is.” (John 4:23) We express a similar sentiment, also in the Lord's Prayer, when we say, “Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” God's kingdom is coming, but is also now. We must practice living in the kingdom today, here on this earth. God loves and wants *all* people to be saved, and that must be visible in our acceptance and love for our fellow man. We must be people of reconciliation, examples of what it means to love and serve our neighbors. We can be confident in God's provision, assured that He will give us the proper instruction and guidance, through the Gospel with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

This is our daily bread, our sustenance to keep moving forward. And it will always be the right message for the current time.

Let us be people of the present, people of today.

Reprint of District Apostle's introduction letter from Winter 2016 Vision Newsletter

THE CREATIVE POWER OF GOD

With great enthusiasm, let us continue to embrace the motto for 2017 - **Glory be to God, our Father!** There are many aspects of this word that we can discover. Already in the New Year's service, our Chief Apostle has outlined a number of ways to glorify our Father...

I would like to focus on the first task: recognizing the creative power and goodness of God. It is so easy for us to take for granted what God has created around us. It starts with a simple fact – I am here! God has allowed me to be, He has revealed Himself to me, and He has called me to be His own. Our wonderment continues as we begin to survey the natural creation around us. For thousands of years, mankind has studied what God has made and we still have not been able to understand all its mysteries and are still continually amazed by new things. Even recently, evidence of another ancient life form was discovered. On land, in the ocean, and in the heavens, God's creative, evolving power is manifest again and again.

Many times throughout my life, I have often pondered the words in Numbers 23:23. They made a deep impression on me when I learned in school that they were the first words tapped in Morse code by Samuel Morse in 1844.

“What hath God wrought?” (KJV)

It is good for us, from time to time, to stop and consider, what has God made? What is He creating today? And what will He yet do?

When we survey our life and that which surrounds it through the eye of the Holy Spirit, with childlike wonderment we begin to perceive what God Himself said in the beginning, *“It is good.”* After such meditative moments we come to the conclusion – how great is our God! Thanks and praises be to Him...

Reprint of District Apostle's introduction letter from Spring 2017 Vision Newsletter

YOU'RE HOME

Our mission statement calls each one of us to serve and reach out to all people. We work at doing this so that every person may come to know and have a relationship with Jesus Christ. Whether we were born into the Church or not, there was a point in all of our lives where someone reached out to either ourselves or an older relative, inviting them to experience God within the New Apostolic Church. This invitation was maybe the spark that was needed to begin a relationship with God, a relationship that can never be severed and lasts for eternity.

If reaching out and offering a simple invitation opens people to the possibility of having a relationship with God, then how do we work on inviting people to church? Usually the first hurdle to inviting someone to church is ourselves. God gives us many opportunities to invite people to church, but we don't always see them or take them. Maybe we're just too comfortable with the people we know and are scared to reach out to someone new. Maybe we're afraid or embarrassed of the possibility that our invitation could be turned down. We may know from experience that not all invitations go well, and not all are accepted. In these cases, we want to be brave as the first Christians. It may be time to get a little uncomfortable and reach out to people, even if that means starting with inviting someone to a small group or youth activity, instead of a divine service.

Once we can move beyond some of these things that hold us back from opportunities of invitation, what can we do to show that our invitation is truly out of the desire to help connect people to Christ and a church with fellow believers?

While there are many approaches to invite one to church or a church activity, there are a few things we can focus on:

- **Be genuine.** When we approach people, our first intention should be to build a relationship with them. We cannot just go to someone, introduce ourselves, and then immediately try to get them to come to our church. Instead, we can focus on them as a person, getting to know them and understand them, learning to love them as a person made in the image of God. With this genuineness, people can see that we truly care for them. Remember, our purpose is not just to bring someone to church, but to aid in their relationship with Christ.
- **Be personal.** For many of us, it may be unnatural to be personal with someone we have only known for a short time. Because of this, we may feel the urge to resort to talking

about facts about God or the Bible, without making it personal, when inviting people to our church. And yet, your personal story and experiences of God are what you know best and can be most passionate about. God is present in the stories of our lives. A true disciple of Christ is a witness of Him with their life. We are called to share these stories so that people may see God's love and grace in our lives, and then want to experience it for themselves.

- **Be open.** Every single person is different and God loves the diversity of His children. This is something we can keep in mind when thinking about inviting a person to church. Other people may have experienced God and church differently than we have, and some of these experiences will not always have been pleasant. We want to be open to hearing about other people's experiences. Our understanding will go a long way in building relationships with others.

These are just three qualities among many that we can have when inviting people to experience God in our church. We want to create a culture of invitation within the church, so that it becomes a normal part of our lives. Looking at the qualities we want to grow in when inviting someone to church helps start the conversation, but it doesn't end there. If someone does accept our invitation, and they find themselves walking into our congregation, what is the next step?

To help answer this question, the NAC-USA Church office has created resources that will help a congregation greet and welcome new guests. These materials are called the *You're home* resources and are intended to support the congregation in making all people feel at home when they enter our congregations. *You're home* helps guide a person's journey from being a first-time guest, to their further interest in our faith, and to their desire to become a member. The first two steps are supported with resources, such as:

- defining the roles of greeters and ushers, creating a congregational welcome strategy,
- providing small group videos and discussion guides to further engage guests with our faith.

Coming soon will be the next level of *You're home* resources, which will help guide the discussion about sacraments on a person's journey in becoming a member. If your congregation has a greeting team in place or is looking to start one, the *You're home* resources are currently located on Minister Companion, which the ordained ministers in your congregation can access.

Reprint of Autumn 2017 Vision Newsletter

A GROWING RELATIONSHIP: ANNOUNCING A NEW SCHOLARSHIP SUPPORT PROGRAM

Six years ago, re Charitable Ministry started to engage with Kings Children Home in Belmopan, Belize for the first time. As Stanley, the local project coordinator admitted many years later, “You guys were such a small group, we weren’t sure you would be coming back.” This statement was as much based on our – admittedly – small size, as it was based on experiences Stanley had made before. While all help is welcome and appreciated, he had noticed that various other groups faded away after one or two project visits, leading him to assume that maybe this was just the way things go.

However, from the day re Charitable Ministry started its work, we were committed to one thing – transforming relationships for both, our partners and our participants.

Fast forward six years and our last project discussion with Stanley sounded quite different. Not only did he commend our participants for their deep commitment and hard work, but one statement in particular touched us: “Today I don’t have to wonder anymore whether you are coming back, but can focus on discussing with you where our home, and our children, are going strategically.”

Moving into their new facility in 2013, the last years were dominated by many construction-focused projects; and while this will continue for some time, the team at KCH also shared some of their concerns and thoughts for the future with us. With the main building construction coming to a completion, some of the past donors are starting to pull back, their commitment fulfilled. However, running the new facility and the number of children assigned to KCH on an ongoing basis, requires resources as well. Government stipends for each child only cover half or less of the average operating cost for each child; core donors make up most of the rest, with a growing number of self-sustainability projects (their freshly baked cinnamon rolls are delicious!) plugging gaps in the operating budget on an increasing basis. One key project in this context was the rainwater retention system installed by our teams in 2017.

In our most recent discussions with Miss Leonie, the founder of KCH, we asked her where she sees the greatest need in the coming years. Much to our surprise her answer had nothing to do with any infrastructure or operating needs anymore: “high school scholarships” was her simple reply. While each child is provided free education until the end of primary school (grade 9 in Belize), this does not extend to high school anymore. And while continuing to high school is not necessarily the best choice for each child, there is a deep desire by Miss Leonie to somehow enable those students who qualify and are interested in completing high school,

to do so. But with an average cost of 800 Belizean dollars (USD400) per student for a year of high-school coursework, this often exceeds the funding currently available.

For the past years, our relationship with KCH has been growing and changing as a result. Today, we feel that we are a small part of the lives of these children and the home. We realize that only a limited number of our members have the opportunity to spend time with these children in person. For those of you who either want to continue your relationship with the kids at KCH or participate in their lives even though you cannot participate in a visit, we are excited to announce our new **KCH Scholarship Support Program!**

As part of this program we will offer a limited number of one-year donation opportunities, either as a one-time contribution of \$400, or a monthly donation of \$33.50, specifically geared towards supporting an eligible student at KCH for one-year of high school. For further details, and to participate in this program, please visit **<https://recharitableministries.weshareonline.org/>** or email us at **re.charitableministry@nac-usa.org**

Reprint of Autumn 2017 Vision Newsletter

HOLY DAYS

With the season of Advent, our Church calendar began once again. As you may know, it is a generally accepted practice among many Christian churches to bring focus on various themes during the year, but especially to prepare for and highlight the Christian holy days.

It begins with the anticipation of the birth of Christ – God’s incarnation into this world. This momentous action by the almighty God opened the way of salvation and forever changed the history of the world. The celebration of Christmas is followed by Epiphany as we enter into the new year.

As the year unfolds, we take up the themes of *Jesus is the salvation of the world* in January and *Jesus the Teacher* in February, all leading to the season of Passiontide. During this period, our thoughts turn to Christ’s teachings leading up to His Passion, and we are inspired to especially look within ourselves as we contemplate His impending final days, suffering, and sacrifice. Palm Sunday begins our focus on Holy Week and the final days leading to the Last Supper and the celebration of Holy Communion with the disciples. The week concludes with the trials and bitter suffering of Jesus until His last moments.

The scene drastically changes as we joyfully celebrate the Risen Christ on Easter Sunday and the ensuing days of His activity in His resurrected body moving to His Ascension. Thus, we come to the final days before the establishment of His church and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the feast day of Pentecost.

Now we come to a special joy – this special holiday will be the highlight of our year here in the USA district. Our Chief Apostle and all the district apostles and helpers worldwide will be with us in Washington, D.C. for this divine service. It will be a great celebration to which all are invited! Our website will provide you with up-to-date information on this event, including service venue location, registration, arrangements, hotel availabilities, etc. Please also be aware of information in the coming months about additional activities during the Pentecost weekend.

So, you see we have a wonderful year ahead. Let’s continue to grow in our knowledge of Christ and strive to remain faithful to the One who has always loved us!

Reprint of District Apostle’s introduction letter from Winter 2017 Vision Newsletter

MARTIN LUTHER: GOD'S SERVANT

Who is Martin Luther? Most people know him as the one who nailed the Ninety-five Theses to the door of the Wittenberg Castle Church in Germany or as someone who initiated the Reformation. While both of these facts are true, Luther was much more, and is actually relevant to us today as Christians and New Apostolics.

Martin Luther was born in 1483 and grew up in a devout Roman Catholic home. To appease his father, Luther studied to become a lawyer, graduating with a bachelor's and master's degree by the age of 22. However, God had a different plan for him. During one of his travels, Luther found himself caught in a severe storm. Fearing for his life, he cried out to St. Anne, promising to become a monk if he was saved. And so, Luther left law and joined an Augustinian monastery. He threw himself into the study of Scripture, so much so that the other monks teased him about being a walking Bible concordance. This change to his life path led him to examine many aspects of the Catholic Church.

As Luther grew in his commitment to Christ and his knowledge of Christ's teachings, he began to notice things within the Church did not seem to fit with what he knew about Christ and the gospel. These contradictions began to affect his relationship with the Roman Catholic Church and changed his relationship with God.

After years of study, preaching, and intense prayer, Luther began to realize that the Church needed reform. Luther did not intend for his work to divide the Church; actually, his posting of the Ninety-five Theses was simply the custom used to initiate a scholarly discussion. But some of the students, unbeknownst to him, took his theses, translated them into German, and distributed them to the people. His message spoke to people and ignited the desire for extreme reform that some felt the Roman Catholic Church needed. The lower classes, who had limited worth with the Roman Catholic Church, especially identified with Luther and his concern over the sale of indulgences in the Church (indulgences were payment to reduce the amount of punishment one had to undergo for their sins). Further, Luther believed that the grace of God accepted in faith, not works, could make you righteous in the eyes of God.

Eventually these concerns led him to write and post the Ninety-five Theses on October 31, 1517. With this document, he expounded on the abuse of power in the Church and catalyzed what would become the Protestant Reformation. After many years and many arguments with other theologians and preachers who followed Luther into the Reformation, the Church divided. Up until then, the Church had always been the Roman Catholic Church, but was

now divided into many different denominations of Christianity, and even continued dividing throughout history.

In 1521, Luther was declared a heretic and was excommunicated from the Church because of his work. Luther was not interested in apologizing or discontinuing his work in order to get back into the good graces of the Church. He was firmly committed to exploring what Scripture taught about being a Christian.

“Faith is a living, daring confidence in God’s grace, so sure and certain that a man could stake his life on it a thousand times.”

Martin Luther

When Luther was in hiding after his excommunication, and into his later years, he worked towards establishing a church that was modeled after the first church we find in the New Testament. Luther knew it was essential that all believers were seen as equally valuable members of the body of Christ, regardless of status, education, and class. This belief, and further teachings and understandings from Luther, became the foundation for parts of our doctrine and have influenced the culture of our own Church.

Because Luther thought it was vital that all people have access to Holy Scripture, he translated the New Testament, and later the Old Testament and Apocrypha, into German. This was an important endeavor because before this, the Bible was only published in Latin, which was a language that only scholars and clergy knew. With the Bible now translated into German, and with the help of the newly invented printing press, it was accessible to all people. Educated or uneducated, Christians could read the Bible for themselves in their own language for the first time. However, this did not mean that Luther gave less value to the preached Word.

Luther believed in what he called the “external Word.” This means that, not only should we read the Word of God ourselves, but it should also come to us externally through preaching, hearing it read aloud, and even through song. This allows Scripture to confront and challenge us without being immediately filtered through our sinful minds. Therefore, when the Word of God is preached, it is a powerful tool of personal transformation and speaks to the gathered believers. Luther believed that increasing our knowledge of Scripture – both personally and even more important, corporately – was important for the Christian life.

Another facet of this church that Luther desired to establish was congregational singing. Not only did congregational singing provide time for the believers to collectively worship God, but Luther also viewed it as a valuable tool to help each believer better understand God. His thoughts about music are expressed in his statement: *“Experience proves that next to the Word of God only music deserves to be extolled as the mistress and governess of the feelings of the human heart.”* For Luther, singing was also a way for people to orient themselves to the Word of God, as many hymn lyrics are based on Bible verses. He wrote many hymns himself, including “A Mighty Fortress is our God.”

Luther's life was not just defined by his work in the Reformation, but also by the importance that he placed on his role as a husband and a father. Not expecting to ever marry or have children, Luther deeply embraced this part of his identity. His marriage and relationship with Katharina von Bora was a display of deep love and their dependence on Jesus Christ. Regarding marriage, Luther said, *"But over and above all these is married love, that is a bride's love, which glows like a fire and desires nothing but the husband. She says, 'It is you I want, not what is yours: I want neither your silver nor your gold; I want neither. I want only you. I want you in your entirety, or not at all.' All other kinds of love seek something other than the loved one: this kind wants only to have the beloved's own self completely."* He expressed a deep love and tenderness towards his children, spending time in daily Biblical devotions with them, which he expressed as much a teaching for him as for them. He very publicly shared what it meant to depend on his Savior in the midst of trials as he grieved the loss of two of his daughters.

Luther was a scholar, a monk, a theologian, a husband, a father. He was also just a normal, sinful, fallen human being. Even a small study into his life reveals many faults: his anger, his sharp tongue, and some writings later in life against the Jewish people. But Luther was used by God to change the world. He inspired change in the Church that has carried through centuries. When we reflect on Luther's life, we see how the gospel was alive in him. Let us also live our lives aligned to God's Word and will, and be on fire for the gospel.

*"I have held many things in my hands, and
I have lost them all; but whatever I have
placed in God's hands, that I still possess."
Martin Luther*

*Research for this was article was largely based on "Luther: A Visual Book" by Stephen McCaskell and Aaron Armstrong, and "Luther on the Christian Life" by Carl R. Trueman

Reprint of Winter 2017 Vision Newsletter

CARING FOR OUR MINISTERS

We are rich in Christ! This is our theme for 2019.

I would like to focus this letter on one aspect of this wealth – the many ministers in our congregations. Nearly all of our servants are lay-ministers, i.e. unpaid by the church for their ministerial activity. Their driving motivation is the love they have for Christ and for those who Christ loves. Hence, they give many hours of their lives to serve in manifold ways in our congregations, setting aside time from their families, professions, and personal lives. It is a noble calling to serve in ministry, notwithstanding, it also requires a sacrifice, which at times is neither understood, nor appreciated.

From time to time, I have received complaints that “my minister *never* visits me” or “he is not available during the day for my calls.” Brothers and sisters, do you realize that these servants must balance all the elements of their lives in an environment completely different from the one that we lived in during the 60’s, 70’s, and 80’s? The professional demands of their time are far more onerous and the increased pressures, wrought by the advancing technologies, are at times, unbearable. Just a few examples:

- Emails demand replies in minutes in comparison to letters, which took days or even weeks to arrive, let alone be answered and returned.
- Before cell phones were common, we would call home or office phones and if the person was not there, we would simply wait until later that day, or the next day to call them back. Now, with most people owning a cell phone, we expect that our calls are answered immediately and 24 hours a day.

I believe that for our ministers to serve Christ effectively, they must have a balanced life between family, careers, personal life, and ministry. Our ministers want to provide pastoral care for you in the love of Christ, and I believe that they try to do the best they can. But as members, we cannot have unreasonable expectations of them.

Let’s reflect back to an understanding brought to us by Chief Apostle Urwyler of self-responsibility. It is important that every Christian recognizes that:

- I am solely responsible for my soul’s welfare and more importantly, my relationship with Jesus Christ.
- The word of James 5:16 – *The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man [believer] avails much...* means that all sincere prayers are accepted before God. The Chief Apostle Leber said, quite openly, that his prayers were not of higher merit than another’s.

- God has provided me servants to *help along the way*. They are not here as a crutch or to make my decisions for me, but rather to pray that the Holy Spirit may guide my path according to the Lord's will.

Serving Christ will never be convenient – it always requires a sacrifice. Let's support and care for our ministers, as they care for us, and express our gratitude to God for these gifts in our congregations!

Reprint of District Apostle's introduction letter from Winter 2018 Vision Newsletter

RICH AS A DISCIPLE OF CHRIST

Once again, the motto for the year will prove to be an abundant resource of spiritual thought and consideration. Already in the opening-of-the-year divine service, we learned of the wealth of God, the Father, Jesus Christ, the facilitator of this wealth, and the teaching activity of the Holy Spirit on how we can obtain it. We received a clear outline, that to receive the riches of God one must:

Believe in Jesus Christ and then, in humbleness,

- Follow His word and teachings,
- Use our gifts to serve,
- Give up what is not necessary for the kingdom,
- Bring our offerings in gratitude and trust, and
- Accept those whom He has sent.

Now let us merge this together with what the Chief Apostle's opening statement was in an interview about our church strategy:

We want to make people disciples of Christ!

The above actions also exactly align with the pathway to become a disciple of Christ. Thus, by striving to become a disciple of Christ, one can also avail themselves of His wealth.

But the story continues. As His disciples, we enjoy a certain lifestyle that is a rich benefit of the wealth that Christ shares with us. In this lifestyle, we see the characteristics of a true disciple of Christ. He or she:

- More deeply knows and understands God and His ways.
- Is confident they are loved by Christ, inspiring their courage.
- Recognizes the greatest advocate they have in Christ, as He was willing to take upon Himself the punishment from their sin and guilt.
- Enjoys contentment and serenity, whether naturally rich or poor.
- Appreciates their rebirth out of water and Spirit as a pledge of their inheritance.
- Delights in the support of those who surround them in the congregation.
- Is sure of the guarantee that they will be given everything they need to obtain the goal of faith.

Equipped in such a way, true disciples of Christ prove their discipleship by living according to the impulses they have learned from their example, Jesus, and as they were taught by the Holy Spirit. They have a necessary urge to share the riches they have received, just as Christ did, with their contemporaries and neighbors – doing good works, forgiving those who have caused them pain and sorrow, helping the needy, and sharing the ever-relevant gospel of Jesus. This they do because as disciples, they are confident that in giving out the riches of Christ, they will never become poorer, but only experience His joy and fulfillment in their lives and in the life to come.

Reprint of Spring 2019 Vision Newsletter

WONDERMENT

Today I would like to write about the word – **Wonderment!**

It is defined as a state of awed admiration or respect. I have always believed that the words *awe* or *awesome* should be reserved only for the acts and work of the almighty God, even as Jacob exclaimed in Genesis 28:17:

How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God...!

It is good for us to find ourselves in a state of awe or wonderment from time to time in considering the omnipotence of the triune God. Such was the case in the divine service from our Chief Apostle in Goslar, Germany on Pentecost. It was quite unique in that the message was not one of instruction nor admonishment. The message simply and beautifully revealed the wonderment of the person of God, the Holy Spirit, and celebrated His power on this earth among the believers of Jesus Christ across the ages. The sermon showed the incredible strength that has been, presently is, and will continue to be imparted into the hearts of people in the face of tragedy, suffering, and difficulty. The message did not create for us a list of what to do or what not to do, but rather, it evoked a true feeling of awe in what the triune God is doing. Further, the Pentecost divine service was a message of praise and adoration, the logical conclusion of experiencing such wonderment. As we perceive the greatness of God, we recognize our smallness, and yet, also His intensive concern for us.

Let us grow accustomed to such services. They are also necessary for our development and understanding of the kingdom. To grow in spiritual health means we need to deepen our knowledge of our Bridegroom, broaden our interest and love for those around us, and more keenly recognize the plan that the Divine has for each of us. These internal soul movements of astonishment cause us to stop, reflect, and inwardly confess:

How awesome is God, my Father! How limitless is His love for me!

What a grace that Jesus Christ always comes near me and wants to forgive me!

What strength there is in God, the Holy Spirit, to help me endure and overcome all that I must to be ready for the Lord's day!

And in conclusion, simply – **How rich I am!**

Reprint of District Apostle's introduction letter from Summer 2019 Vision Newsletter

HOPE IN CHRIST

Once more, a new year lays before us. Only God knows the content of the hours and days that we will encounter. Naturally, we want to have a bright and positive outlook considering what is to come. We wish for health, success, and good things to happen; there is nothing wrong about such wishes, and we know, with God, all things are possible. In this regard, we are mindful of what Paul said in 1 Corinthians 15:19 - *If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable*. Perhaps this verse becomes a little clearer in a different translation: *If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied* (NIV). It is a strong, yet truthful statement that if we only rely on Christ for things of this life, we have missed what His divine, and eternal, intention is for us.

On the other hand, it is also in our human nature to look towards the future negatively, with fear of the unknown, dread for an approaching concern, or anxiety over present shortcomings.

Let us consider a different perspective through the eyes of our faith. We approach each day with confidence and courage in the belief and knowledge that the almighty God, our Father, is with us! With such an understanding, we recognize the fact that whatever the day brings is of little consequence to us. When we live in the Spirit and abide in the environment of God's will, we live a life of freedom procured for us by Jesus, and our future is secure.

Here, the Magnificat of Mary, gives us the right attitude:

*My soul magnifies the Lord,
And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior.
For He has regarded the lowly state of His maidservant;
For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed.
For He who is mighty has done great things for me,
And holy is His name. (Luke 1: 46-49)*

Mary composed this prayer in a time of uncertainty, not knowing the full extent of God's plan. Yet, strengthened by her cousin, she remained resilient and exclaimed such a hymn of confidence.

It is wise for us to be aware that the time prior to the coming of Christ will, at times, be fraught with difficulty and tribulation, causing one to even question the Lord's presence in their life, the church, or even His power in the world. At such times of disappointment and

misunderstanding, the evil one will attack with doubt, and try to create distance, damaging our relationship with the Lord.

As in the time prior to Christ's birth, this also occurred during His Passion with the disciples. We can imagine the dismay and confusion when Jesus told them of His impending captivity, torture, and death. How was this possible? It seemed everything was on a positive track. However, the intentions of God did not coincide with the ideas of the disciples, especially Peter, whom Jesus warned in Luke 22:31-32.

We live in a similar circumstance today. At one time, we thought the church would continue to grow and triumph in the circle of Christianity, and then the Lord would come. We may have thought that large numbers are a measure of success. But it becomes more and more apparent that the Lord's measurements for success are vastly different than ours. We can see this in the small number of disciples that He left when He ascended, and yet, from these, Christianity spread and has endured over 2000 years!

Dear ones, let us not be dismayed because we do not understand the ways of our eternal Father. He does not expect us to understand. He simply has called us for His mission; to do what Jesus Christ commissioned His apostles to do...

**Preach the gospel.
Make disciples of all people.
Prepare for His return.**

This is our task and we will continue in it.

Yes, we do not know what the future days will bring, but this we do know: over the past years, under the activity of the Holy Spirit, the Lord has always allowed us the opportunity to grow and become closer in our relationship with Him. One knows it and can feel it! Let us not become tired in advancing the mission He has given us, even if we cannot understand or comprehend His entire plan. The Lord is with us, come what may.

We join with the psalmist - *Whenever I am afraid, I will trust in You...in God I have put my trust; I will not fear* (Psalm 56:3-4).

Thus, we rest in our hope in the Lord. This is not wishful thinking, but a true hope in the biblical sense - the confident expectation in the fulfillment of the Lord's promise:

I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also.
(John 14:3)

However, even as we look towards this future, Jesus wants to fulfill this word already today! Believing souls, *here and now*, can perceive His presence in the prefiguration of His kingdom as we share in the fellowship of Holy Communion. Our desire to live in this promise, *that where I am, there you may be also*, is articulated in our plea – *Your kingdom come!*

So, while we wait to be with the Lord, in the most complete and perfect way when He comes, we can already tangibly experience that He is with us already today. May this give us strength, courage, and confidence as we look into the year ahead.

Reprint of District Apostle's introduction letter from Winter 2019 Vision Newsletter

Culture

*Spiritual and
Theological
Teachings*

PERSPECTIVE: LITURGY OF A DIVINE SERVICE

With the recent changes in the Liturgy, some members may be uncomfortable or confused as to when to close their eyes and when to look to the minister. Before examining each component of the Liturgy individually, we should start with the idea that no one should feel uncomfortable during these very important ministrations. If someone would like to continue closing their eyes during the Absolution, Consecration of the Elements and Benediction as was our old tradition, they are welcome to do so. However, if we look carefully at the purpose of each of these Holy Acts, we may find a new comfort zone that enhances our experience during the divine service.

Absolution: This is actually not a prayer, but a proclamation of the grace of God directed to you and me as believers in Jesus Christ. This message is very personal. God offers us forgiveness for every sin great and small, and His peace to replace our guilt and remorse. The minister is authorized to declare this to us in the name of Jesus Christ by our apostle. It is God speaking to us through His servant and we can be comfortable looking into his eyes just as we do during the sermon.

Eucharistic Prayer: The Absolution is followed by the Eucharistic prayer. As in all prayers, it is customary for us to bow our heads, fold our hands and close our eyes. This is a very important prayer. The minister speaks to God on our behalf and captures our feelings to God as we approach the sacrament of Holy Communion. He brings our collective thanks to God for the gift of grace made possible through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. During this prayer we are reminded of His suffering for us. The minister expresses our joy that in Holy Communion we will be in the presence of His Son and share in the power that made Him victorious over sin and death. He speaks of our desire and commitment to struggle against our sins in the future and to experience eternal communion with Him one day. It is so important that we are “present” during this moment.

Consecration of the Elements for Holy Communion: Like the Absolution, this is not a prayer. First the minister, in the name of the Triune God, consecrates the natural elements and lays into them the power of Christ’s eternally valid sacrifice. He then speaks to us the words of our Savior. We are now in the presence of Jesus Christ and He reminds us that He gave His body and blood freely for our eternal life and asks us to take His life into our lives. And finally, He reminds us that when we partake of this meal, we are proclaiming our belief in Him and His return. These are the most intimate and loving words that can be spoken to us and again, we can be comfortable looking into the eyes of the minister who says them on behalf of the Lord.

Celebration of Holy Communion: When we partake in Holy Communion, made possible through faith and the forgiveness of sins, we are commemorating Jesus' sacrifice for us and thus, are able to have fellowship with Him through Holy Communion. Because Holy Communion is an act of fellowship, we keep our eyes open when we look at the minister who dispenses it to us.

Benediction: This is not a prayer but rather a declaration of blessing to us by God as we prepare to leave His house. He promises to accompany us in the future with the continuing elements of the Trinity, the grace of Jesus, the love of God and the continuing, ever present comfort of the Holy Spirit. This is quite a promise and we can once again be comfortable looking into the eyes of the minister who proclaims this closing message to us from God.

The minister is talking to and making pronouncements of the Lord to us in these important parts of the service, so it is appropriate to keep our eyes open for them. We want to receive these messages, so if we feel comfortable doing so, we can look at the one who is delivering them.

Reprint of Autumn/Winter 2014 Vision Newsletter

PERSPECTIVE: FUNERAL AND MEMORIAL SERVICES

Over the years, our once traditional funeral service has evolved into two different forms with names and distinctions that may seem vague or confusing. I would like to clarify our understandings and practices based upon the direction of the Catechism while allowing for flexibility as needed for unique circumstances.

In general, we have come to distinguish a “funeral” service from a “memorial” service based upon the presence of the deceased’s earthly remains. In a “funeral” service the earthly remains were present and an interment followed the service. In a “memorial” service, the earthly remains were already cared for by burial or cremation.

However, the Catechism states that a funeral service is a word service which provides comfort and strength for the bereaved. This service also commends the immortal soul of the deceased to the grace of God. The Catechism further states that the presence of the earthly remains or the method of interment (burial or cremation) has no bearing on the purpose of the service or upon the soul’s future resurrection.

Therefore, let us conclude that every New Apostolic member is entitled uniformly to a funeral service.

In addition (but not as a matter of course), a memorial service may also be an appropriate option in the time that follows the funeral service under certain circumstances:

- The family desires a private funeral service with the immediate family and then wishes for a memorial service in a larger venue for the greater congregation of friends and loved ones or for those needing to make travel arrangements from long distances.
- The funeral service is held where the deceased lived and a memorial service is conducted in another part of the country where the deceased lived previously.

Reprint of Autumn/Winter 2014 Vision Newsletter

PERSPECTIVE: FORGIVENESS OF SINS

In the international District Apostle Meeting in March of this year, Chief Apostle Schneider shared some thoughts concerning the forgiveness of sins and the importance it has in our spiritual lives. There are four main parts to this teaching:

1. Preparing for the absolution moves us forward in the sanctification process

Before our sins can be forgiven, there are a few things we must do, and this process strengthens us spiritually. To be forgiven for our sins, we must first **be aware** of them. This requires an intense reflection and examination of ourselves. Set aside time for yourself before the time of absolution to recognize and reflect on your transgressions. Following the recognition of our sins is our **confession to God**. In the confession, we can show God we know what our sins are and that we feel guilt over them. The Chief Apostle said, *“Confession is a great way to counteract false excuses that we invent ourselves.”* After our confession, we can **repent** for what we have done and make a resolution to do and be better. Repentance might be seen as the last preparatory step to forgiveness of sins, but there is actually one more thing we are implored to do; this is to immediately **start the reconciliation process** with our neighbor. By doing this, we can show to God that we are committed to our resolution to better ourselves. These four steps, done in preparation for each divine service, help us move forward in our sanctification, developing us more and more to become like Christ.

2. Forgiveness of sins advances our spiritual well-being

The absolution not only erases our sins, it also assures us of the peace of Christ when we hear the words at the end of the absolution, “The peace of the Risen One abide with you.” Hence, we are reminded of three truths that are indispensable to our spiritual well-being:

- a) The forgiveness of sins confirms God’s constant love for us. He does not reject us for our sins and therefore, forgives us.
- b) We experience the victory of Christ over evil. Our sins are able to be forgiven because of Christ’s sacrifice. Chief Apostle Schneider said, *“The evil one can still make us fall, but he cannot separate us from the love of God.”*
- c) With forgiveness of sins, our guilt is voided. Without the burden of our guilt, God allows us to have a fresh start.

3. Forgiveness of sins strengthens the unity of the children of God

We also need to consider the communal aspect of forgiveness of sins, which strengthens our fellowship as children of God. Together, the congregation confesses their sins by singing the repentance hymn and praying with each other the Lord's Prayer. In this open confession, each one publicly acknowledges their sin and admits that one is not better than another brother or sister. When the congregation says together, "deliver us from the evil one," in the Lord's Prayer, it signifies that all are joined together in the fight against the evil one. We pray and hope for each one that we can overcome temptations and fight sin. After the Lord's Prayer, we hear the absolution together. This confirms not only that our individual sins have been pardoned, but also that my brother and sister's sins have been pardoned. When we experience repentance and forgiveness of sins together, we grow stronger in our relationships with each other. This is a major element of our "Joy in Christ." We can be joyful that not only are our individual sins forgiven, but that the sins of our brothers and sisters are forgiven.

4. Forgiveness of sins is indispensable in preparing for Holy Communion

The forgiveness of sins is necessary for our worthy partaking of Holy Communion, which is crucial for our salvation and for us to live in Christ. Forgiveness of sins is an important step before Holy Communion because we must be pure in order to have communion with Christ. Holy Communion is for those who are committed to turn away from evil and follow Christ, and through the repentance of our sins, we are honoring this commitment. Holy Communion allows the congregation to also be in fellowship with one another, while we commune with Christ. The Chief Apostle said, "*True communion is only possible if [the congregation] has forgiven each other.*" Our desire to reconcile with one another is necessary for us to partake in Holy Communion together. Because Holy Communion is an indispensable part of our spiritual lives, we need to put in the work to prepare ourselves to have our sins forgiven.

We can see, through this understanding from Chief Apostle Schneider, that the forgiveness of sins is much deeper than we may have thought or felt. It is not just a brief moment in the divine service, but rather is something that involves our preparation for the divine service, our sanctification, our spiritual well-being, our unity, and our worthy partaking of Holy Communion.

Reprint of Autumn 2015 Vision Newsletter

ARE WE STILL WAITING FOR THE LORD?

Many of us can probably remember a time within the church when more attention was given to events of the future. More discussion and elaboration was dedicated to describing phrases like the Wedding Feast in Heaven, the Man-child, the Woman Clothed with the Sun, and the Thousand Years of Peace, than we experience today. All of these phrases describe future concepts that follow the First Resurrection or return of Christ. Often in the past we have also clung to certain phrases, such as waiting for “the last soul” and for “the numbers to be fulfilled,” while we “wait for the Lord.” These mottos-of-sorts help us put complex meaning into simple lines. Many of the phrases we have embraced in the New Apostolic Church have been about the doctrine of future things, and this is not surprising considering that the commission of the Apostles, a defining ministry of our church, “is to prepare the church of Christ for the reunion with Jesus Christ at His return.” (CNAC 10.1.3) In an earlier section, the catechism states more comprehensively:

Jesus Christ Himself directly gave His church only one ministry, namely the Apostle ministry. In His stead and by His commission, the Apostle ministry is to build the church and make redemption in Jesus Christ accessible to human beings who long for salvation. Furthermore, the Apostle ministry is mandated to prepare believers for the return of Jesus Christ. (CNAC 7.4)

But the importance of the return of Jesus Christ raises the question, why does it seem like the Lord’s coming is being spoken about less? We might think, “I never hear those familiar phrases of hope and anticipation anymore. **Are we still waiting for the Lord?** This expectation is what I live for and die hoping in!”

I would like to shed some light on this concern by reorienting our focus onto the preparation aspect of waiting. We must shift from “waiting for the numbers to be fulfilled” to the preparing of the bride—a “ripening” of souls as Chief Apostle Leber once put it. We are not in the business of checking souls through the gate, but rather forming the people of God into citizens of His kingdom. The Apostles’ work is focused on the Lord’s coming, but there is much that needs to take place before that day. They help the souls to prepare, or “ripen”, before the day of the Lord so that all can have access to salvation. This is the function of the Apostles.

Sometimes I have seen excitement of the future kingdom function like a pacifier. It may be used to dull the pain of current struggle or burdens. We might say, “I struggle with illness now, but I will be happy and healthy in Heaven.” In so doing, we reduce life to a waiting

period, as if we have already bought the ticket, and simply wait for departure. We have to move away from this understanding. As Chief Apostle Schneider said in Miami last year, “We have this strong desire. We want to become like Jesus and we suffer because we are not yet like Jesus.” Later in the year in Venezuela he said something similar, “We suffer because we were disobedient towards God.” God reveals something similar through Micah to Israel and Judah of His love and justice shown in the form of discipline. Struggle is a formative exercise. Struggle is not simply there to build the anticipation for pending relief (though it does that also). Struggle can drive us towards righteousness that comes by grace and faith. All this is clear when we recognize ourselves as sinners in need of serious reform to be like Christ. Let us also reflect on the special Bible verse that Chief Apostle Schneider gave for the USA in the Woodbury service this year out of Isaiah 44:21. The Chief Apostle told us to remember that we have to struggle to be saved. Let us also keep in mind the words of Jesus to the disciples on the Mount of Olives: *But he who endures to the end shall be saved.* (Matthew 24:13) Yes, we have to struggle, but if we can endure this struggle, we shall be saved.

No one can be worthy just by talking about or hoping for the day of the Lord. In divine services and in our small group discussions, when we hear and talk about how to transform ourselves into Christ, we are actually still focusing on the Lord’s coming. The words “Lord’s coming” or “second coming” might not actually be spoken, but we have to learn how to ready ourselves for His coming, and we do that by learning how to model our lives on Him.

So are we still waiting for the Lord even if we don’t talk about it as much as we used to? YES!

We are waiting and also **preparing** for the Lord’s coming. This is the focal point of our future, but in order to prepare for our future, we need to work on our current selves and the world we find ourselves in right now.

So if waiting for the Lord’s coming is really about preparing, what are we doing today to refine ourselves to be ready for the Lord’s coming?

- Thinking back on Chief Apostle Schneider’s thoughts on Isaiah 44:21, ripening our souls for the Lord’s coming is not something that always happens easily, it requires us to struggle and persist in our learning and growing.
- We can pray for the Holy Spirit to guide us so that we may be prepared for the Lord’s coming.
- From Isaiah 44:21, the Chief Apostle also told us to remember that we are called to serve God in whatever situation we find ourselves in. Being able to serve God and others before ourselves at any point in our lives is a sign of the ripening of our souls.
- We can grow in our small group discussions with our brothers and sisters. In these discussions we learn more about Christ and how we can strive, individually and as a community, to become more like Him in our everyday deeds.
- To ripen our souls, we can extend the divine service experience, starting with the worship before a divine service. We can realize that it is not just about the song that’s being played, but rather is about the worship of our great God and expressing to Him

our thankfulness, joy, and awe. By participating in the worship before service, we can prepare ourselves to receive God's word, which we can then reflect on and apply to our lives after the service is done.

In the past few years our understanding has further developed regarding our life of faith. Through these teachings, we have deepened our understanding of Christ and this prepares us for His return, and we need to continue our journey forward.

The question posed earlier — are we still waiting for the Lord? — can be answered with a simple yes, but we must see the activity that runs alongside waiting for the Lord. To be prepared, we must struggle to be ripened by the Holy Spirit. Micah poses rhetorically, “*And what does the Lord require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.*” (Micah 6:8) Let us not **simply** wait for the Lord, but struggle towards being a holy people prepared to stand with our Lord when He returns. Let us prepare for the Lord, spending our time discussing and acting upon how we can become more and more like Jesus.

Reprint of Winter 2015 Vision Newsletter

TRUST IN GOD: A MATTER OF LOVE

In the US, there is a tradition of public trust in God. On our currency we see the inscription “In God We Trust.” Likewise, on certain public buildings like courthouses, we find similar inscriptions. But it’s interesting to dig into the history of these traditions. We find that very often they were inspired during times of great national stress and uncertainty. These were times when the very survival of the nation was in question and the answers did not seem humanly possible. When human solutions were exhausted, people often turned to God in desperation. King David voiced this sentiment so powerfully when he found himself facing only bad choices: *“Let me fall into the hands of the Lord.”* (1 Chronicles 21:13)

This picture brings to mind the team building exercise some organizations use to inspire trust between fellow workers. An individual is encouraged to fall blindly backwards into the waiting arms of team members. Anyone who has tried this can testify of the uncomfortable sensation of dependency that is experienced at the moment of truth.

In a similar way, Jesus spoke of this relationship also in the 6th chapter of Matthew. He describes the simple existence of the birds of the air and the lilies of the field who are dependent on God who cares for their every need. He continues:

Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble. Matthew 6:31-34

But why is it that we rediscover this simple truth often only during the darkest moments within our own lives? Why are we so often resistant to being dependent on God? Why does it take a crisis to turn back to Him? Why is He so often our last resort?

There is no single answer to these questions. We can point to many factors. From day one of mankind’s creation, God gave the gift of free will and independence. He placed within our capabilities the gifts of reason and resourcefulness. Trust is a choice and within this choice lies the possibility to be seduced by our own resourcefulness and knowledge. The evil one exploited this human tendency in the Garden of Eden: *You will not surely die. For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.* (Genesis 3:4-5) To become “Godlike” to ourselves is a constant temptation.

We also receive many messages during our life encouraging us to become independent and self-reliant. As children, we were rewarded for these traits and accomplishments. The trend continues throughout our adult lives. Recognition and financial rewards often come to us as we become more resourceful and knowledgeable. These discoveries shape our thinking and make us vulnerable to a great miscalculation that we see described in Revelation: *Because you say, 'I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing'—and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked.* (Revelation 3:16) These are harsh words, but from God's perspective, we can recognize the simple truth.

Then, at the other extreme, there is another danger. Within the disappointments, disillusionment, or hardships of our human experience, it's possible to become cynical. We can become convinced that no one can be trusted. In this condition of mind and soul, we superimpose these negative human characteristics we have experienced on God as though He too will act in a flawed human way. Seemingly, this leaves us no recourse but to trust only in ourselves.

So what is the prescription for trust in God? This could seem quite complicated, but let's put some simple truths in the right order:

- **God is trustworthy because He loves us.** There is no remedy for trust that does not begin with a recognition that God loves us completely and perfectly. He desires our eternal nearness and reconciliation and has made a solution path to make it so. His love is more powerful than our enemy and accuser, and His grace is greater than any sin or human condition. Within our New Apostolic Mission statement, we find these words "that all may feel the love of God." It is so critical that our congregations become the refuge for every soul regardless of their circumstances to experience the words of David, "Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good" (Psalm 34:8).
- **Jesus Christ is the outlet for God's love in our lives.** He is the solution path that brings us to eternal salvation. He is the evidence that God loves us so perfectly. We need Him and must be convinced that our lives are incomplete without Him. Our relationship with Him today brings the love of God into our lives and into the lives of our neighbors when we live in Him. We can depend on Him.

Before the birth of Jesus, we can examine the Old Testament teaching of Job regarding an almost inconceivable trust in God. Despite every hardship, disappointment, and injustice that makes up the human experience, Job declares these well quoted words: *The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; Blessed be the name of the Lord.* (Job 1:21) It's hard to imagine this degree of trust under the circumstances of his life. However, when we look deeper, we see that his trust is fueled by a powerful, prophetic belief in the coming victory of Christ: *For I know that my Redeemer lives, and He shall stand at last on the earth; and after my skin is destroyed, this I know, that in my flesh I shall see God.* (Job 19:25-26)

Likewise, Christ speaks simply and directly of His role to bring us into the love of God just hours before His death to His disciples: *for the Father Himself loves you, because you have loved Me, and have believed that I came forth from God.* (John 16:27)

And lastly we find this testimony from the Apostle Paul: *For when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet perhaps for a good man someone would even dare to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.* (Romans 5:6-8)

In conclusion, we should never underestimate the power we have to inspire trust in God within others. When we live in Christ, we live a life of love and compassion that affects those around us. As disciples, Jesus expects us to testify of Him and His Father through our love for one another. Please look around you. Equipped with the love of Christ, who can you inspire to trust God?

Reprint of Winter 2015 Vision Newsletter

BLESSING

Over the past year, we've heard in divine services, discussed in small groups, and heard in For Your Journey videos about blessing. Before last year, blessing may have been thought of as an increase in your life from God. Today, we have come to understand blessing as anything in your life that God gives to bring you closer to Him.

Chief Apostle Schneider explained this definition of blessing in the 2015 divine service out of Woodbury. He said we can experience God's love through the blessings He provides us with. With the Old Testament understanding of blessing, we would think that if we have a good job, a lot of money, or good health, then we must be richly blessed by God. And on the other hand, if we had no job, were poor, or were sick, then we were not blessed by God. Let's work on moving beyond this black-and-white definition of God's blessing by considering how God's love is connected to the blessings He gives us. God loves us so much that He created a plan to restore our relationship with Him. This plan of salvation involved sending His own Son to the earth to ultimately sacrifice His life for our sins. Jesus didn't come to give us a better life on earth, He came so that we could have eternal fellowship with God. When we think about how much God must love us so that He would send His Son to earth to die for our sins, then we can look at the blessings in our lives not as things of increase, but anything that might help to restore our relationship with Him.

What has happened in your life recently? You are the one with the power to decide if something is going to be a blessing in your life or not. God provides us with the strength to be faithful and everything we need to take the path that leads to Him. It is our decision to accept what God gives us and remain on this journey of salvation. Believe and trust in God's love that everything in your life, good or bad, has the ability to bring you closer to Him.

Reprint of Spring 2016 Vision Newsletter

DOCTRINE & THEOLOGY: ORIGINAL SIN / GOD'S ELECT

Original Sin or Inherited Sin?

Receiving the sacraments is part of being a Christian and they are a prerequisite for salvation. Because the sacraments are so essential to our understanding of Christianity and salvation, it is important that we deepen our knowledge of them. In this article, we are going to focus on Holy Baptism and the difference between original sin and inherited sin.

Holy Baptism with water dispensed in the Triune name of God allows us to enter into our first close relationship with Him. Through Holy Baptism, we become a Christian and part of the church of Christ. Baptism with water is an act of God that He alone does and it forever changes the relationship between God and a person. It is a true expression of His love for us.

Through baptism, original sin is washed away. This image of “washing away” brings to expression that God has removed the condition of permanent separation from Him that began with mankind’s fall into sin. With original sin removed from us, we can enter into a relationship with God. Even though original sin is washed away in Holy Baptism, we still have the propensity to sin. Referred to as “concupiscence,” the human inclination to sin persists after baptism as another consequence of the Fall. Concupiscence brings to light the brokenness that we all have as sinners, but it is also a reminder of our dependence on God and His grace in our lives.

Now that we understand that original sin is our permanent remoteness from God and that Holy Baptism washes away that permanence, we can look at what inherited sin means.

The term “inherited sin” was coined by Saint Augustine. His study of Scripture led him to believe that all of Adam’s descendants biologically inherited his sin through the sexual act of procreation, therefore equating sex with sin. Although we do not align with this concept, for many years, our church considered “inherited sin” to mean the sins we obtained from our parents and ancestors, which are washed away in our baptism. However, inherited sin cannot exist when we believe in the eternal love of God. In consideration of His limitless mercy, how could we reckon that He would allow a parent’s sin to pass on to their children when He allows each soul to have an individual relationship with Him? ***Thus, we no longer use the term “inherited sin.”***

Our relationship with God is the greatest gift of His grace. Once the connection is made with Him through baptism, it can never be severed. His love for us is so deep that even if we turn away from Him or become unfaithful, the opportunity for a relationship with Him, created by our baptism, will remain. How comforting it is that God expresses His love for us in this way!

**This article is written based on a presentation from the international church theologian, Dr. Reinhard Kiefer.*

God's Elect

Children of God who have been reborn out of water and the Spirit are elected for salvation. So what does it mean for us to be elected by God?

God calls all to salvation, but He determines the timing and the purpose that each person will have in His plan. God is sovereign, so He chooses whomever He wants, whenever He wants, without having to justify Himself. We see examples of timing and purpose when we look at the teachings of the Old Testament: God first called the people of Israel and He chose Noah for a specific purpose. Noah was elected by God in order to be saved from the flood. The people of Israel were elected by God in order to obtain His blessing and deliverance. In the New Testament, election takes on a slightly different understanding. In the new covenant, the salvation that comes from being elected by God means that we are liberated from sin and a path is opened to eliminate the separation between us and God. This salvation is only possible through faith in Jesus Christ.

Our story of salvation does not end after we are elected. Our election does not give us a free pass. We have to continue to make our election sure. What does this mean? It means accepting God's salvation and purpose in our lives. Noah did this by being faithful and obedient to his task of building an ark. The Israelites had to remain faithful to the Mosaic Law. Making our election sure is not determined by our own criteria, but rather by what God wants of us.

As part of the church of Christ, how can we make our election sure? As Noah and the Israelites did, we also want to demonstrate our faith and serve our God. We do this by bringing praise to God, being credible witnesses of His presence in our lives, following Jesus' teachings, and spreading His Gospel. We can see from these examples that serving God and others is at the crux of our faith. When we are elected by God, this not only means that we have been granted a path to salvation, *we are also called to do something, to serve Him*. James perfectly summarizes the importance of serving when he writes, *"For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also"* (James 2:26).

Another aspect of divine election is the election of the firstfruits. Being reborn out of water and the Spirit means that we have also been chosen to become firstfruits in God's kingdom. We can read in James 1:18, *"Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of **firstfruits** of His creatures."*

When Jesus Christ returns, He will come to seek the elect, both among the living and the dead. At that point, we have the opportunity to enter into fellowship with Christ without having to wait for the Last Judgement. This election also involves more than just being baptized in water and Spirit. We want to make our election sure by allowing ourselves to be prepared by the apostolate of Christ. We believe that, through the Holy Spirit, they discern God's will and bring Jesus' teachings to us in the divine services.

Being elected by God does not make us better than someone else. God is faithful to His promises and in His own time, He will see to it that every person is given the chance to be saved. Because we love God and He wants everyone to have salvation, we also desire the same thing. This is why we are called to spread the Gospel and our knowledge of God to those around us, so that they might also come to know Him and understand His offer of salvation. This is our mission as the church of Christ and God has always seen to it that the church is able to fulfill its mission on earth. With this knowledge and trust in our great God, we can accept His salvation and purpose in our lives by doing our part in His plan of salvation.

**This article is written based on thoughts from Chief Apostle Schneider.*

Reprint of Spring 2017 Vision Newsletter

MEDITATE ON THESE THINGS.

The universal message of the gospel speaks to our relationship to God, to one another, and to our salvation. This message is for all people and it is part of our responsibility to make sure that all people have the opportunity to come to know the gospel.

This requires that we talk to people, sometimes people we know and sometimes people we don't know. But when we approach people, to bring them this important message of the gospel, we have to first ask ourselves if we are credible witnesses of the gospel. After all, why should someone listen to us talk about the transformational power of the gospel if we don't demonstrate it and live as if we have been transformed through the gospel message? This means we have to be credible witnesses. Jesus says to His disciples in Luke 10, *He who hears you hears Me* (Luke 10:16). Our actions and our words should be able to tell the people around us that we are followers of Christ. Of course, as imperfect people, this is hard to do in every single action and in every single word, but it is something for which we strive.

We must especially be cautious with what we say over social media, where it sometimes seems that we are anonymous and that our words have little effect on those who read them. Again, we are called to be credible witnesses of the gospel, even on social media, and use our words in love and humbleness. We can watch over our words and make sure they conform to the will of Christ. Following are some thoughts from District Apostle Kolb to help us watch over our words.

"These are the times that try men's souls."

So was the sentiment expressed by Thomas Paine shortly before the American Revolution. They were turbulent times. And in some regard, it may also be said today of the environment in America. There is an abundance of provocative and controversial topics being heatedly debated at every level of society. It is easy to become passionate and caught up in the maelstrom of these discussions and voice our opinion.

The social media of today creates an environment unlike anything anyone has ever experienced before in history. Because of this network, I can, almost immediately, find myself in a "bubble" of thousands of people who think in the exact same way that I do, with the exact same preferences, the exact same opinions, biases, prejudices, etc. This can create a false sense of security and sometimes may even lead to aggressive behavior to those that are unlike me. More and more, instead of unifying, people are becoming more divisive, and sometimes, less understanding, less compassionate, less caring... Open,

unchecked expression, verbally or via social media, creates divisiveness in any group and I am concerned specifically for our congregations. Let us be cautious of what we “like” on this media. Galatians 3 reminds us we are one in Christ. This may mean we need to lay aside our nationalistic pride, our ethnicity, our gender, our self-righteousness for the sake of unity and peace.

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Please allow me to lay before you the words written by Apostle Paul in his letter to the Philippians, the fourth chapter, as a guidepost for us in these disparaging times and as a word of comfort.

Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice!

In everything, let us start with praise and the expression of our joy in Christ! We are His!

Let your gentleness be known to all men. The Lord is at hand.

The word gentleness has a few definitions - nobility, consideration, moderation, balanced, carefulness. We understand, as God’s children, that though deeply passionate for Jesus Christ, we are not radical, but rather moderate and stable in trying times, convinced of the Lord’s present nearness at all times. Gentleness also means wellborn; yes, we are born of God! And so we desire to behave as such to glorify His name.

Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God;

Again, the admonition not to be fearful, the Lord is at hand! Knowing this, with gratitude we make our requests known to God, our Father. Not fearful murmuring, not complaining, not overwhelmed with the “tempestuous seas” around us, but with stability, confidence and the assurance that He knows everything, can do anything, and will surely care for us according to His will.

...and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus...

What creates the peace of God? It is the security knowing His omnipotence, omnipresence, and omniscience is far beyond anything we can comprehend. This security *guards our hearts* from fear, apprehension, overwhelming concern and *our minds* that are confused, calculating dismal projections and prophecies fueled by the constant wave of information or our own paranoia. We must allow the Lord’s security in His peace to guard us! We receive this peace every Sunday in the absolution.

Finally, brethren, whatever things are true [God's word], ***whatever things are noble*** [Jesus Christ], ***whatever things are just*** [God's ways and decisions], ***whatever things are pure*** [love of God], ***whatever things are lovely*** [His creation], ***whatever things are of good report*** [the good news, the Gospel], ***if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy*** [the goodness of God revealed in each other, our neighbor, in the church] — ***meditate on these things.***

In other words, instead of being caught up in the clamor of the day, let us *occupy ourselves* with the good things of God, our Father, and thus, behave in the ways that bring honor to Him.

Here the old question applies – What would Jesus do? And further, what would Jesus want me to do? We align our understandings *and views* with the Gospel and we live according to the Gospel. By aligning to the Gospel in our life, sometimes Christ's teachings may coincide with a popular view or an opinion from a certain "side of the table." We can take a firm position for what is right, not because we align with a political party or the voice of the zeitgeist, but because and only because it is the teaching of Jesus, whom we love and follow. We stand with and align with Him, the same yesterday, today, and forever!

Notwithstanding, He has not called us to be radical in standing with Him; remember the lesson in the garden with Peter cutting the soldier's ear, where he acted impulsively because of his limited understanding at that point. God has called us to proclaim the Good News in word and in our lifestyle, by showing His love and interest for all by our conduct, conversation, etc. We cannot convert anyone. This work He alone does, as it is the product of His love and remains dependent on the free will of each individual. God allows opportunities, sometimes through problematic circumstances, to increase our compassion, to deepen our faith, to shine forth our joy, to share with our neighbor. These events are a chance to behave in a way that clearly demonstrates we are His!

Further, when we encounter someone with a different view than ours, we cannot judge them. Christ is very clear on this matter in Luke 6:37 - *Judge not, and you shall not be judged. Condemn not, and you shall not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven.* Again, judgement is left up to the Almighty One, as He alone knows all there is to know about each soul.

Let us not be swayed by the attitudes of others, but keep true and authentic to our childhood in Christ. Remember the exhortation of Paul in Romans 14. He speaks of the laws of liberty, but also of love:

Therefore, let us pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another... It is good neither to...do anything by which your brother stumbles or is offended or is made weak.

I do not advocate that we not participate in social media, but simply ask that we exercise caution in our communications and that we speak, even through social media, in a manner that glorifies God, our Father. Hence, self-responsibility and self-control are key factors here. Let us not act irresponsibly and thus, harm our brothers and sisters that we want to love and serve.

Yes, these are trying times, but equipped with the Gospel and the strength of Christ, we can navigate our path forward.

Reprint of Winter 2017 Vision Newsletter

JESUS CHRIST, THE ROCK

Recently, Kathy and I had the opportunity to see the church in this picture built on a mountain in Arizona. As I looked at how impressively this building was founded between the rock in this mountain, instinctively I began to hum an old choir hymn: ***On Rock that stands forever, the Church of Christ is built....***

Jesus Christ is the rock...as Apostle Peter states in Acts 4:11-12 – *This is the stone which was set at naught of you builders, which is become the head of the corner. Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.*

Thus, on His life, teaching, sacrifice, resurrection, and ascension, the Church of Christ is established on an unshakable foundation. Mountains and rock evoke a feeling of permanence, continuance, and resilience. Therefore, we are wise to build our life firmly on Him, our Rock.

This image also connects with this year's work to be *faithful to Christ*. We believe **Jesus Christ is in His Church** and that He, alone, **will finish** the Church.

...being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ... (Philippians 1:6)

This means:

- He has allowed us to be in His church for a purpose, and He will help us to fulfill that purpose, if we want this.
- We believe in His omnipotence and that, despite conditions without and within, He will accomplish His intention to bring souls to salvation.
- We realize Christ does not measure by numbers and success as we see it.
- We remain resolute in our determination to continue serving and giving, and are not discouraged by setbacks. In our deep love for Christ, we continue...

Being faithful to Christ means we will endure, as our brethren in the first church, without wavering. Thus the hymn completes with a firm resolution: ***...nor shall Thy strength diminish, nor we forget our aim, we know that Thou wouldst finish the Church that bears Thy Name!***

Reprint of District Apostle's introduction letter from Spring 2018 Vision Newsletter

FAITHFUL TO CHRIST

What does it mean to be faithful to Christ? First, we must recognize and understand – God is faithful to us!

How great is the faithfulness of our God? It's difficult to even comprehend God's faithfulness to us because He is perfect and He is love. Why would He stay faithful to us, people who are imperfect and oft times have a hard time showing love? But, even when we are faithless, He is faithful. He is interested in every soul – those who come near to Him and those who walk away.

Everything shows His faithfulness. Let us look at the lyrics of the hymn, "Great is Thy Faithfulness." Even the seasons, as the song says, show His faithfulness. The more we discover and understand how God is faithful to us, the closer we move towards our faithfulness to Him. This is not measured by how much we offer or how often we are in church, but rather by how much we are learning, growing, and transforming into the image of Christ.

So, let's ask ourselves: Am I faithful to God? Chief Apostle Schneider brought out four ways that we can demonstrate our faithfulness to God.

Follow Christ's example

In order to follow His example and conform to His image, we have to know about Him. This requires a culture of learning. The Lord wants to open new understandings of who He is and what He wants for us.

One example that Jesus set for us was how to pray. He teaches us about prayer in the Lord's Prayer and shows us examples through the many times He spent alone in prayer. Do our prayers parallel Jesus' prayers? Wouldn't it be nice if at the beginning of our prayers, we start in adoration and praise by expressing to God the ways that He is faithful to us, and *then* bring our intercessions and petitions?

Be constant in love

We want to both always dwell in His love and be unending in our love towards Him. Of course, this means that even in times of suffering, we are constant in our love. Christians will have suffering; Christ even foretold this in John 16:33.

We can read in 1 Corinthians 10:13: *No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it.*

God is always there to provide the way of escape or offer courage and strength to get through it. He is faithful, and that's why we remain constant in love.

His faithfulness also inspires us to have love towards each other. God wants us to share His love with other people, and so it is our sacred duty to do this. Because we have His Spirit in us, we have the love of Christ in us and we can love as He did, everlasting and directed towards all people (ref. Romans 5:5).

Constant in love...

One of the ways we are faithful to Christ is to remain constant in love to Him and to each other. In this regard, I am especially mindful of those who no longer walk together with us. May our constancy of love inspire us to remember and reach out to them – we are family!

Please let there be no strife between you and me... for we are brethren.

Genesis 13:8

Be willing to serve

What is our motivation to serve? Doing something because we have to is not a willingness to serve. Christ was willing to serve. Jesus calls us to be a witness of Him and that means our lifestyle is different. We have to keep moving or evolving our lives into what Jesus would want, and be willing to serve in all types of situations.

We all have been given gifts by God to do what He wants us to do. These gifts are given to us in order to serve one another. So let's always be asking ourselves: Am I doing what Jesus has asked me to do?

And maybe we already do serve when we have the opportunity, but we don't experience much success. Mother Teresa once said, "God has not called me to be successful. He has called me to be faithful."

Let us not be discouraged if we don't see positive results from our serving. We don't know God's plans; what we know is that we are called to do what He asks us to do.

Keep your promises

In the confirmation vow, we promise to renounce the devil. God doesn't expect us to live perfect lives, but He does want us to renounce sin, to push it away and resist when something is wrong, to give up the part of ourselves that rebels against God. This is all part of keeping our promises.

With the marriage blessing and vow, couples promise to glorify God through their marriage and let their relationship with Christ be a guide for their relationship with each other. In the vow made during the baptism blessing, parents promise to raise their children under the teachings of the gospel and to have a relationship with Christ. The Church is not responsible for us keeping these promises. We are responsible, so let's be faithful to God in this way and remain true to our promises.

Our faithfulness to God demonstrates who we are as Christians. Are we part-time Christians, where we only show love sometimes, or we only serve in situations that are convenient, or we only keep our promises if it suits us? Let our lives be a reflection that we are God's children and let us strive to always be faithful to Him.

*Great is Thy faithfulness, O God my Father
There is no shadow of turning with Thee
Thou changest not, Thy compassions, they fail not
As Thou hast been, Thou forever will be*

*Chorus:
Great is Thy faithfulness
Great is Thy faithfulness
Morning by morning new mercies I see
All I have needed Thy hand hath provided
Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me*

*Summer and winter and springtime and harvest
Sun, moon and stars in their courses above
Join with all nature in manifold witness
To Thy great faithfulness, mercy and love*

*Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth
Thine own dear presence to cheer and to guide
Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow
Blessings all mine, with ten thousand beside*

Looking at these lyrics, how is God's faithfulness expressed?
What else in your life is a sign of God's faithfulness to you?

Reprint of Spring 2018 Vision Newsletter

HOLY SEALING

And they continued... May these words bring to expression our forward determination and zeal after the wonderful Pentecost feast that we experienced. I was filled with gratitude and joy to see how many could come together to celebrate Pentecost and participate in the activities of the weekend. Thank you for your willingness to share the weekend with us and for your many prayers in preparing for this special event.

The Holy Spirit opened new understandings for all of us in this divine service.

With our Holy Sealing we received a:

- **Seal** – the assurance we belong to God and He will always receive and accept us.
- **Guarantee** – the assurance that *as long as we remain in an active, close relationship with God*, He will provide all that we need to enter His kingdom, despite the weaknesses that exist in the visible church.
- **Promise** – the assurance that we will experience the resurrection of our body and enter the kingdom of God. This is the foundation of our hope for the future.
- **Pledge** – the assurance that we can already today receive part of our inheritance in experiencing a foretaste of the Kingdom by going deeper into the knowledge of our Father in the divine word, feeling His presence in the sacraments, and growing in His unity in our fellowship.
- **Calling** – the task to praise and witness Jesus Christ to those around us and profess His gospel and His return.

In light of these wonderful assurances and tasks, let us keep the promises we have made to the Eternal One when we were baptized, sealed, and confirmed, and thus, prove our faithfulness to Christ. We live under His gracious benefits and spiritual blessings!

Reprint of District Apostle's introduction letter from Summer 2018 Vision Newsletter

WHAT IS SIN?

For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man's obedience many will be made righteous. Romans 5:19

Because of the fall of Adam and Eve, humans are born with *concupiscence*, the inclination to sin. Since this inclination is a part of our nature from the day we are born, we should take some time to try to understand sin and its effects on our lives.

What is sin? We may feel inclined to answer this question by reducing sin to an action we do or some words we say. But how do we know what a bad word or action is versus a good one? Who sets this standard? Even when we look at different societies or countries, we find different sets of laws and regulations. Which are correct? When we consider these questions, we can come to understand that sin is more complex than something that is “bad.” Sin is: a turning away from God. We can see that the definition also becomes the consequence of sin – we are turning ourselves away from our God. Every word or action that disorients us from God's will makes a mark on us that continually pushes us away from Him and warps us into a being He did not intend us to be.

In Romans 3:23, Paul wrote, *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God...* We need to understand that the sins we commit do not begin with just the things we do or say. Understanding our sin starts with who we are. We are not good people who sometimes sin. We are sinful people who sometimes do the right thing. It is a part of our nature. We are permanently in a state that is separate from God, because He can't be where sin is. We are sinners in need of a Savior. When we become aware of how much we *fall short*, we begin to comprehend our dependence on our Savior, Jesus Christ. It is through Him that this divide can be mended.

Before a person comes to know or believe in Christ, they cannot understand their need for a Savior. Unbelievers are trapped in sin because they either remain tolerable of their sin, or, without accepting Christ as their Savior, they think they can save themselves.

Believers in Christ understand that they are dependent on Him. When they accept Christ in their lives, they have to work to transform from their old, sinful nature into the new nature of Christ. The battle against sin, which tries to prevent that new creation from growing, is between the believer's old nature and their new nature. It's not just about the things you might do each day that are sins, but rather, that you are a sinner and that's why you do those

things. This fight between the old and the new nature is more than just trying to change our behaviors or actions, it is about changing who we are. It is possible to change our actions on our own. But we cannot change our underlying, sinful nature. To do that, we are completely dependent on Christ and His sacrifice. Only the power and freedom from sin we have through Him gives us the ability to overcome our nature and transform into His image. It's not about *doing* something, it's about *becoming* a new person in Christ.

When we come to the realization that we are sinners in need of forgiveness, we are led to confess our sins and to repent for them. Until we are made perfect through God's grace, we will always be sinners. Martin Luther, in his 95 Theses said, "Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ...willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance."

Reflecting on our sin and turning to Christ must become a daily practice or discipline.

Following Christ does not mean that we are just trying to be a good person or that we want to be nice to those around us. Following Christ means our sinful nature dies daily. But until His Spirit wholly consumes our old nature and we are re-joined with God, we will be sinners. Because of this, let us always humbly and joyfully embrace God's gift of repentance.

Reprint of Summer 2018 Vision Newsletter

WHAT IS REPENTANCE?

The Greek word for repentance is *metanoeo*, which means, “rethinking.” This evokes the idea of completely re-evaluating a matter, which then results in a change of one’s direction, condition, or behavior. Repentance is the act of being remorseful for what you have done, turning away from sin, and resolving not to return to that behavior.

In the pre-Reformation church, *metanoeo* was translated as “penance,” rather than repentance. Penance is an act of self-abasement or devotion performed to show sorrow or repentance for a sin. This interpretation implies that we are to pay retribution in some way in order to be in right standing with God. The concept of “penance” leads to the false understanding that when we do good works, we can attain some degree of righteousness before God; this is a dangerous path of thinking. Because of our sinful nature, there is **nothing** we can do to be worthy or righteous in God’s eyes. Only Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross and His payment for our sins avails us of the grace to be righteous before God.

Yet, repentance comes with a certain amount of suffering; we feel the weight and pain of our sin. When we contemplate that Jesus carried the weight of our sin to the cross, we feel remorse. With the realization that every sin separates us further from God, we recognize the need for His grace and the necessity of repentance to receive forgiveness, so we repent and run back to Him.

In 2 Timothy 2:24-25, we read: *...if God perhaps will grant them repentance, so that they may know the truth, and that they may come to their senses and escape the snare of the devil, having been taken captive by him to do his will.*

Therefore, we can appreciate repentance as a gift from God, which opens the way to forgiveness and a close relationship with Him. As we “rethink” and change our minds through repentance, we are led out of darkness, and, with God’s help, we allow the new nature of Jesus to unfold within us.

Repentance starts with **awareness**. Often, our sinful nature is not apparent to us. We must stop and take time, perhaps at the end of the day, to meditate, reflect, and examine our thoughts, words, and actions. It’s important to explore the underlying reasons for sinful words or actions. Maybe anger or bitterness causes us to speak or act in a way that is hurtful to others. Perhaps fear or doubt causes mistrust or jealousy, or envy leads to hostility, or selfishness creates apathy. We should compare ourselves to the example of Jesus in the

Scriptures and notice where we do not align with His nature. Self-examining in this way permits space for God to enlighten us to our sin, so that we become mindful of the sin and its effects on those around us. Only by realizing how far away we actually are from God can we take the steps to move closer to Him.

We find two examples of this God-inspired assessment in Genesis. In chapter 3, after Adam and Eve sin, *the Lord God called to Adam and said to him, "Where are you?"* (Genesis 3:9), and then in chapter 4, when God asks Cain, "What have you done?" to call attention to the terrible deed that Cain, in his self-righteousness, could not recognize. As human beings, we are sinners and therefore enemies of God and His righteousness. We are perpetually sinful; alone, we cannot climb out of this condition. As He questioned Cain, God questions why we have rebelled and fought against Him. Why have we again allied ourselves to the evil one after our Father has continually approached us with love and compassion? It is an act of grace that He questions us, so that we can see the true perspective of our being and recognize that we are far from Him. God is waiting to forgive us, but we must first see our true state so that we understand our dependence on His grace. We are running in the wrong direction and we need to turn back.

The intended result of the awareness of our sin is **remorsefulness**. Once we come to this understanding, we suffer because the relationship with our God and Father has been disturbed. We sink down into the realization of our sinfulness and distance from God, as David did (2 Samuel 12). We are humbled because we realize that we deserve nothing. We deeply mourn our sinfulness as it is juxtaposed with God's goodness and benevolence.

In this state of unrest and turbulence in our souls, we **confess** our sins to God. Confession is the natural progression as we come to the awareness of and remorsefulness for our sin. Apostle John wrote, *If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness* (1 John 1:9). This confession does not just happen in the moments of the Lord's Prayer in the divine service, but needs to be wrestled with daily in our prayers.

At our baptism or confirmation, we promised to renounce the evil one and surrender ourselves to the triune God. Remembrance of this promise inspires **our resolution** to keep fighting against sin. Our old nature resists this, but we fight on because we want the new life of Christ to emerge in us and extinguish the old nature that continually drives us away from the One we love. His love inspires a longing and willingness to change and evolve. Even though we may have resolved a hundred or thousand times before, we resolve once again because we know that God will not remember the sins He forgives.

As we experience God's everlasting love for us through the gift of repentance and forgiveness, we come to understand His wish for us to also **forgive others**. If we want to be close to God, we cannot let pride or self-righteousness stand in our way. Jesus clearly stated in Matthew 6:14-15: *For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.* Although we may have suffered an injustice or terrible offense from our

brother, sister, or neighbor, we are resolved to journey down the path toward forgiveness and seek reconciliation. We realize that if God forgives our many sins against Him, then surely, we can strive to forgive the transgressions of others.

Joined with all of our brothers and sisters, with anxious hearts, we express our confessions, feelings, and resolutions to the almighty God, our Father, in the Lord's Prayer. He, alone, is able to restore us and set us on the right path for His is *the kingdom, the power, and the glory, forever!*

With a deep longing, we wait for the comfort we find in the absolution. This is the assurance of God's forgiveness and His willingness to always give us a fresh start by the merit of Christ's sacrifice. This greeting of peace gives us the confidence that He will never forsake us, no matter how many times we fall. The words, "The peace of the Risen One be with you all," are like balsam that washes over our troubled souls, and, released from sin, we rest securely in the assurance that the Lord loves and accepts us once again.

Martin Luther, in his 95 theses, said, **When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, "Repent," He willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.**

The daily journey of realizing our sin and coming to repentance creates a tension in us because the old nature must be slain and supplanted by the new life of Christ. For this newness to grow, it is necessary for us to continually embrace God's gift of repentance.

Reprint of Autumn 2018 Vision Newsletter

EXPERIENCING PASSIONTIDE

We have entered into the season of Passiontide, the 40 days leading up to the Passion of Jesus Christ. It is a time acknowledged by most Christian churches for reflection, meditation, fasting, and prayer. Let's look at these four ways to experience this unique and interesting season.

Reflection – This is taking time to think and consider the incarnation and life of Jesus, and the wonder of God's plan to deliver us and have open access to eternal fellowship with Him. Perhaps some additional reading of the Gospels would enlighten and deepen our understandings of God's plan for mankind, and for you and me.

Meditation – Once we have looked deeper into the story of Christ, this discipline is where we purposefully and intentionally set aside time to ponder what we have learned and comprehended. As the hymn writer, Elizabeth Clephane, expressed in "Beneath the Cross of Jesus": *Upon that cross of Jesus, mine eye at times can see the very dying form of One who suffered there for me; and from my smitten heart with tears two wonders I confess – the wonders of redeeming love and my unworthiness.*

Fasting – This discipline is the voluntary "giving up" of or abstaining from something in order to "liberate" oneself from that which is mundane, in deference for something greater or of more importance. It can be healing and regenerative, and also lead to a deeper sense of repentance.

Prayer – We must always return to this beautiful gift of communication with our God and Father. Truly, it is not only meant to express our wishes and concerns, but moreover, it is a spiritual dialogue wherein we can perceive the thoughts of Him who loves us. *The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much* (James 5:16). Perhaps if our prayers contain more praise and wonderment of God's works and our thankfulness, we can have a deeper sense of being in dialogue with Him.

And so, dear ones, as we draw nearer to the holy days of Passion week, may we also move inwardly toward a deeper, more profound and holy celebration of Christ's sacrifice and resurrection; it is the foundation of all that we believe.

Reprint of District Apostle's introduction letter from Spring 2019 Vision Newsletter

MADE IN HIS IMAGE

There's a fascinating story in the Bible – one that is about us. It starts with these words:

Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness..." So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. (Genesis 1:26-27)

We may know these verses as part of the creation story, where God created Adam and Eve to be in fellowship with Him in the Garden of Eden. But this isn't just about Adam and Eve – these verses apply to us; we were created in God's image.

What does that mean? As human beings, the crown of His creation, God has given us godly attributes. Animals function based on what God instilled in them - instincts. But we are distinct from animals and the rest of creation. Humans have speech, the ability to reason, freedom, and with it, responsibilities, consequences, and the ability to love. All of these attributes are from God and are specific to us.

Just as God exists in relationship – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – He also created us to exist in 3 fundamental relationships:

With God:

We can recognize His presence and hear His voice, we can pray to, worship, and praise Him, we can experience His love and respond to it with trust and obedience.

With each other:

We were created for community, we depend on and support each other.

With the rest of creation:

God commissioned humans to live in harmony with creation. To protect it, care for it, unfold it, and develop it.

When we live in fellowship with God, each other, and creation in this way, we experience it the way God intended. Just think of the description of the garden of Eden; Adam and Eve walking and talking with God in the cool of the evening, caring for and existing off of the beautiful environment that God had created for them.

But with the fall into the sin – *everything was shattered*. With one catastrophic choice, all of the relationships were broken, and this we still experience today:

Our relationship with God went from intimacy to fear. Because of our sinfulness, we became remote from God and lived as prisoners to the evil one, with an unrelenting propensity to sin.

Our relationship with one another went from community to conflict. Though man and woman were still seen as equals in God's eyes, they tried to rule over each other, which produced jealousy and hatred.

Our relationship with creation deteriorated from care and sustenance to toilsome labor. We have become enslaved to material things and greed to the point that we stop caring about our fellow man. We exploit the creation's resources in a selfish manner without worrying about the cost of our behavior to others.

However, when the fall occurred, God promised Adam and Eve that a Savior would come to restore these broken relationships. With the coming of Jesus Christ *everything changed*.

Jesus Christ is the image of God, the second Adam, and through His life we see, again, what God intended for humanity:

A close relationship with God

Jesus nurtured a close relationship with His Father through an intense prayer life, a perfect love, continually trusting and obeying Him, and faithfully living according to His Father's will.

A servant-minded relationship towards those around Him

Jesus came not to be served, but to serve. He showed love and concern for all – men and women, rich and poor, children and outcasts, the upright, as well as the sinners. He treated everyone as equals.

A correct relationship with creation

As a human, Jesus experienced needs and enjoyed earthly things just like we do, but it had no influence on His relationship with God or others. His commandment to "love your neighbor as yourself" also became a guiding principle for how mankind should behave in caring for and using the resources that God gives them.

SO WHAT SHOULD WE DO?

We must believe in Jesus Christ and follow His example. Through our rebirth out of water and Spirit we become a new creature, a new man and woman, with the possibility of aligning our life to His.

Paul reminds us in his letter to the Romans: *For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified.* (Romans 8:29-30)

The Lord has predestined us for this – to be a new person in Christ! As we grow into His image, with the help and guidance of the Holy Spirit, we can also begin to live in renewed and reconciled relationships.

The Holy Spirit strengthens our relationship with God. Our prayers evolve. No longer just calls for help or wish lists, they become genuine exchanges with God, filled with worship and thanksgiving. We speak more of God's works rather than our own and we express our love to God through our trust and obedience to His will.

Our relationships with one another also begin to change. The Spirit helps us overcome our differences and we truly begin to understand and live by the words found in Galatians 3:28 – *There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.* We love our neighbor regardless of their heritage, culture, social class, or gender. We love each one as God has made them.

We realize that we are sent to serve and do good to others and also show them that God loves them, through our actions. We can start this right in our congregations as it exhorts us in Galatians 6:10 - *Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith.*

The Spirit gives makes us wise and frees us from the dictatorship of money. Our decisions are not profit-driven but rather take into account our responsibility to others. We consider questions such as; What could I do to give back to society? How could I do good for someone around me? How are my actions impacting future generations?

The story that began in Genesis with the creation isn't over yet. Let us live in relationship with God, with each other, and with the rest of creation, as new creatures in the reconciling power of Christ.

For it pleased the Father that in Him all the fullness should dwell, and by Him to reconcile all things to Himself, by Him, whether things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of His cross. And you, who once were alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now He has reconciled in the body of His flesh through death, to present you holy, and blameless, and above reproach in His sight — if indeed you continue in the faith, grounded and steadfast, and are not moved away from the hope of the gospel... (Colossians 1:19-23).

Reprint of Summer 2019 Vision Newsletter

Culture

*Biblical
Teachings*

7 WORDS FROM THE CROSS

We will shortly celebrate the season of Eastertide. It is customary and good for us to examine the historical events leading to the resurrection of Jesus Christ because within His victory lies the basis for our hope. In John 14:19 we read: "Because I live, you will live also." This verse can be used to explain the Chief Apostle's year-beginning message: "Let us make 2016 a year of victories with Christ."

With this incredibly hopeful message in our hearts, I would ask you to consider the events of Good Friday in great detail. Specifically, please focus your thoughts on the seven sayings or last words of Jesus during the horrific moments of His crucifixion. Perhaps this is a topic we have avoided because the suffering of our Lord is disturbing, but within each of these words, we find another element of the victory of Jesus Christ. Each of these smaller victories together made up His supreme sacrifice that brings us the means of our salvation. And so our victory in Christ will also be made up of daily smaller ones.

When reflecting on the last words of Jesus and when discussing them together, please search for the relevance and power of His legacy in your own life that will help you win your personal victories with Him. And please don't limit yourself to the applications listed in this article. These are just the tip of the iceberg to whet your appetite. The Holy Spirit can go much deeper if you ask Him. He knows Jesus Christ intimately, He knows you, and He knows your life.

Likewise, please search for a deeper understanding of the true nature of Jesus' sacrifice, His selfless love for all mankind (and for you personally), His humility, His willingness to forgive, and His powerful drive to do the will of God. This understanding will help us all to experience Holy Communion in a continually more vibrant and renewed manner that truly transforms our inner being.

To find the seven sayings of Jesus on the cross, we must search all four Gospels. In the first three sayings, all happening within the first 3 hours on the cross, Jesus speaks to or for other people. Despite His suffering, Jesus is still selfless and cares for the needs of others over His own.

Luke 23:34 - Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.

A victory of forgiveness over injustice.

- Despite the incredible injustice, His first words are of forgiveness.
- They fulfill Isaiah's prophesy: *He made intercession for the transgressor* (Isaiah 53:12).
- They satisfy His own teachings: *But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you* (Matthew 5:44).
- He wishes forgiveness even for those who show no remorse or repentance. Jesus wants them to be free of their guilt when they realize what they have done. That is the result of forgiveness, freedom from guilt.

Luke 23:43 - Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.

A victory of grace over judgement.

Jesus gives a gift to one of the two criminals also being crucified based upon the man's humility and recognition of Jesus as the Son of God, even if at the last minute of his life. The phrase seems to indicate a pardon from judgement and an invitation into paradise and the presence of Christ.

- *We deserve to die but this man has done nothing wrong* (ref. Luke 23:41).
- *The wages of sin is death (what we earned) but the gift (what we were given but didn't deserve) of God is eternal life* (Romans 6:23).
- *Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom* (Luke 23:42). The man's request is critical. He didn't ask for relief from pain or death.

John 19:26–27 - Woman, behold your son. Son, behold your mother.

A victory of love over the needs of self.

In the midst of His suffering, He cares for the needs of others. Also, we see a victory of love over fear on the part of the few who follow Him to the cross.

- It is revealing to see who is with Him at this moment: John, "the disciple whom Jesus loved," and a group of very brave woman, all who loved Him enough to follow Him to the end and witness His suffering despite their fears for their own safety.
- Mary, His mother, is a widow and now faces an anxious future all alone. Jesus acknowledges her need and the need of the church (in the person of Apostle John) to care for her and love her as a devoted son. He entrusts her to the church, thus pointing out an important future pastoral role of the church.
- In this way He teaches us the responsibility to care for one another even when we ourselves are suffering.

After these sayings, the sky turns dark and the sun is obscured for the remaining three hours of Jesus life, despite being in the middle of the day, and intensifies the feeling that something incredibly earth-changing and historic is taking place. The remaining four sayings of Jesus are directed inwardly or to God. They chart His final steps of suffering under the weight of

all mankind's sin and His willingness to be abandoned by God in His final moments as the sacrificial lamb of all the world, to the declaration of His victory, and the completion of His mission to bring us back to God.

Matthew 27:46 & Mark 15:34 - My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?

It has been reported that Martin Luther secluded himself to prepare a sermon on this verse and sat trance-like for many hours. Finally, he got up, and walking away remarked: *"God forsaken of God, who can understand that?"*

- It is the mystery of substitution. In this moment, Jesus substitutes Himself for mankind, takes on our every sin and punishes Himself so that mankind can escape God's judgement. 1 Peter 2:24: says, *Who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness—by whose stripes you were healed.*
- His words document that God does not acknowledge Himself to His Son at this moment. Jesus experiences His sacrificial death alone just as mankind does. God does not intervene or comfort Him as described in Psalm 22:1-2, *"My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me? Why are You so far from helping Me?"*
- In other moments of prayer, Jesus refers to God as Father, but not at this moment.
- This is the moment of payment for mankind's sins and the victory of Jesus Christ that satisfies the righteousness of God.

The next 2 sayings are described in a sequence just before Jesus dies:

After this, Jesus, knowing that all things were now accomplished, that the Scripture might be fulfilled, said, "I thirst!" Now a vessel full of sour wine was sitting there; and they filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on hyssop [branch], and put it to His mouth. So when Jesus had received the sour wine, He said, "It is finished!" And bowing His head, He gave up His spirit (John 19:28-30).

John 19:28 - I thirst.

Jesus is confirming that He has experienced this moment of victory of love over self as a human being and is confirming His humanity. He suffered for us in human form with all our sensations.

This account also confirms that the Scriptures are fulfilled in Him.

- *For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin (Hebrews 4:15).*
- *Isaiah says, Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows...But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed (Isaiah 53:4-5).*
- *When I was thirsty they offered me vinegar (Psalm 69:21).*

John 19:30 - It is finished.

The victory of knowing and doing the will of God. This is a cry of victory, not despair.

His enemies thought **He** was finished, but He is declaring something else: **It** is finished - the purpose of My life and the will of God the Father to redeem mankind from sin.

- *Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to finish His work" (John 4:34).*

What did He finish? See the many descriptions of His victory and the completed purpose of His life:

- *For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit (Romans 8:3-4).*
- *And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses, having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross (Colossians 2:13-14).*
- *He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love, in whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins (Colossians 1:13-14).*
- *For the sin of this one man, Adam, caused death to rule over many. But even greater is God's wonderful grace and his gift of righteousness, for all who receive it will live in triumph over sin and death through this one man, Jesus Christ (Romans 5:17 NLT).*

Luke 23:46: Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.

The victory of trust in God. These are the last words of Jesus before dying.

- He gave His life voluntarily: *No one can take my life from me. I lay down my life voluntarily, for I have the authority to lay it down when I want to and also the power to take it back again (John 10:18).* This reminds us that Jesus had the power to avoid the cross. He had the power at any moment to subdue His persecutors and walk away from the cross. So while it was physical nails that pierced His hands and feet, in reality it was His trust in God and His love for us that bound Him to the cross.
- His mission is complete and He is confident that His spirit will be welcomed and safe in God's presence, despite the darkness and aloneness of His suffering, now that He has overcome the sin that separates from God.

Reprint of Spring 2016 Vision Newsletter

UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE

What is the Bible? This seems like a simple question. We know the Bible is made up of the Old and New Testaments. We know the Gospel of Jesus Christ is recorded in the New Testament. We know many writers contributed to the recording of the Bible. And we know that our church is Bible-based. But that is not all there is to know about the Bible, especially since we are continually encouraged to dig deeper into it to learn about our God.

So how can we begin to understand the Bible? We can look to the Catechism as a starting point. In section 1.2, we read that the author of Scripture is God and the text of the Bible was written by humans who were inspired by the Holy Spirit. God used these people's abilities to commit to writing that which was to be passed on in accordance with His will. Although the contents of the biblical books have their source in the Holy Spirit, it was not dictated to the authors word for word by Him. This means that each book of the Bible bears the mark of each writer's perceptions. Their writings were influenced by conceptions of the world at their time and by the form of expression that was available to them. We only ever encounter God's word through the people who professed it, both in the past and today. God knew this and this is a signal to us that we may treat the Bible critically and use a scholarly approach when reading and interpreting words that were written by people in a different time than us. Not only that, but these authors lived in an ancient world and the Bible is a piece of ancient literature. It came into being in a world that is completely foreign to us. This makes it difficult to fully grasp the worldview and perceptions of the writers. However, this isn't a reason to let the Bible just stay in the ancient world, so to speak. We have to bring it into the present. So, how can a historical text become a present, relevant text to us today? Even if He didn't pen them, God is the author of the books of the Bible. If God, who is eternal and always has a plan, is the author, then this text has the ability to be present to us again and again because it is His word. This is what makes the Bible real for us today.

The Catechism reminds us that the writers didn't create the Bible all by themselves, it came into being through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. God filled imperfect humans with the words to record His plan of salvation in effect. If we believe that the Holy Spirit inspired the writing of the Bible and that the same Holy Spirit dwells within us, then we can be sure of the possibility to understand Scripture. With His help, the Bible can be found to have relevance in our lives and the task of shedding light on scripture in the present is taken on by the apostle ministry. What the apostles highlight with Scripture is the incarnation, death, resurrection, and return of the Son of God. This is who it always comes back to: Jesus. Even with the Old Testament, the purpose is to prepare the incarnation and work of the Son of God. He is the

central being of importance. Through Scripture, the apostles lead us back to the basics of our faith, which rest upon Jesus.

When we read and study the Bible, we also have to always bring the focus back to Jesus. We don't read the Bible to only look for answers to our problems or to figure out what is right and wrong. As Christians, anytime we read the Bible, we have to ask some important questions: What is the relation of the verse or passage to Jesus Christ? And, what is the connection of the verse to Him as the Redeemer of mankind? The answers to these questions have a direct impact on our lives as Christians, and this needs to be our focus when studying the Bible. Not everything in the Bible is equally relevant to our lives and so we only acknowledge the statements that are consistent with the Gospel. We have to allow the Holy Spirit to guide us when we are looking at different verses so that we can see Jesus in them.

There are many tips on how one can read and study the Bible. The church's method often involves what can be called the four-fold method. With a Bible passage, one first looks at the literal sense and what the verse says about the past. Next is the allegorical sense, which deals with how the verse relates to salvation history. Then one looks at the moral sense of the passage and how it relates to their own self. Finally, the prophetic or eschatological sense is studied and what the verse says about the future. With this way of analyzing a Bible passage, we can attempt to see the bigger picture, instead of just focusing on the literal meaning of the words in any given verse. The Bible is multidimensional and it should be understood that way, which is why we want to recognize its original, intended meaning and also its present meaning for our lives.

The four-fold method is not the only way to look at the Bible. There are various methods and resources one can use to read and study the Bible. All of these methods, including the four-fold method, can help you to look at the Bible in a way that makes it bigger than just one or two verses.

All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16-17). The Bible is such an important aspect of our faith. Not only is it what our divine services are based on, but it is one way that God chose to share His love and plan of salvation with us. Imagine Christianity without the Bible. It's impossible! Without the Bible, we would never know of Jesus. The Bible is what gives our faith the proper language and the standard on how we should speak about the Triune God. It gives us written stories of Christ and His love that we can come back to over and over again. When we look at the verse from 2 Timothy, we know that the Bible is a gift that God has given us to equip us to be the people that He wants us to be.

Let this glance at how we understand the Bible encourage you to keep reading it, studying it, and using it as a tool to grow in your discipleship of Christ.

Reprint of Winter 2016 Vision Newsletter

JESUS THE PASSOVER LAMB

When we approach holy days in the Christian year, there is always a sense of familiarity. Some of us have celebrated these holidays ever since we can remember. When something is so familiar to us, we could easily pass it by without giving it much thought. This is especially true as we approach Holy Week and the remembrance of Christ's sacrifice for us. In order to never take His sacrifice for granted, we should always dive a little deeper into some of the events of Holy Week to make it come alive for us again. There are always new meanings and understandings to be discovered through the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit.

When we look at the Bible in its entirety, it's amazing how the Old Testament connects to the New Testament and how often it alludes to Jesus' life and sacrifice. One instance of this is the Passover Feast and the Last Supper. We may already know that when Jesus and His disciples gathered at the Last Supper, they were together to celebrate Passover. However, it is more than just a coincidence that the Last Supper happened to be during Passover. We can look all the way back to Exodus 12, when the Passover Feast was instituted, to see how that moment was a foreshadowing for what Jesus would do for all humanity.

Passover was first established right before the Israelites fled Egypt to escape slavery, as we can read in Exodus 12:11 where the Lord states the Passover meal should be eaten in haste and with all of their things ready so they could leave Egypt quickly. After this initial Passover Feast when the Israelites left Egypt, Passover was then celebrated every year as a remembrance of their freedom and is still celebrated by Jewish people today.

The first and last portions of Exodus 12 are God's instructions to Moses and Aaron on how to celebrate the Passover meal. His specific directions are what reveal the connections to His Son, who would come to earth many years later to give His life for our sins.

In Exodus 12:3 and 4, the Lord instructs Moses and Aaron to tell the Israelites, *"On the tenth of this month every man shall take for himself a lamb, according to the house of his father, a lamb for a household. And if the household is too small for the lamb, let him and his neighbor next to his house take it according to the number of the persons; according to each man's need you shall make your count for the lamb."* From these verses, we can see that the lamb is given great significance; it is to be shared as the main part of the Passover Feast among many people. We can draw a parallel between the Passover lamb and Jesus as the new Passover Lamb. Jesus is often referred to as the Lamb of God, as seen in John 1:29, and also as "our Passover" by Paul in 1 Corinthians 5:7. Why is the image of a lamb applied to

Jesus? Not only does the animal represent the meekness and gentleness of Christ, but just as the Jewish people would bring a lamb to the priest as an atonement for their sin, Jesus was brought before God as a sacrifice on behalf of man's sin. One difference between the two, however, is that the Jews' sacrifice was repeated, but Jesus' sacrifice was once and lasts for all time. We are reminded of this every Sunday when we hear the words during the consecration of Holy Communion, "the *once brought, eternally valid sacrifice* of Jesus Christ."

The Exodus verses also put a focus on the sharing of the lamb. The lamb is not meant for just a few people, it is meant to be divided by many, even sharing it with a neighbor's family. This is true of Jesus as the sacrificial Lamb. He did not die for the sins of one person, but for the sins *of all people in all times*. His love and sacrifice should not be hoarded by a small group, but should be shared with as many people as possible.

Isaiah also paints a strong picture of the Messiah's sacrifice, further reinforcing the image of Jesus as the Lamb of God: "*He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent*" (Isaiah 53:7). Jesus is the Lamb of God because He is both the sacrifice presented to God and the sacrifice provided by God, removing the world's sin and taking it on Himself alone.

Continuing with God's instructions for the Passover Feast, Exodus 12:5 states that the "*lamb shall be without blemish.*" The Passover lamb's connection here to Jesus is more evident. While Jesus was fully man, He was also fully God and therefore, perfect. He was without sin and faithfully submitted to His Father's will.

In verse 6, we're told that the Lord then says to Moses and Aaron, "*Now you shall keep [the lamb] until the fourteenth day of the same month.*" The Israelites were instructed to keep their lamb in their house for four days, from the "*tenth of this month*" to the "*fourteenth day of the same month.*" Their sacrificial lamb wasn't just something they picked up at the local farm when they were ready to slaughter it. They had to let the lamb stay with them for four days. Anyone who is a lover of animals may understand the implication of this. The family may have started to care for the lamb, seen it as something valuable and precious to their family, so when it was later sacrificed, it affected those who had to care for it in those four days. We also want Jesus' sacrifice to affect us. He wasn't just a stranger who decided to give His life for us; He is someone we know, who we love, and we can feel the loss of His death all the more for those reasons.

Exodus 12:7 describes that after the lamb is killed, some of its blood should be put on the two doorposts and the lintel of the house where it was eaten. God explains the importance of this in verses 12 and 13: "*For I will pass through the land of Egypt on that night, and will strike all the firstborn in the land of Egypt; both man and beast... Now the blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you are. And when I see the blood, I will pass over you; and the plague shall not be on you to destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt.*" The Israelites who followed this instruction could rejoice in the fact that God spared their firstborns. God knew that this plague would urge the Pharaoh to release the Israelites from slavery because of

the fear of inciting more of God's wrath. As God said of the houses that had the lamb's blood on the doorposts, "*I will pass over you,*" slavery passed over the Israelites and they now had access to freedom. While slavery has been a reality for different groups of people over time, what has held all people captive since the time of Adam and Eve? Sin is the heaviest chain and we cannot lift it ourselves. And God knew this. So, He sent His only Son to earth to die for our sins, to release us from those chains. Because of Jesus' blood on the cross, judgement for sin can pass over us and we can have access to a relationship with God again. Just as the lamb's blood on the doorposts ultimately provided the Israelites their freedom, Jesus gives us freedom from the weight of our sins.

And so the Israelites made their exodus from Egypt and continued to celebrate the Passover every year, and Jesus and the twelve disciples at the Last Supper was just another celebration of that same Passover Feast: Until Jesus was betrayed and turned over to the Romans. Until He was hung on the cross. Until He willingly gave His life for all people. That year, Jesus breathed new life into the celebration of Passover, which would have an eternal effect on all people, not just the Israelites.

For one more example, we can look at John's account in John 19:31-37. Here, he tells of how the day after Jesus' crucifixion, the Jews asked Pilate if the dying process could be sped up so that no bodies remain on the cross on the holy Sabbath day. This is done by breaking their legs, so that they had no way to support their bodies, quickly causing death by asphyxiation. The soldiers went to the two men who had hung next to Jesus and broke their legs, so that they immediately died. When they came to Jesus, they found that He was already dead (cr. John 19:30). Therefore, Jesus' legs did not need to be broken. John, a witness of the breaking of the legs, said that this was done that "*Scripture should be fulfilled*" (John 19:36). What is John referring to here? We can go back to Exodus 12:46 to see one other rule from God regarding the Passover lamb: "*nor shall you break one of its bones.*" Jesus' bones were not broken during His sacrifice. This happened so that Scripture could be fulfilled and that we could see that it was fulfilled.

Jesus' death gives a special meaning to the Passover meal. It gives further clarity to us on what Jesus's death is about and the vital role He has in our lives: the Lamb of God gave *His* life to give *us* life.

Reprint of Spring 2017 Vision Newsletter

WHERE DID THE BIBLE COME FROM?

What books are currently filling up your bookshelves or devices? How many of them have been written by the One and only Creator of all things? The Bible is a testimony of the revelation of God. Its words should be read, studied, and utilized daily by all who have the desire to know God and are striving to become more like Jesus. No matter where we store our books, our copy of Holy Scripture should be opened each day and its words should be allowed to come alive in our hearts.

Have you ever asked yourself, what is the Bible and how did it come together?

Over the course of many centuries, human experiences of God's revelation and His acts in the course of the history of salvation have been recorded in writing. Already in the time after the Babylonian exile, that is, in the centuries before Christ's birth, the writings concerning God's acts, promises, and commandments were accorded great authority in Judaism, and were also called "Holy Scriptures" in the epistles of the New Testament. The second epistle to Timothy emphasizes that these Scriptures are based on divine revelation: *"...that from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness"* (2 Timothy 3:15–16).

The term "Bible" is derived from the Greek word *biblia*, meaning "books, scrolls." The Bible is a collection of books from Old Testament times, which came into being over a span of more than 1,000 years, as well as books from the New Testament period, which were composed over a span of about 70 years.

The author of Holy Scripture is God, while its writers were human beings whom the Holy Spirit inspired (2 Peter 1: 20–21). God made use of their abilities to commit to writing that which was to be passed on in accordance with His will. Although the contents of the biblical books have their source in the Holy Spirit, they bear the mark of their respective writers and their perceptions of the world, in terms of style and form of expression. We trust that God has ensured that these texts have remained unadulterated over all this time.

Holy Scripture is a testimony of the revelation of God without claiming to be a complete account of all of God's deeds (John 21: 25).

The Bible is comprised of two main parts: the Old Testament and the New Testament. The term “Testament” derives from the promise of the “new covenant” recorded in Jeremiah 31: 31–34. While the writings of the Old Testament refer to the covenant that God made with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses, the writings of the New Testament testify of the new covenant, which God initiated with the sending of His Son. Both the Old and New Testaments testify of God’s plan of salvation for mankind and therefore are linked to one another. The designation, “Bible,” for the Old and New Testaments has already been in use since the ninth century.

The term “canon” (meaning “standard” or “guideline” in English), which was borrowed from the Greek language, is used to describe the collection of holy writings that have been binding on all Christendom since the middle of the fourth century.

The Christian canon of the Old Testament is based on the Hebrew canon of Judaism. Even by the time of Jesus and the early Apostles, Judaism did not yet have a firmly defined canon. Although there was a basic collection of holy writings (the Torah, the books of the prophets, and the Psalms), there were also other books which were accepted as holy by some Judaic groups, but rejected by others. The scope of the Hebrew canon was conclusively defined by the end of the first century AD. At that point in time, the Christian canon of the Old Testament was far from complete. To this day, there is no uniform canon of the Old Testament that is binding on all Christian churches.

For the early Christian congregation, today’s Old Testament comprised the actual Bible. In addition, the recorded “words of the Lord” (logia) soon came to be given special regard. The logia were at first passed on verbally. Even before any accounts of Jesus’ activity were ever recorded in writing, the congregations had various creeds and hymns in which the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ were professed. These also found their way into the writings of the Apostles. The oldest early Christian writings handed down to us are the letters of Apostle Paul. These were read aloud in the divine services and then passed along to neighboring congregations.

After the epistles of Paul, the Gospel of Mark is the oldest written testimony of Christian belief. The content and structure of the Gospels according to Matthew and Luke are closely related to it. In order to preserve the apostolic tradition, pass along its teachings, and distinguish it from false doctrines, it became necessary to prepare a collection of New Testament writings that would be binding upon the church. An Easter letter from Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria, dating from the year AD 367, lists all 27 writings of the New Testament as binding. This canon was ultimately ratified by the synods of Hippo Regius (AD 393) and Carthage (AD 397). The Old and New Testament canons did not come into being on account of human contemplations alone, but most of all through the will of God.

There are several other Gospels that were written that were not included as part of the New Testament canon. They contain various teachings or beliefs that are legendary and/or incompatible with the claims of the canonical Gospels. These writings, such as the book of Thomas, the book of Mary, and the Gospel of Philip, to name just a few, are not recognized in

our church or in any other major organized Christian church because they were not accepted by the church councils of the past. The canonized Scripture provides us with enough teaching to keep us occupied and continually learning.

The Old and New Testaments are interconnected and tell one unified story about God and His love for His people.

Throughout the writings of the Old Testament, we see evidence of Jesus, and then in the New Testament, we see how everything came together in the sacrifice and resurrection of the Son of God. This is why it is important to look at the Old Testament through the lens of the Gospel. Jesus Christ is the focus of Scripture and so we base our doctrine and beliefs on those texts that are consistent with the Gospel. We can focus on these statements and learn from Scripture when we are inspired by the Holy Spirit and allow Him to help us interpret what we find in the Bible. The Spirit also helps us to interpret a Bible verse based on its context, which is essential to its meaning. When we read Scripture with the Holy Spirit, He reveals to us God's will and reminds us of the words of Jesus, so we can find relevance and meaning in passages with context that may seem out of touch with our own world.

As you read through the different books of the Bible, ask the following question – what is this story teaching me about Jesus?

Invite the Holy Spirit to read the Scripture with you each time you open its pages and experience how the words written thousands of years ago come to life and are relevant for today.

Reprint of Summer 2017 Vision Newsletter

AND THEY CONTINUED...

And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. Acts 2:42

Pentecost is a feast that has its roots in the Jewish feast of thanksgiving. Later, it was recognized as the day that marked the renewal of the covenant between God and the Israelites, and the day to commemorate when Moses received the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai.

After Christ's Ascension, Pentecost was known as the day God's promises were fulfilled: His Church was established; the Holy Spirit – the Helper – dwelt within each one of the believers, providing them with what they would need to fulfill their calling; and the apostle ministry was equipped to be ambassadors of Jesus Christ among all nations and point the congregation towards His return.

When the Holy Spirit filled Jesus' disciples on Pentecost, they were able to speak in other tongues (Acts 2:4). With this gift, they did not talk about themselves or their own thoughts and emotions. Instead, they did what the Spirit inspired them to do – they praised the Lord's greatness and spoke of His deeds of salvation. They were moved to profess the Lord. Their profession in many tongues allowed all the people gathered to hear the Lord being praised in their own language, **which had not happened before**. This experience at Pentecost was more than a miracle of tongues; it was also a miracle of listening.

Peter then gave a sermon to the Jewish people gathered from the many nations about the sending of God's Spirit and what that meant for the people. After Peter's call to repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, about 3,000 people were baptized and became part of the first church. *So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved (Acts 2:46-47).*

The disciples continued... The book of Acts is just one testimony of how the disciples continued in their work for the Lord with the Holy Spirit as their Guide and Helper. We are also called to do the same. The Holy Spirit that filled the disciples of Jesus' time is also within us. Let us be moved to profess Christ in our actions and words. Let us be a sign that the Spirit is working within us and not talk about ourselves in times of fellowship, but rather, share

Christ with each other and lift Him up. Let us use our schooling, our work, our leisure time as opportunities to glorify God and serve others. When we do these things, our lives become a testimony of **how we continued** in our work for the Lord.

As believers today, **Pentecost is still a time of celebration**. We celebrate that the church of Christ is active and that we are part of it. We celebrate that the gift of the Holy Spirit dwells and works within us. We celebrate that the apostle ministry is still active in dispensing the sacrament of Holy Sealing through the laying on of hands. We can celebrate these things together, giving thanks and glorifying God as His people.

Pentecost 2018 is an opportunity for us, as people of different cultures and backgrounds, to come together for one weekend and celebrate the fulfillment of God's promises, the ones that were fulfilled many years ago, and the ones He will fulfill in the future.

In the NAC USA district, we can gather to celebrate Pentecost in a divine service with our Chief Apostle. We can experience Holy Communion together and Communion for the departed. During this weekend, you'll find old friends and new friends, and experience together different activities that will help equip you in your personal calling in the Body of Christ. Let this weekend be an opportunity to worship God, glorify Him, and engage in fellowship, sharing our lives with one another to become one heart and one soul.

Join us for this 2018 Pentecost weekend to rekindle the gift of the Spirit in us, to deepen our passion and joy in the work of God, and to continue our work according to His will.

Reprint of Spring 2018 Vision Newsletter

LAODICEA – RICH OR POOR?

In the last book of the New Testament, Revelation, Jesus reveals to the Apostle John insights that were not just for the believers and churches of that time, but are also for the churches that exist now. The Scripture reads in Revelation 2:7 – *He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the **churches**. To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God.* This letter is both apocalyptic (revealing) and prophetic in that it reveals God’s perspective on events in the present and the future. Therefore, what was revealed to the world through it calls the people of Christ to obey Him in the present and to trust Him in the future.

We will focus in on what was said to the church in Laodicea and utilize their instruction and the promises made to them to encourage us as we strive to live a victorious life in Jesus Christ.

REVELATION 3:14-22

In Revelation 3:14-22, John writes: *And to the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write, “These things says the Amen, the Faithful and True Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God: ‘I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth. Because you say, “I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing” – and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked – I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see. As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent. Behold I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me. To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcome and sat down with My Father on His throne. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”* The believers are assured at the start that the One who is saying this to them is the resurrected, glorified Creator of everything, the ruler of God’s creation. He knows them and their works. What is written next may seem odd or make little sense to us today, but for the believers in Laodicea at that time, the meaning of what was said to them would have been very clear. To help our understanding, we need to know a few things about Laodicea.

WATER SUPPLY

First is its location. Laodicea was located in Asia Minor where two key trade routes intersected. While this brought the city many benefits, one major liability this location had was that the city had no native water supply, so they had to convey in water from an outside source. By the time the water made its way into the city, it was neither hot nor cold; it was lukewarm. Lukewarm water is of little use to anyone. It's not refreshing to drink and it's not useful for medicinal purposes. On the other hand, the two cities that neighbored Laodicea, Hierapolis and Colossae, both had useful water supplies. To the north in Hierapolis, they were known for their hot freshwater springs, which were of great help to those seeking healing for their physical ailments. And to the south was Colossae, which was known for its pure cold water, which was cool and refreshing to drink. So the people of Laodicea were well aware of the inferiority of their water and how useless it was when compared to the natural resources their neighbors enjoyed.

FINANCIAL WEALTH

Second, Laodicea was a very wealthy city, one of the wealthiest in the world at that time. It was known for its banking and financial institutions. Currency changing was a common occupation. The city had its own coins. Its people were very wealthy, so much so that when an earthquake devastated the city in AD 61, the people didn't need financial assistance from the Roman government to rebuild. They were able to recover using their own resources.

WOOL CLOTH

Third, Laodicea was a clothing manufacturer and was known for their black wool tunics named *trimira*. The city was famous for this black clothing that they produced with soft, glossy wool. This clothing was coveted by the wealthy at that time and people traveled from other parts of Asia Minor to purchase it.

HEALING OINTMENTS

And fourth, Laodicea was a distinguished medical center. They were known for their medical innovation because they had developed an eye salve that assisted those with vision impairments, and an ointment for ears that helped treat hearing loss. Again, people travelled to the city just to get these medical elixirs. As you can imagine, their wealth, clothing, and medical innovations were a source of great pride for the people of Laodicea. With all of this information in mind, we again turn to what was said to them in Revelation.

The first few verses are words of correction. In verses 15 and 16, they are told that they have become lukewarm and their works are neither hot nor cold, both of which are useful, just in different ways. They had become repulsive to the Lord. With this illustration, their attitude of indifference and half-heartedness is being called out. The Lord wishes for them to be useful, not somewhere in the middle where they are useless to all because of their tepid spiritual indifference.

Verse 17 speaks to their wealth and the resulting attitude of not needing the help of others. This caused them to lose their spiritual focus and they failed to recognize that from God's perspective, they had really become "wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked." Though they were rich, they were poor in what mattered most. Though they could manufacture the most finest of clothing lines, they were naked when it came to putting on the righteousness of God. Though they could help people with their physical blindness, they had no remedy for their lack of spiritual sight. The Laodiceans had much, but they did not have what was necessary for their spiritual well-being.

Then in verses 18-20, they are given instruction on how to transform their lives so that they could become useful again to the Lord. In verse 18, Jesus simply asks them to turn their attention back to Him, and come to the door of grace to receive the riches of God, white garments to cover their nakedness, and eye salve so that their spiritual sight could be restored. These things – His grace, His knowledge, and our faith in Him – can only come from God. In verse 19, they are told how to receive the grace of God – with a repentant heart. They are reminded of the love God has for them and are directed to change their mind and their direction back to God. From verse 20, we can understand that the Lord had been pushed out of the church at Laodicea. But when the believers turn back in repentance, then the Lord would come to them and knock at the door. And when it is opened, He would re-enter.

The concluding verses tell the people of what they are promised when they follow the instructions that they have been given. The promise to those who faithfully follow and overcome is a place on the throne with Christ.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR US?

How can we as believers today utilize what was given in this letter to Laodicea? We must be watchful that we do not develop that same condition of indifference to God. In order for us to do our part to fulfill the mission of the church, we need to be either hot or cold, we cannot become lukewarm in our spiritual life. Today, the same attitude of "I have need of nothing" or "I don't need anyone's help" is as prevalent as it was in Laodicea. That's why it is critical for believers in Jesus to continually turn to Him with a willingness to grasp hold of the gift of grace, and through repentance, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we can grow into the new creation and do our part to edify the body of Christ and contribute to the community of believers. Take the time to introspectively check the condition of your faith and follow the instructions given by God, so that you can enjoy the promises to come and be a part of the victorious church.

Reprint of Winter 2018 Vision Newsletter

THE CHRIST HYMN – EXPLORING THE HYMN IN PHILIPPIANS

There are two passages in the Bible that are often referred to as “Christ Hymns:” Colossians 1:15-20 and Philippians 2:6-11. Although both passages are of importance and would be worthwhile to study, we will focus our attention in this article on the passage from Philippians:

*...who, being in the form of God,
did not consider it robbery to be equal with God,
but made Himself of no reputation,
taking the form of a bondservant,
and coming in the likeness of men.*

*And being found in appearance as a man,
He humbled Himself and became obedient
to the point of death, even the death of the cross.*

*Therefore God also has highly exalted Him
and given Him the name which is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
of those in heaven, and of those on earth,
and of those under the earth,
and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ
is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

Scholars still argue over the authorship of this hymn. Many believe it was an early hymn that Paul quoted, while others believe that it was written by Paul himself. Regardless of authorship, one thing is for sure: given the rich vocabulary, inclusion of poetic elements, and the fact that, with a couple small changes, it can stand alone as an independent composition, these six verses comprise a hymn.

This hymn is one of the most significant and informative depictions of the nature of Christ in the New Testament. Specifically, the poetic language expresses the dual nature of Christ, who was “in the form of God,” yet humbled Himself, “taking the form of a bondservant.” The overriding purpose of this passage is to present Christ as an example of the humility and self-sacrifice which all Christians should endeavor to possess. The hymn also enjoins the Philippian church to have a singular goal and passion, namely serving each other in the mind of Christ. Paul makes this clear with the verse that sets up the hymn, verse 5, when He says,

“Let this mind be in you which is also in Christ Jesus.”

At its midpoint, the hymn highlights God’s exaltation, giving Christ “the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus” all the realms of creation are called to bow in homage and every tongue proclaim, “Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” And not only is He the Lord, but He is the Lord of all - those in heaven, those on earth, and those under the earth. This would’ve been important for the people of that time to hear, as many felt that they were ruled by powers, principalities, and rulers of the darkness (see Ephesians 6:12). Through Christ, they (and we) are liberated from these powers. This was a very enlightening and freeing text for the people at that time, just as it is for us today.

Christ’s humility and obedience led to God’s glorification and exaltation. We are reminded through this hymn that this kind of exaltation, as a reward for humility, is one that we hope to experience ourselves someday. Not only is this a hymn of humility for the past and present - it’s also a hymn of hope for a future filled with the glory of God.

The beauty of hymns and choral music often lies in the lyrics. Here we have an example where no music is included, and yet, through the lyrics, we are drawn closer to the Father through knowledge of the Son. Even without music, the hymn is incredibly impactful. When we sing in worship, it’s important that we are fully aware of what it is that we are singing about, and that we let the wonderful truths of God, revealed in the lyrics, dwell richly within our soul.

In light of the powerful truths found within this hymn, let us joyfully and patiently endure all suffering and hardship in the mind and name of Christ, our perfect example.

Reprint of Summer 2019 Vision Newsletter

Culture

*Thoughts
from the
Chief Apostle*

THOUGHTS FROM THE CHIEF APOSTLE

Chief Apostle Schneider held an Apostles' Conference in Miami on February 8 of this year. In these meetings, he shared some very valuable insight on the work of the Lord and us as children of God. The Chief Apostle referenced a few stories, and through those, brought forward teachings that we can take away. The first story came out of the Bible verse for the meeting: *Remember these, O Jacob, and Israel, for you are My servant; I have formed you, you are My servant; O Israel, you will not be forgotten by Me* (Isaiah 44:21).

When God introduces Himself to the exiled, imprisoned Israelites, He says through an unknown servant, "Now hear, listen to Me. I am the King of Israel and his Redeemer. I am the first and the last. The only God. My counsel shall stand and I will do all my pleasure." In this presentation of Himself, the people become aware of who God is, which is a wonderful way to worship Him. We have to look up at God. He never changes. He is the first and the last. He's the Almighty God. In the past generations, the church saw much growth and there were many sealings. Today it seems a little bit different. We could say, "Is that the same church? Is that the same God? What changed? What happened?" We still have the promise that Jesus will prepare His bride for the Holy Spirit. But where is that bride? What happens? Nothing happens. Sometimes God has to remind us, "Now listen to Me. Did you forget who I am? I am the Almighty God. I am the first one and the last one, and what I began I will complete. You have some reason to hope because it's Me, the Almighty God." We should never doubt that God will follow through with His plan and His reminder to the Israelites also serves as a reminder to us.

In this story, God refers to His chosen people as Jacob and Israel because Israel was the children of Jacob and he was the one who had the promise: You will be the father of a great people. He had this promise and many others, but when he got these promises he had nothing. He had just a stone to lay down his head. He had to flee because his brother wanted to kill him. He had nothing but a promise and he trusted in it. It was a long time before Jacob saw the promise fulfilled through his 12 sons. Through the whole story of Jacob, we can see he remained faithful. This serves to remind us that we should always be faithful even when we cannot tell how the story will end or if God's promise will come to fruition.

We also are children of Jacob and we have this promise. Jesus will come and catch up His bride, and His bride will be prepared. Today sometimes, we have the impression that it's not possible. That cannot be. Jesus calls us, "Here too, you are children of Jacob. You have this promise. Even if today you have just a stone and you have just nothing, be faithful. I will fulfill

my promise.” Sometimes we are tired or we lose our courage. That’s normal because we are just human. But, in the depths of our hearts we must keep this promise. Jesus will come and His bride will be prepared. Jesus wants his apostles to fight for this promise to remain alive in the hearts of His people. Jesus will come and we are the ones who have to keep this promise alive.

Jacob’s second name was Israel because he struggled and won the battle against God and man, so God gave him a new name. He wanted the blessing. In his battle against the angel, he was injured, but he didn’t give up. He went on and continued. Why? He wanted the blessing. Even if he was hurt, he went on because he wanted the blessing and he got it. So, for sure we also have to struggle and fight because God named his people as Israel and we are their descendants. We have to fight against the devil and the spirit of this time. We have to fight against the world and its difficulties. But we want the blessing. What is that blessing we are fighting for? What do we want? We want Jesus Christ. That’s the blessing we are fighting for. We want to enter into fellowship with Jesus. That’s why we are fighting and for sure it is not easy. Sometimes we are tired or even injured. All of us have suffered and that will continue. But, we do not give up because we want the blessing. We want Jesus Christ.

The other story that Chief Apostle Schneider brought forward was the 10 workers in the vineyard, which he feels for New Apostolics.

We have been working hard and we suffer, while others might not. The Lord says, “What’s your problem? I give you everything, what more do you want? Are you good to the other one?” The idea behind that is that in some way we think we deserve salvation and the reward of eternal life because we are New Apostolic, we are faithful and we serve God. The whole image of the story that Christ told is that you cannot deserve it. It’s just grace. What was important is not what you did during these hours of working and suffering, but rather I called you and you came and did what I asked. That’s why you are saved. The last one I called 1 hour before. He heard my call, he answered, and he worked. He did what I asked him to do. That is why he’s saved, because of his obedience. But who is called when, that is the decision of God. We cannot interfere. That’s why what is important is the love we show our brothers and sisters.

The Bride of Christ will love Christ and love their neighbor. If you love Christ and you love your neighbor, our reward or “salary” is Christ. And if I have Christ, I have everything. He comes to me and says, “Okay, because you were faithful and you answered my call, I will share everything with you.” If he decides for any reason that one person or another will come with Him, will I be angry? I have everything, why do I want more? He shares with everybody and even if the other one has the same thing as me, I never have more or less. That is God. We cannot understand that. We think in terms of heritage. “Oh, there’s 1 million. If I am alone I have 1 million. If there are 10, I have only 100,000.” But God is God and He can give everyone all. That’s why worship is important. Just remember who He is. We cannot understand Him. We can just love Him.

HUMILITY

In March of this year, Chief Apostle Schneider offered his thoughts and guidance on the subject of humility. Following are extracts from this message.

Jesus made humility before God an essential condition to receiving salvation, and hence, it is central to our doctrine. The writings of the New Testament present humility before others as a characteristic of the elect. Since humility is such an important aspect of being Christian, let's look at three different aspects of it more closely and see what they mean for us today.

Humility Before God

When we are humble before God, we recognize that we are entirely dependent on His grace. There's nothing that we can do better or more of in order to gain God's grace. Have you ever thought that if you just do something nice for someone, God will look upon you more favorably? While we should always want to help and serve our neighbor, we need to work on changing our mindset so that we don't focus on trying to sway God's opinion of us. He loves us and He always will.

Understanding that we cannot change or force God to do anything also shows that we have God-fear. We know that God is perfect and infallible and we can neither comprehend nor compel Him. Expressing our God-fear further demonstrates our humility before Him.

We also express humility by surrendering completely to God's love. His love for us is what has the power to transform our lives. But this change can only happen if we are open to His love, if we allow it to fill us and influence all parts of our lives. Surrendering to God's love and having humility before Him does not mean that we reject ourselves. We see that God doesn't forbid us from taking care of ourselves in the commandment, "love your neighbor as yourself."

When we are humble before God, we must also be careful that we do not take it too far and fall into the trap of "false humility," meaning that we use the excuse that because God is so much greater than us, we are unable to accomplish what He asks of us. When one is truly humble before God, they know that God knows them better than they know themselves and with His help, can do anything that is asked of them.

Humility Before Our Neighbor

To have humility towards our neighbor is a fruit of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit teaches us that God loves us because He is love, not because of what we are. This means that He loves our neighbors as much as He loves us, even if they are completely different from us or even if we don't like them or think they don't deserve to be loved. One does not have to become like us in order to be loved by God. Regardless of who we are and our merits, we are all dependent on grace.

In his letter to the Philippians, Apostle Paul says, "in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself" (Philippians 2:3). At first, this passage seems unrealistic: it would require us to consider ourselves as being consistently lower than others. However, this simply isn't true. Evidence of this is seen in the following verse, where it says, "Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others" (Philippians 2:4). This shows we can make decisions based on our own interests, as long as they take into account the interests of others, as well.

Paul continues to speak about our humility before our neighbor, using Jesus Christ as the ultimate example. "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross" (Philippians 2:5-8). Jesus was fully aware of His position and authority, yet He completely obeyed the will of His Father. He humbled Himself to the level of the sinners, dedicated Himself to their service, and suffered for them in order to raise them up with Him.

We want to look to Jesus as our example and bring ourselves to our neighbor's level. Like them, we are sinners who need grace to be saved. We also know that we have been sent to be at their service, to guide and support them on the path of salvation. This cannot be done without humility in our hearts.

Humility In Ministry

When we are engaged in a ministry, we have to keep both our humility before God and humility before our neighbor in mind as we lead and serve others with the gifts that God has given to us.

As a humble servant, we need to always be aware of who we are doing our work for: God. Keeping this at the forefront, we want to always follow His will in our ministries. In every situation, Jesus' teachings should always be applied.

When we serve in ministry without humility, we can become focused on how our efforts could give us an outcome that we want. However, while it is our responsibility to think about the future, develop plans, and implement, them, no one can force God to give us the outcomes we want. He always decides what the outcome will be of our work and efforts.

When we allow God to be at the forefront of our ministry, this also allows us to be humble before our neighbor. In a leadership or ministerial position, we never want to think that our outer authority gives us permission to abuse our position by imposing our own opinion or by implying that if our instruction is not obeyed, that there will be eternal consequences. We want to be careful to not attach too much importance to our title because it can lead to a breakdown of the trust between us and the people we interact with in our ministries. We want to always be humble before those around us and be open to the Spirit's guidance in our ministry.

After exploring what humility before God and your neighbor looks like from an individual perspective and from a ministerial and leadership perspective, consider how your interactions with those around you give you the opportunity to express humility. Are there aspects of your life where you could practice humility more?

Reprint of Winter 2016 Vision Newsletter

LIVING TO THE GLORY OF GOD

Our 2017 motto urges us to bring glory to God, our Father. Chief Apostle Schneider laid out three ways that we can do this in his New Year's Message...

Recognize the greatness of God

God's omnipotence, His unlimited power, is clearly expressed in His creation. By His word alone, everything came into being from nothing, both the visible and the invisible creation. While certain aspects of creation seem to be chaotic or random, there is still order to be found, even if we may not be able to see it. This order bears witness of God's wisdom. Just as God is good and perfect, so is His entire creation. Even though we, imperfect beings, make up part of His creation, we can still be assured of God's perfectness and kindness because of His plan of salvation. Hence, our task is to know God more and continually develop a culture of learning.

Give Him thanks

As we learn more about our Father, we are inspired to deep gratitude. We show our thankfulness by accepting God's will, even though it can be difficult. We can look to Jesus as our example in this, particularly when He prayed to His Father in the Garden of Gethsemane. Even though He asked to have the cup of suffering on the cross pass over Him, He prayed, "not as I will, but as You will" (Matthew 26:39).

We show our thanks by bringing Him offerings. Everything we have belongs to God. Our offerings to Him give back to Him what was His from the beginning. When we realize that all things come from God, we make every effort to take care of what He has given us and use it for His glory.

We trust in God. We do this by spending less time complaining about our cares and earthly struggles. Even though we are sinners, we know that God takes care of us and is with us every moment in our lives. When we are assured of this knowledge, we display our trust and thanks for God and His will, and our prayers become expressions of praise and thanksgiving in lieu of lists of our expectations.

God's will is to save every soul and open a path for people to restore their relationship with Him. We show our thankfulness to Him by respecting the dignity of every person and praying for their salvation.

Proclaim His glory

In order to proclaim God's glory, we must first acknowledge His authority. Compared to the One who knows everything, we know so little and submit ourselves to His authority because of our trust in Him and our knowledge of His goodness and perfectness. When we recognize God's authority, we realize that His laws are holy and that one aspect of His glory is His giving of the law. Through the law, God aims not to suppress us, but to preserve us from evil, which was true in the time of Moses and is true for us today, reflected in the two commandments that Jesus gave.

We live our lives in a way that speaks of God's glory to those around us. **We accomplish this by behaving like children of God.** With Jesus as our example, we can live a life that emulates His attributes by: learning more about our Father, allowing that knowledge to inspire us to trust Him and to understand His will and intentions, and loving and serving one another.

Our God is greater than everything and nothing can prevent Him from giving us His kingdom. His love and faithfulness to His plan to save us is a sign of glory. When we consider all that our God is, we are inspired to worship and glorify Him. This further deepens our relationship with Him.

God's life has been laid into those that have been sealed with the Holy Spirit. After receiving such a gift, how should we respond? We want keep developing so that our nature can be transformed by this gift. Our journey of growth bring us into oneness with each other as we understand that there is "one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all" (Ephesians 4:6).

Reprint of Spring 2017 Vision Newsletter

WHO IS GOD?

How we feel about God is determined by our experiences with Him. It only makes sense then that because each of us has experienced God differently, we may think about God differently than the person next to us. However, this isn't something that should divide us. Instead, we can focus on and be thankful for the characteristics of God that will always be the same for all people, something that is universal.

The message of the gospel, whether people believe in it or not, applies to all people. This message is based on that which Jesus teaches us about God, ourselves, our relationship with God and our neighbor, and the salvation that God prepares for us. Let's look at the five universal aspects of the gospel of Christ:

God is perfect

It's hard to understand perfection because we have never been and never will be perfect. And yet, God is perfect. When we recognize this about Him, it is a wonderful revelation. It means that we know and believe that God doesn't make mistakes and He never has to fix things. This is clearly seen in His creation – it is always adapting and evolving. Further, we can perceive in His perfection that all good for us emanates from Him (Psalm 16:2).

God is love

God is not just loving, He is love. He is the genesis and essence of this gift of His kingdom. Love only exists on earth because He is love. And God's love is unconditional. When Adam and Eve fell into sin and were cast out of the Garden, God had a plan in place to send His Son as a sacrifice and restore the relationship He had with man. God loves us and He wants us to love Him back, freely and willingly.

God is Triune

God is composed of the Trinity, three Persons who are one – God, the Father; God, the Son; God, the Holy Spirit. This is a unique relationship that no one will ever be able to fully comprehend; it is a divine mystery. However, when we enter into a relationship with the Triune God, only then will we be able to have peace and oneness in our relationships with others, only then will we experience harmony and unity. God loves our diversity, but He wants us to overcome our differences and be unified through a relationship with Him.

God is Jesus Christ

Through Jesus Christ, God revealed Himself in flesh to us. He is the only way of salvation. As both true Man and true God, Jesus Christ is our model, our example to follow. To be fully liberated from evil and sin, we must learn from and follow His words and deeds.

God is peace

God wants us to have His peace by allowing us *to become the being that He intended us to be*. Adam was created in the image of God – he was created to be the best he could be. But, Adam failed. So, then the new Adam came in Jesus Christ. Because of Christ's sacrifice, we can enter into a relationship with God again and strive for a fulfilled life in becoming the best person that we can be.

This gospel message is for everyone. To allow everyone to connect to the gospel, we want to be credible witnesses of this message and truly live out these five aspects.

We can also let these five universal gospel truths be reasons we give thanks and worship to God. We want Him to see our expression of how we feel about Him and all that He has done in our lives.

*Based on excerpts from the International District Apostle Meeting in Vienna, 2017.

Reprint of Autumn 2017 Vision Newsletter

GO TO THE PEOPLE

Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. Matthew 28:19-20

Chief Apostle Schneider used the Great Commission as the foundation of the 2017 minister service in Chicago. This is the ministers' mission in the church, and we, as members, can also share in and support this mission.

What does the mission consist of?

Jesus makes this very clear: *Go*. We have a mission to fulfill and part of that means we must go deeper into the knowledge of Jesus Christ. We cannot remain where we are and think we know everything. To **go further into the knowledge of Christ**, we need to follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit. **We have to go to the people**. The transmission of the gospel needs a **personal contact**. It's not a mission given by Jesus to an organization or to a company. It's a mission given by Jesus to each of us. We cannot say that's the task of the church. We ARE the church. And so it is our responsibility to go because Jesus wants us to have a personal relationship with the people. That's the difference between a Christian church or the work of God and a company. We cannot act as a company. We have to move, go, talk, and make personal contact.

Why do we go?

To make disciples of all the nations. To make disciples means our task consists of motivating people to follow Jesus. That's the **definition of a disciple: the one who follows Jesus**. To do this, we first have to believe that the gospel is valid for all men. Whatever the conditions they live in are, whatever their cultural background is, whatever their economic situation is, whatever their past is. The whole gospel, the laws and the salvation, is **valid for everyone on earth**. In the Gospel of Mark, it says, *Preach the gospel to every creature*. We have to preach the gospel and make disciples in the whole population, irrespective of their conditions, of their culture, of their age, of their wealth. When you look at your congregation, does it reflect the population of your town or state?

And what's our task? **To motivate all to follow Christ**. We do not want to promise them something. It would be easy to go to the poor one and to promise them they will become

rich if they follow Christ. But that wouldn't make disciples out of them. Plenty of people followed Jesus because they were waiting for a miracle of healing. Others expected Jesus to deliver them from the oppression of the Romans. But this is not why Jesus came to earth. He wanted to have disciples who follow Him because they love Him, they trust Him, and they were ready to leave everything behind to follow Him. And it's not necessary to threaten people either, that if they are not faithful, then they will suffer in the great tribulation. We just have to reveal to them the glory of Jesus Christ. We have to plant in their hearts the love for Jesus Christ, and help them to discover how great He is. That Jesus is God and God is Jesus. He's humble. He's powerful. He's almighty. He's love. He's patience. He's grace. When people know this, then they will follow Jesus because they have discovered His love and desire to save. That's the true motivation to follow Christ.

To baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. We have to make clear that being baptized and reborn out of water and Spirit is not just a condition to be fulfilled. When you are baptized with water and with Spirit, you get a special strength and it's up to you to use it. With this power, you can love like Jesus, you can forgive, you can follow, and you have the power to change and to become like Christ. The best way to explain this power is to demonstrate it. Be an example to make obvious the power that we received through baptism with water and with Spirit.

To teach them to observe all the things that Jesus has commanded. When people have decided to follow Christ and they have discovered His glory, love, grace, and patience, then they can understand what it takes to follow Christ. There are a certain number of rules, the law of Christ, to be respected. But when people come to know Christ, these rules won't seem so restrictive. Now, they love Christ. Now, they will have a desire to live by these rules – out of love for Him. Our task is to teach the law of Jesus Christ, not our own law, our own rules, our own traditions. Our rules have nothing to do with salvation. We have to teach them the gospel and how to live it in their life. This also applies for the younger generations. They don't need to become like we were and like we are. They can follow the gospel in their society and in their time. Knowing this, we can become more aware and accepting of people's differences. We cannot ask people to become like us because that's the way we know how to follow Christ. Instead, we have to teach them to follow Christ and to live according to the gospel in their conditions.

This is our task for the future: going to all people and motivating them to follow Christ, showing them the glory and the love of Jesus Christ. This needs personal contact. And once they love Jesus, then they can be baptized with water and be prepared to be baptized with the Spirit. Then they can be shown how to use this power from their baptism. And then, they can follow Christ in the way that He commanded.

*Taken from the Chief Apostle's Ministers service in Chicago, 2017

Reprint of Autumn 2017 Vision Newsletter

IN A MANNER NOBODY COULD IMAGINE...

Taken from the Pentecost service held by Chief Apostle Schneider

Pentecost is a very important feast for us because it bears witness that God is the faithful One. God promised that He would send the Savior, the Messiah. And He fulfilled this promise, but *in a way nobody could imagine*. Something incredible happened. God, the Son, came to earth and became man. That was beyond anything man could imagine.

Jesus announced that He would have to die, they would kill Him, but then He would go back to His Father. In His resurrection, He rose from the dead, and He was taken up to His Father in heaven *in a way nobody could imagine or explain*. That was something so wonderful. He was dead, He rose from the dead, and He went into heaven. *Nobody could imagine that*.

Jesus promised that He would send a Comforter. I have no idea what the disciples thought, if they thought, "Okay, He will send a friend or somebody." The Bible doesn't say it's the Holy Spirit. But when Pentecost arrived and the Holy Spirit was poured out, *it happened in a manner nobody could imagine before*. God fulfilled His promise.

Jesus promised that He would come back to take the elected ones, His Bride, to Himself. *It will happen in a manner nobody can imagine*. That's definitely beyond our understanding. Nobody can explain it. Nobody can describe it. The return of Christ can only be grasped in faith. But we know one thing. **It will happen! Jesus will come, and He will take His Bride.**

Dear brothers and sisters, that's our joy of Pentecost. We know that God fulfills His promises. We cannot explain it. We cannot describe it. **We need to grasp it in faith.** But we know, we are convinced, it will happen. Our God is the faithful one.

Reprint of Summer 2018 Vision Newsletter

CHURCH STRATEGY

What will the Church look like in fifteen or thirty years? A fascinating question for which we cannot provide competent answers without a strategic approach. In an interview with our online news magazine nac.today, Chief Apostle Jean-Luc Schneider provides detailed information on his plans for the years to come.

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.

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 neighbor 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. In terms of faith, the gospel of the Lord offers everything that a believing person needs.

Our mission is going to people and making them into disciples of the Lord, not members of the Church.

We fulfil our mission by making sure 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.

To read the rest of the interview with the Chief Apostle, search for the following articles on www.nac.today:

- ***Making people Christians, not members of the Church***
- ***A faith that lives in cultural diversity***
- ***Contributing to a collective solution***

Reprint of Summer 2018 Vision Newsletter

WE ARE RICH IN CHRIST

This is the transcript of Chief Apostle Schneider's New Year's message for 2019.

Dear brothers and sisters,

Welcome to the new year. It is my wish that we begin with the firm conviction expressed in the Psalm 23: *The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.*

Despite our worries, struggles, and fears, we can confidently declare that God is immensely rich:

rich in kindness, rich in patience, and rich in grace.

And God wants us to benefit from His wealth. We can share in this wealth – namely through Jesus Christ.

Dear brothers and sisters, for 2019, I propose that we focus on the following objective: let us be rich in Christ! Let us therefore caption this year with the motto: Rich in Christ!

What does this wealth consist of? How can we acquire it? Over the next few weeks and months, we will occupy ourselves with these questions. I am very curious to learn what ideas the Holy Spirit will awake in each one of us and in the congregations.

Beyond that, there is another element, which is of special significance for us: we can share our wealth in Christ with others without becoming poorer ourselves as a result. Let us share the wealth in Christ with our fellow human beings. This is not only a possibility or a need for us. In fact, it is our very purpose.

I wish you all a richly blessed year 2019!

Reprint of Winter 2018 Vision Newsletter

WHY DO WE COME TO JESUS?

Taken from the divine service Chief Apostle Schneider held in Charlotte, NC on February 10, 2019.

Dear brothers and sisters, it's important for us to know for what reason we come to Jesus.

For sure, we can come to Jesus to get His help, and many people do that. They come to Jesus and they think, "If I go to church, if I'm a faithful believer, if I pray in the right manner, and if I do what I have to do, then Jesus will help me in my life. He will solve my problem." Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. We are aware that even if Jesus helps us with something in our daily life, that doesn't solve the whole problem. His help will last for a moment, but we will get sick again, we will have to face other problems. It's just a short-term solution when Jesus helps us with these things. We are also aware that He is just one way to solve these problems. There are many other ways. Other people, they do not believe in Jesus Christ, they do not pray, they are not faithful, and they live at least as good as we live. They just have other solutions. They have other ways to solve their problems. So, if we just come to Jesus to get some help, we come for the wrong reason.

Other people, like the Jews of His day, want Jesus to rule the country and society. The Jewish people wanted Jesus to become their king, and they thought, "If He is our king, He will deliver us from the domination of the Romans. He will settle our problem. We will be a free people again, and we can live according to our faith and traditions." This is also a way of thinking in our society today. Many people think that if they live according to the gospel, if they respect the commandments of God, if they do what Jesus tells them to do, then life and society will be much better. And they consider the Bible as a code of ethics. If the whole society would live according to the principles of the Bible, then life would be better. Again, we are aware this is also just valid for a short period because it is not the root of the problem.

All of us are sinners. We are imperfect human beings, and whatever we do, we will remain sinners. And because we are sinners, that will be the problem for us and for our neighbor. We live under the domination of the evil one since the fall into sin. And even if everybody lives according to the Bible, that won't solve the origin of the problem. We will remain sinners. The origin of the problem is the fall into sin, the domination of the evil one. The problem is our weaknesses.

Jesus came not just to solve our problems in daily life. Jesus didn't die for people to have a better life or to rule countries. Jesus came to offer eternal life. He wants to solve the whole problem. He knows the origin of our problem is the domination of sin. He has overcome evil, and He wants to deliver us from it. He wants to lead us into eternal fellowship with God. He wants man to live as the new creation where evil no longer exists. He is the solution for this problem. There is no other solution.

Jesus came to provide eternal life, to live in communion and fellowship with God in His kingdom where everything is pure and holy. There is no place for evil. This is His solution. This is what He came for, what He died for.

So, why do we come to Jesus?

Reprint of Spring 2019 Vision Newsletter

YOUR KINGDOM COME

From June 20 to 23, 2019, Chief Apostle Schneider visited the countries of the Dominican Republic and Haiti in the Caribbean. Following is an excerpt from the divine service he held in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic.

In Luke 11, Jesus teaches His disciples how to pray using the Lord's Prayer. First, they began with, "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name." Begin in worship, and adore God, and once you've done that, you can come with your first plea. And the very first one is, "Your kingdom come." So, Jesus wanted the disciples to know that should be your first demand, your first wish, your priority. "Your kingdom come." And dear brothers and sisters, when we come together and we pray the Lord's Prayer, that's also our first wish, our first plea: "Please, Your kingdom come." That means something. Doing so, we express our priority and we confess our faith.

Our first prayer – "Your kingdom come." That means we are aware that the Son of God came to earth to establish His kingdom. In His kingdom, there's no place for evil. Jesus Christ overcame sin and the devil to establish His kingdom. He wants to save man, to deliver them from domination, from the power of the evil one. He wants to lead them into the kingdom of God where they can enjoy eternal life, eternal fellowship with God, with no more influence and damage caused by the evil one. That is why the Son of God came to earth. That is the work of salvation done by Jesus Christ. He didn't come to do miracles. He didn't come to solve all the problems on earth. He wanted to help man and to save them, leading them into His kingdom. That is salvation, and the whole meaning and purpose of the gospel of Jesus Christ. And when we pray, "Your kingdom come," we acknowledge that Jesus came to earth to save men, to lead them into the kingdom of God because that is the will of God.

So, praying, "Your kingdom come," is a confession of our faith. Jesus wants to save us, not to heal us, not to make us rich. He wants to lead us into His kingdom. We are waiting for the return of the Lord. And those who are prepared for His return will enter His kingdom, and they will live in fellowship with God. That is why we follow Jesus Christ, and that is what we express when we pray, "Your kingdom come." We long to enter His kingdom. That is the purpose and the goal of our life, and why we remain faithful. We do not follow Christ to become better people. We follow Christ and remain faithful because we are longing to enter the kingdom of God. We are waiting for His return, and we prepare ourselves for this time.

Reprint of Autumn 2019 Vision Newsletter

CHIEF APOSTLE SCHNEIDER

2020 ADDRESS

Dear brothers and sisters,

Today marks the start of the New Year. Hopefully, the last year was a good one! It is my hope that you may always find enough reasons to give thanks to our Lord and give Him the glory for all the benefits He has bestowed!

Together with all the Apostles, I wish you a blessed and peaceful new year. And here too, my wish applies: may it be a year of joy into which we can look with confidence!

It has become something of a tradition for me to publish a message for each New Year. In agreement with the district apostles I will do the same this year as well. Our motto for the year 2020 is:

Christ makes free!

This motto derives from a Bible passage which we find in Apostle Paul's letter to the Galatians: *Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage* (Galatians 5:1).

Liberty—this is a great and precious gift! We all know this. As children of God we know that this not only applies to our earthly existence. We make liberty in Christ our top priority. So what does it mean to be free in Christ?

I would like to answer this question as follows:

- 1. The triune God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - is completely free from all constraints.** For Him there are no boundaries, no restrictions, and no rules set by others. His love for mankind is unconditional. Neither an individual's conduct nor any human imperfections have any influence on this.
- 2. As human beings, it is completely up to us to answer this love of God—or not.** We can choose liberty. In order to be redeemed, we must follow Christ.
- 3. Christ makes us free!** He desires to liberate us from sin, from evil, and from all afflictions.

Therefore our focus is on a completely different kind of freedom, namely the liberty of the soul. This is granted to us by God, and is an expression of His love for us.

For the year 2020, I recommend that we concentrate on this spiritual dynamic:

Christ makes free!

There is one thing that is especially important to me in this context.

Liberty in Christ is not an end unto itself, nor is it merely a token, nor is it anything we could have earned through our own merit. Liberty is a gift from God, which no one can earn. The Lord does not impose this upon us. But He does liberate those who desire to be liberated!

Let us allow ourselves to be liberated by the Lord by surrendering ourselves completely to the activity of the Holy Spirit. He reminds us that we are God's children. Because we know that the almighty God loves us, we can look to the future with confidence. Even in distress we trust in God. This liberates us from unnecessary worries about ourselves.

By remaining faithful to Christ, we decide over our future. Our desire is to be with Christ forever in the glorious liberty of the children of God.

Together with all the Apostles, I extend warm greetings to all of you, and wish you a good and blessed New Year filled with confidence!

- Chief Apostle Schneider

Reprint of Winter 2019 Vision Newsletter

Culture

*Giving and
Thanksgiving*

AN ATTITUDE OF GRATITUDE

At the end of February 2015, I was in Peru for a youth weekend. During one of the lunches, a young sister sat next to me and showed me some pictures of her small congregation in the jungle and the different events that they do there. In some of the pictures she showed me, there were festive dinners being hosted. She explained to me that her congregation has these dinners at the end of the year to show appreciation to the people who have different roles in the congregation. One dinner is for the ministers, another for the children, and yet another for the choir members.

These acts of appreciation done in this jungle congregation touched me and made me reflect on how gratitude can change our attitude towards one another. Perhaps some congregations in the USA already host dinners to show appreciation, but what else can we do to show that we value each one for their role in the congregation? More importantly, why should we take the time to let others know that we are grateful for them?

God has called and equipped us with individual gifts and skills to use in the Body of Christ. And what do we do with these gifts and skills? They are not something we use to serve ourselves; we use them in our congregations to serve each other and Christ. Next time you are in your congregation, look at your brothers and sisters and recognize that they are doing something for you by using their spiritual gifts, even if they might not think about it in that way. Looking at it in this light can help us to understand why it is essential to show our thankfulness to them.

We don't want to be passive in our gratitude towards others. By this, I mean that we can't just only think, "Wow, that's nice of this person to do this." What's stopping us from telling the person that we are thankful for them and their willingness to serve? Let us strive to be active in our gratitude, whether it's hosting a dinner, singing a song of thankfulness, or saying a simple "thank you." By adopting an attitude of gratitude, our minds are cleared of anything negative that might take its place. Criticism and complaining cease to exist when there is an environment of gratitude in a congregation.

Something I recently learned is that the month of October is Pastor/Minister Appreciation Month in the Christian community. This is celebrated on the second Sunday of October. Sometimes we don't realize all of the things our ministers do for us; and that everything they do is in addition to their regular jobs and caring for their families. While our ministers don't serve in order to receive thanks or gifts, it is important that they know we appreciate

everything that they do to guide and support us on our spiritual journeys. If you are looking for an opportunity to thank your minister and show your love for him, I would suggest doing something special for all of your congregational ministers on October 11, the celebratory day of Minister Appreciation Month.

Sharing our gratitude for one another is sometimes overlooked, but it is such a simple thing to do. The young sister in Peru reminded me of this and she inspired me to relay these thoughts to you. Let us all work on instilling active gratitude in our congregations to help cultivate joy in serving and the warm fellowship mentioned in our Mission statement.

- LRK

Reprint of Summer 2015 Vision Newsletter

STEWARDSHIP: WHAT DO WE DO WITH WHAT GOD HAS GIVEN US?

As we approach the autumn season, it is customary for me to write to you about our New Apostolic Thanksgiving Day. For those of you who have diligently saved during the year and intend to give a special expression of your thanks to God with your offering, I thank God for your faith and am inspired by your example.

This Thanksgiving season, I would like to introduce a new perspective to our understanding of offering. This perspective comes directly from the teachings of Christ and is called stewardship. Allow me to explain it this way:

Stewardship may require an evolution in our thinking and a different level of Christian understanding from which to view our lives. It begins with the knowledge that God has called us to follow a unique path of service and love to Him and to others, according to the teachings of Jesus Christ. This is His purpose for our lives. He has given us many gifts to equip us on our paths; **in fact, all that we have are His gifts to us:**

- The gift of our physical existence; our lives and health
- Our time; a lifetime of opportunity
- The grace of Jesus
- The presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives; the gift of Divine Childhood in God
- Our unique spiritual giftedness which can be identified through Work of Ministry
- Our relationships with our parents, spouse, children; family and friends
- Our wealth or material possessions

These things really belong to Him, not to us. He has given them to us to glorify Him and to serve His purpose. A steward is someone who manages the possessions of another with the highest level of trust.

We see that Jesus described this relationship between God and us in many parables. Perhaps most notable is the parable of the talents which we can find in the 25th chapter of Matthew. I would ask you to read this parable carefully and ponder these points:

- Each servant received something different “to each according to his own ability” from his “lord.” We see here that not everyone receives the same gifts.
- The lord of the parable then leaves these servants to care for his talents “in trust” during his absence.
- But each one is expected to account for their use of the lord’s talents. He expected them to be good stewards over His gifts.

- It was not acceptable to ignore the talent or to plead ignorance as to what to do with it.

And then it is interesting that this parable leads directly into Christ's comments on the judging of the nations as sheep or goats.

All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on His right hand, "Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me." (Matthew 25:32-36)

Perhaps here is the purpose that God has called us to and for which He has gifted us.

I would like to continue this discussion of stewardship and add to our awareness over the coming months. Let me conclude this segment with a few final thoughts on offering and money:

Jesus defines "blessing" in a new way. Our offering is given out of thankfulness for God's blessing in our lives. God's blessing is often associated with natural abundance such as wealth and good fortune, like Abraham. Conversely, consider the parable of Job. His friends assume God has removed His blessing from Job's life because of his natural calamities and they unfairly judge him.

But Jesus paints a different picture in His teachings. In the Beatitudes, He tells the poor, the meek, the mourners and the persecuted that they are blessed also, but links blessing to the Kingdom of Heaven. Our Chief Apostle recently emphasized that in this way, Jesus defines blessing. It is anything that God gives or allows that brings us closer to the Kingdom. Hence, some conditions may be a blessing that are not pleasant to experience and may not include wealth and health. Please be careful of the idea that our offerings will lead to prosperity.

Materialism: This is a powerful negative force that takes us in the opposite direction of stewardship. Here, the individual spends their God-given giftedness in the pursuit of things that *moth and rust destroys*. [Matthew 6:20] Further, this individual says: "I am what I own. I define my life's purpose, even my self-worth, by my possessions." This path can be quite destructive. We are inundated with messages that reinforce the myth that material possessions bring respect, acceptance, and purpose to our lives. When taken to the extreme, this path leads away from a true Christian life of peace and love towards God and each other. There are startling statistics that indicate just how indebted our society has become in the pursuit of materialism and the effects this has on spiritual, emotional, and even physical health.

Lastly, it is quite interesting to recognize just how focused Jesus Christ was on this subject. It would be much easier for us to avoid the subject of money completely; it is an uncomfortable topic. However, Jesus dedicated a significant number of His teaching parables

to the subject of our relationship with money, so we must conclude that it is an important part of our decision to walk as disciples with Him.

Perhaps we find ourselves in the dilemma of the servant who buried his talent. Perhaps he didn't know how to manage the gift that he received. Likewise, perhaps some of our members have a heart to help others and to support the cause of Christ, but are prevented by a lack of financial skills. Take just a moment to consider the parable of the Good Samaritan. How would the story be different if he had a heart filled with compassion, but no funds? He had both the heart to help and the ability to give.

Stewardship, in the form of healthy financial habits, is a common problem for many folks today. If you or someone you love could use some help in this area, you are not alone. There are resources available that approach this subject from a Christian perspective. In the hopes of helping each member be a better steward over God's gifts and to live a more peaceful, balanced, and fulfilled Christian life, the church will provide access to these resources in the coming months and will announce their arrival as they come on line.

Reprint of Autumn 2015 Vision Newsletter

GRATUITOUS

Adjective

1. given, done, bestowed, or obtained without charge or payment; free; voluntary.
2. being without apparent reason, cause, or justification
3. given without receiving any return value

What have you been blessed with? What has God given to you?

When we think of everything that God has entrusted to us we are often moved to thankfulness. But what is the next step after gratitude? What can we do to show God that we are not only thankful, but that we want to glorify Him with all we've been given? We can turn to Matthew 10:8:

Freely you have received; freely give.

As we are humbled by the abundance that God bestows on our lives, these thoughts must turn into action. The action of giving like Christ did, with no conditions or expectations.

In the 2014 Pentecost service, Chief Apostle Schneider said that one of the effects of God's love is that He is always the giver.

He gives without calculation. He gives without expecting anything in return. He gives without stipulating any conditions...The Lord Jesus gave His life for all, without any conditions. He has given us the gift of the Holy Spirit. And I am sure we all agree: without any merit on our part... He gives because He loves us. So if we truly have love then we also have to be those who give it. We too are to give to others without calculation and without expecting anything in return.

Think again of what God has given you. Maybe you are thankful for your spiritual gifts, your relationships, your health, or the time you have to make experiences and learn new things. How can you freely give these things to others? Can you give these things without calculation or without stipulating certain conditions? How can you give away things like time or health?

If we can stay in the frame of mind that the things in our lives really belong to God and not to us, as discussed in the article on stewardship, the natural response inspires us to give freely.

Through our giving to others we are drawn into a closer fellowship and likeness to God and His Son. Acts 20:35 is a verse we are familiar with: It is more blessed to give than to receive. As our relationship with Christ grows, we clearly see that true joy in Christ is found in giving.

How can our congregations embrace the concept of gratuitousness? It's very clearly defined in our Vision by the phrase, to create "a church in which people feel at home." When we can "give without calculation," we display our love for those to whom we give. This culture of giving and serving is a key aspect in fulfilling our Vision and is a responsibility that is inherent in all of Christianity.

Who we are, and what we have, has been given to us so that we can place it at the service of others. Freely we have received, freely we must give. Our task is to make it bear fruit in good works. - Pope Francis

Reprint of Autumn 2015 Vision Newsletter

STEWARDSHIP: LIVING A LIFE RICH TOWARD GOD

As promised in the Autumn 2015 Vision, we will include an ongoing series of articles on the subject of stewardship and this is the next installment. You may remember that the concept of Christian stewardship revolves around the belief that all that we have in life is a gift in trust from God. This gift is given to us to manage as stewards - to His glory and for His purpose. It includes every aspect of our life: our time, energy, passions, spiritual giftedness, relationships, and possessions. They all belong to Him and He has given them to us, but expects us to account for them one day as Jesus described in the parable of the talents.

In this article we will focus on this powerful idea that God has a unique purpose for each of our lives. Our Chief Apostle spoke to this concept in a recent service in Switzerland using Jesus' teaching parable of the rich farmer (Luke 12:15-21). It may be helpful to read these verses carefully and then consider these points which our Chief Apostle highlights:

- Jesus has no quarrel with the farmer's prosperity. He earned it fairly. But notice that he does not see his good fortune as a gift from God and gives Him no thanks or honor for it.
- Furthermore, the farmer decides that all of his prosperity should be dedicated to self-gratification. His conversation is with no one but his own soul and his plans include no one but himself. We see no vision of a God-directed purpose for his life or a sense of responsibility for others. The Gospel is so clear on this point! Jesus taught and lived a life dedicated to others. He referred often to His life's purpose: to do the will of God who sent Him, who loves Him and whom He loves in return. His love and compassion for others, especially those who were in need, also drove His decisions and plans. This is a special life, a life richly lived. In the parable, Jesus calls this a life "rich toward God."
- Lastly, notice how Jesus points out the danger of the man's short term view of life. At that single moment in time, his life appears to be successful, rewarding and well lived. But see how quickly the accounting changes when in the next moment, God requires his soul. When the perspective shifts and a lifetime is viewed from eternity, the definition of a rich life changes. Now the moments lived to the glory and purpose of God and for the good of others can be seen in their true light and their true value.

This closely mirrors Jesus warning to the church in Revelation 3:14-17: *Because you say, "I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing" - and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked.*

That's so tragic. Who wants that said about their life?

*I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, **that you may see.***

So with our Chief Apostle's urging in mind, I would be wise to ask myself some important questions:

If my life were lived "rich toward God" what would it look like? Would it look (perhaps feel) different than it does right now? Is it time to make some changes?

Reprint of Winter 2015 Vision Newsletter

STEWARDSHIP: SUPPORTING A FRUITFUL LIFE

In previous articles comprising an ongoing series, we have examined different elements of Christian Stewardship. Fundamentally, it is the concept that God has gifted us with all we possess in life and that He requires us to be good stewards over His gifts. Moreover, He expects us to use His gifts to glorify Him and to further His purpose. Jesus advised us to live a life rich toward God.

In His teachings, Jesus often described our God-given calling or life's purpose in terms of fruitfulness and abundance. In John 15:16, He makes this statement to His disciples: *You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit. What did He mean by this?* First, He makes clear that He has intentions for us, that our lives are not random. Further, He wants us to live a fruitful life.

Fruitfulness is a state of identity. One author labeled it as “the outward expression of the inward nature”. The identity, or inward nature of a tree, can be determined by its fruit or outward expression. Apple trees only produce apples, but what differs from apple tree to apple tree is the measure of the harvest. It may be abundant or it may be modest; sadly, it may also be nonexistent and therefore its identity remains invisible and its purpose unrealized.

What outward expression identifies the inward nature of a Christian life? Apostle Paul paints a clear picture of a life rooted in the Spirit of Jesus Christ in his letter to the Galatians. *But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control* (Galatians 5:22-23).

People often evaluate personal satisfaction or happiness in terms of their “quality of life.” Paul is describing quality of the highest order. A life growing out of the nature of Jesus is a beautiful life and deeply satisfying, as evidenced by its fruit. And here is a paradox. A powerful truth is often hidden within this life because on the surface we associate growing in the nature of Jesus with labor, self-sacrifice, and service to others. The more we strive selflessly to create a harvest within the vineyard, where the Lord has employed us and taught us by His example, the more we create a life to be savored personally and eternally. Being fruitful is both the labor and the reward. Coupled with the grace of Jesus, it leads to life eternal within the Kingdom of God.

What could keep us from being fruitful? Jesus spoke to this directly in the parable of the sower or four-fold field. This parable is described in Matthew 13:3-23, Mark 4:3-25 and Luke

8:5-18, and each Gospel writer adds something unique to our understanding. Please read each account carefully in a quiet moment as there is so much we can learn. Jesus explains to His disciples also in a quiet moment that this parable is about the Kingdom of God. His Word is a seed that, when planted within our hearts, is intended to bring a harvest of the Kingdom into our lives.

In some lives, the harvest is abundant. The abundance may be different from soul to soul, but sometimes there is no harvest at all because of the condition of the field (the soul) it is planted in. Jesus describes one of the fields as thorny ground. Mark recounts Jesus' explanation this way: *Now these are the ones sown among thorns; they are the ones who hear the word, and the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things entering in choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful* (Mark 4: 18-19).

We see that the thorny ground actually has three different elements. We have already addressed the “deceitfulness (the lie) of riches” and “the desires for other things” (materialism) and their dangers in a previous article. Let's focus on “the cares of this world.” These cares should not be underestimated. We all have felt their stress and their ability to choke us with worry and concern for our daily bread. This anxiety has the power to destroy the fruit of the Spirit that Paul describes in his letter to the Galatians and to leave our lives empty of our identity in Christ and our spiritual purpose.

Therefore, the “thorny” condition of the soul becomes a matter of great spiritual concern for the church. Jesus said that this will keep many from the Kingdom of God. If the church can help our members solve this condition and learn to be freed from financial pressures, they can move forward toward more fruitful lives in Jesus Christ. This is an important element of stewardship that can transform us. Good stewardship can be taught and this kind of teaching can help all live a life of greater peace and security.

The techniques for teaching Christian stewardship applications and the tools and resources for supporting personal financial health will be introduced and made available to our members in a unique and flexible format later this year. Each interested member will be able to choose the format and path that matches their unique circumstances and preferences. Financial health often involves making life changes that can be difficult and goes beyond just knowledge. Some congregations may decide to make this an ongoing outreach ministry which serves their broader community.

In conclusion, it is amazing to see how relevant the Gospel is today. Jesus' parable so accurately describes conditions that current experts in the field of behavioral finance recognize as an epidemic of poor financial health which can deteriorate physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual wellbeing; the very quality of life. Let's heed the advice of Jesus, the Lord of the harvest, and be wise stewards. We can support one another in creating good ground for the Word of God and live fruitful lives. Let's labor for His Kingdom. It's a beautiful life.

CONTENT AND THANKFUL

I recently read about a Puritan man long ago who sat down to a meal of bread and water. He bowed his head in prayer and declared – “All this and Jesus too?” Truly a wonderful example of contentment and thankfulness.

David expressed his contentment as well in his words in Psalm 23 – *The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want!* Contentment and gratitude are linked together. When one is thankful for what they have, they are content. And when one is content in their life, they are thankful. From this we can understand that being content is a choice – I shall not want! Let us never misinterpret the expression, “Always thankful, never satisfied,” that the District Apostle Kraus often intoned. His expression revealed that we should always be filled with thankfulness for all God provides, but never be satisfied with ourselves, our work, or our efforts because we can never deserve the grace that Christ shares with us.

It is always good to remember the words of Solomon in Ecclesiastes 5:15 – *As he came from his mother’s womb, naked shall he return, to go as he came; and he shall take nothing from his labor which he may carry away in his hand.* Hence, we really own nothing, but simply use it while we are here in this life, borrowed from God, the Creator of all. And as Jesus explained, we are not defined by these things, for *one’s life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses* (Luke 12:15). It then begs the question – how is one defined then? The Lord clearly told Samuel, *the Lord looks at the heart* (1 Samuel 16:7).

As we come into the Thanksgiving season again and as we complete this year together, let us see to it that our hearts are filled with contentment for what our loving Father has bestowed upon us, even though it may seem difficult from our view. Our contentment shows our trust in His omnipotence – He is with us always and will provide for us out of His divine providence. In thankfulness we can then exclaim – “What can I ask of Your providence more?”

Reprint of District Apostle’s introduction letter from Autumn 2016 Vision Newsletter

IS GIVING IMPORTANT?

As we contemplate this year the behavior that glorifies God, our Father, we realize the life of a Christian has many aspects. It begins with believing in Christ's life, teaching, death, resurrection, and ascension into His Father's kingdom. With this, we know that if we believe in Him and have faith in His teachings, then we must also act according to these teachings. As Christians, we are called to witness and testify of God's presence in our lives; we are called to worship Him; we are called to serve Him by serving those around us. And we are called to give; give of our life, our time, our money, our love.

This is the first article in a series that addresses some important questions: How should a Christian, steeped in the Gospel, view the subject of giving? What in our lives can we give in order to praise and offer thanks to God? Further to our understanding, terms such as giving, offering, and tithing are often used interchangeably with different interpretations of their meanings and significance.

Objectively, we may see many factors that have influenced our thinking. We have gathered our understandings from various sources in both the Old and New Testament, but also from our culture and traditions. It is important that our beliefs are accurate and reflect the teachings of Jesus to remain relevant today in shaping our decisions and behavior.

For many, the subject of giving is shrouded in mystery, lack of transparency, and discomfort, as though the subject of our giving should not be discussed openly. However, Jesus did not shy away from the topic. He was quite transparent. While He advised the Pharisees to keep their personal giving secret to teach humility and avoid a self-promotional public display, the subject of giving was not taboo.

Perhaps we may have been influenced by the thinking that the church does not need our giving. Clearly, God does not need our money, but the visible church, a distinctly human institution, requires the financial support of the believers. Jesus intentionally created this institution, charged it with His mission, and then placed the responsibility for managing it into human hands. He gave His Spirit to lead our decision-making, but He did not give us an endowment to fund the mission. He left that to us. The institutional human church is dependent upon our giving to fulfill the Divine purpose found within the Great Commission: *Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age* (Matthew 28:19-20).

But, beyond the practical needs of the church lies one very important, vital fact: believers have a need to give - *for their own spiritual growth!* How do we know this? Because the Gospel tells us so.

Over this series of articles, we would like to explore the origins of our present beliefs, clarify assumptions and terminology, and provide a sound and authentic understanding of Christian giving based upon the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the writings of the apostles, and the New Apostolic doctrine.

However, before we begin, let's acknowledge that a search for simple, easy rules by which to live our life may leave us a bit frustrated. We won't find a checklist in the Bible. Jesus intentionally moves away from strict definitions and easy-to-apply formulas in favor of self-responsibility, self-discipline, and the condition or attitude of the giver's heart. Not surprisingly, just like the limitless generosity of God towards humankind embodied in the sacrifice of Jesus to pay for our salvation, the Gospel is quite open-ended on the subject of giving. It is rooted in the law or commandment of love towards God and our neighbor.

We will examine this topic from three perspectives, in future articles:

GIVING IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

In the Old Testament, we can trace the origins of giving as an expression of worship starting very early in history with Cain and Abel and continuing as a thread through the lives of the patriarchs. We will also discover the very practical concept of tithing as prescribed within Mosaic Law. What is a tithe? What was it used for? You may find some interesting, and possibly surprising, discoveries that shed light on our own experience today.

GIVING ACCORDING TO THE GOSPEL OF CHRIST

Jesus had a lot to say about giving. But what did He say about tithing? Was it relevant to Him and should it be for us today? And what did He say about the heart of the giver? And lastly, what will we learn about giving and mission from His example and supreme sacrifice?

GIVING ACCORDING TO THE TEACHINGS OF THE FIRST APOSTLES

The writings of the first apostles describe their struggle to embrace the divine mission of Christ and to convert it into the daily functions of a human institution. We can see a very practical side of the church.

Our series will conclude with some observations and teachings from our Chief Apostle to help us pull it all together. We look forward to sharing the journey with you and hope to make some wonderful discoveries together with real life applications.

*This article is taken from a study done by the NAC-USA Work Group Giving, comprised of apostles, ministers, and members.

Reprint of Spring 2017 Vision Newsletter

GLORY BE TO GOD, OUR FATHER

As we move forward in this year, we want to continue exploring our theme - **Glory be to God, our Father**. Recall that as we become more aware of God's perfection, love, and peace, we are humbled and become more and more thankful. The psalmist had a wonderful expression as he realized these things in Psalm 16:2: *You are my Lord, my goodness is nothing apart from You* (NKJV). Another translation expresses it this way: *You are the Lord, my only source of well-being* (BET).

Such movements in our soul motivate us to change our behavior in a way that glorifies God. Our worship of Him is one behavior that brings God glory. As we have discussed in past articles, worship can be expressed in a multitude of ways. One form of worship is giving.

In giving, we acknowledge that everything we have comes from Him, the Creator of all. And from this little we have, we want give something, albeit meager, back to our Father so that it can be used for His purposes. Such giving helps advance and maintain the church as a place where people can see and experience the glory of God through His word, His sacraments, and our communal expression of worship to Him. Thus, giving is not simply a kind gesture to our neighbor or someone in need, nor a nice offering. Giving is rooted in the culture of those that love and worship God; those to whom He has given His life in the gift of the Holy Spirit.

As we continue to step forward, we would like to discover the deeper aspects of giving, specifically as a form of worship to God, our Father and I ask you to ponder these ideas personally.

Reprint of District Apostle's introduction letter from Summer 2017 Vision Newsletter

OUR MOTIVATION

What does it mean to truly serve someone? There are many different expressions our serving can take when we try to help someone who needs it. The idea of serving someone is not just a religious ideal. Many people who are not religious see the need to serve those around them because it is the morally right thing to do or because it promotes unity and love among people. As Christians, our motivation to serve others can also touch on doing the right thing and promoting unity and love, but there is also a deeper element to it: we serve because of Christ.

Christ came to earth as the ultimate servant. His motivation? To do His Father's will to offer salvation to all people. When we serve others, we also want to have Christ's motivation, that we make God's offer of salvation known to them and that they experience the love of Christ. Jesus was able to stay true to His Father's will because of His love for the ones He came to save. His love for all people is pure. One of the greatest examples of His pure love is when He is hanging on the cross and asks His Father to forgive those who persecuted Him. In order to truly serve those around us and to live our lives according to God's will, we must also have pure love in our hearts. An example of such a servant was noticed by one of our members. Recently, one of our sisters passed away due to cancer. During her life, she touched many people, but made a special impression on one particular person. This person was inspired to reach out to her family to let them know the impact she had on him. His testimony is shared below:

She is a mother to me. The many sacrifices she made through the many years are so significant that I can't imagine our lives if it was not for her kindness and love. Her actions and examples, without lectures or preaching, restore my faith continuously even in the most difficult times. I owe the life that I know to her. Many wonderful people have touched my life, but none as decisively as she has. I love her, not because of what she did, but because of who she is. A true mother. My tears are of gratefulness for what goes way beyond what can be seen.

We can see that the way this sister lived her life and served those around her made such an impact on this man's life, that he is forever changed because of her. Through this man's testimony, we can see the result of what it means to be a true servant to those around us. The love she had for others and her love for Jesus Christ filled her completely. When we serve others, we also want to have pure love in our hearts as we strive to do our Father's will.

What if love isn't our motivation? Some may think that one of the results of our serving others is to bring them into our congregation, to hear the divine Word and partake in the sacraments. While this is always a nice outcome, this result cannot be our motivation. The success of our serving is not defined by the number of people we encourage to come to our church. Whether one accepts our invitation to come to church or not, we are called to love them regardless. This love shows that we are not focused on visible success, such as an increase in people who come to our church. Rather, we are focused solely on serving others.

Sometimes God tests us and wants to see if we really love others as He does. When we serve others, we hope that maybe they will come to experience God in our church. But if we do not see this outcome, we may start to cast blame – on ourselves or the people we are trying to serve. This is proof that our love is not sincere. We are maybe only looking for success, or glory, or self-satisfaction. The true focus of our serving must always be love, so that we love others no matter what happens, no matter what the outcome is, no matter if we never see them again.

When our motivation is our Father's will and the love of Jesus fills us, then we can serve others out of His love so that they may also be filled. We want others to experience what we have experienced and so we share Jesus with them, knowing that He is the one who has the power to transform their lives.

*This article is based on thoughts from Chief Apostle Schneider.

Reprint of Summer 2017 Vision Newsletter

THE GIVING NATURE OF GOD

In our efforts to learn behaviors that glorify God, we discussed in the last two newsletters a study done by our work group on the topic of giving. The resulting reference paper was introduced at our National Synod, and will be disseminated to all our members using several themes to highlight various aspects of this topic. The first in the series is *Giving is Love*.

When we think about both giving and love, we must turn to the almighty God. He is the giver of all perfect and good gifts [ref: James 1:17], and He, alone, is the genesis and essence of love. Anything to do with love must find its source in Him.

In His love, He gave life to Adam and Eve. He gave them, and us, the creation to care for [ref: Genesis 1:29]. In the creation, we find a sustaining power also born out of His love that continually renews life until this day. There is also an evolving power that permits the creation to adapt to time and the changing environment, even under the burden of a polluting, sinful humankind.

However, the greatest gift God gave was His incarnation in Jesus Christ, who in turn also gave. Foremost, He suffered and gave His life for our salvation. He gave us the gospel to learn the ways of His kingdom, the church as the assembly of believers, and the apostolate to testify of Him. These gifts also have sustaining and evolving characteristics. Further, He gave His words, which are the bread of life for us, and the water of baptism, which brings us into a special closeness with God.

In pondering the love and giving nature of our God, let us allow His love, which has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, to overtake us so we also may, in turn, be givers in love.

Reprint of District Apostle's introduction letter from Autumn 2017 Vision Newsletter

GIVING IS LOVE

Giving is...

Giving allows us to give expression to our passions, interests, and feelings by offering ourselves and our resources to help advance them. As Christians, giving is an integral part of our faith and a vital part of our profession to the world that we are followers of Jesus.

We would like to discover together some deeper aspects of giving in all its forms. In this article, we'll focus on giving is love. Upcoming Vision Newsletters will introduce faith, joy, worship, mission, sacrifice, and secret – all aspects of giving.

We pray that these articles will serve to inspire a new understanding of Christian giving and a new desire to demonstrate God's love to the world through a renewed willingness to share what we've been blessed with.

Giving is love...

Our desire to give begins and ends with God. John wrote in 1 John 4:16, *God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him.* It is love that has brought us from the brink of despair into fellowship with God. It is the love God has shown us that fuels our passion to share with others what we have been given. When we recognize that we are unworthy to receive all that God has given us, we must respond in love towards our God and our neighbors. This love prompts us to give freely from what we've been blessed with.

Following God's example

We're often told to hold on to the things that are most precious to us, and for good reason. Whatever we consider most precious is very valuable to us – it is instinctual for us to safeguard these things. Because of this, we may be reluctant to share what is precious to us out of fear that we will not get them back or have our generosity reciprocated. But let us understand that giving is love. And our guiding example for how to love is God, Himself, who is love. We must learn to love as He loves – unconditionally and without concern for reciprocation. So how do we learn to give unconditionally from those things that are most precious to us, our very best? Follow God's example.

In John 3:16, the Bible says, *For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.* God's creation is sin-filled and broken. And yet, this has not deterred His love from us. Instead, He further proved His love by giving the very best He had to all people: His son, Jesus Christ. The sacrifice of His Son was not given for just the people of that time, but rather for all people in all times. And so, we can feel that God continues to look upon us with love.

In Romans 5:8, Paul wrote, *But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.* This verse speaks to the unconditional nature of God's love for humankind. The sacrifice that Christ brought on the cross for sinners showed that there was no activity, no good work, which anyone could do to receive God's grace and reprieve from their sins. It was only by the gift of Jesus Christ that redemption could be received. *While we were still sinners,* Jesus gave His life for us. God's love is unconditionally given to His creation and we are called, as disciples of Jesus, to share this unconditional love we have been given.

Giving reflects three commandments

We know that meeting the needs of others is important to Jesus because it serves both God and His children. This importance is laid out in three commandments that Jesus gave:

- *Jesus said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the first and great commandment. (Matthew 22:37-38)*
- *And the second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (Matthew 22:39)*
- *A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. (John 13:34)*

Throughout Jesus' life, we see the compassion that He had for the needs of those around Him. He gave beyond what the law required at that time because of the compassion and love He had for people, and because of His desire to do His Father's will. Out of this same desire, we see that a Christian gives beyond the tithe to honor God and to provide others with what they need because we feel compassion for the needs of others. Jesus gave beyond the law. He gave everything, including His life, because He loved God, and thereby became the embodiment of God's love towards us. It was what God wanted and what we needed. Christian giving is a function of our love towards God and each other, and is our response to meet the needs of others.

Jesus teaches further, through the parables, specific attitudes and actions that connect giving with serving others. In Luke 10:30-35, you can read the parable of the Good Samaritan. The Good Samaritan saw the need of another and responded with the compassion and love of God. But he didn't just do the minimum and take the injured person to a place to receive help. Instead, he bandaged him, set him on his own animal, took him to an inn, and then he established a plan with the innkeeper so that the man would be fully cared for even after the Good Samaritan had moved on. When we give out of the love of God, we will go beyond the

minimum of what is expected and we will try our best to fully care for a person's needs. You may be saying to yourself that it's not possible for you to do that. And this is true; this kind of compassion and love is impossible when you rely on only yourself. But, when you are fully surrendered to God and moved by the Holy Spirit, **you can love unconditionally** and go beyond what is expected.

Believers give with the confidence that their reward is assured by their belief in Jesus Christ, and it awaits them in the kingdom of God. But this is not why we give. When our giving is a response prompted by the love we have received, no thought is spared for what we have given or what we will gain as a reward. This perspective, based on the parable of the sheep and goats found in Matthew 25, is expounded upon further in the third session of the October small group discussions.

What do I have to give?

Those who *have* give to those who *have not*. This is what God wants for us. In a sense, it is why we have been given what we have, in order that we may give it away. We receive God's merciful love through Jesus Christ and His sacrifice, both freely and undeservedly. We can express God's merciful love to others when we give to them. 2 Corinthians 8:9 reads, *For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you by His poverty might become rich.* We are only rich through Christ because of His love for us, and we can share that wealth with others. In some way or another, most of us have experienced a period of poverty – whether that meant having little money or receiving little love. These experiences help us to be compassionate to those we see in a similar state. If you can relate to someone in need and be empathetic of their circumstances, then let your love for them be genuine. Work hard to meet their needs because you already have all that you need to do so. And if all you have to give to a person is the love of Jesus, that is the greatest gift that can ever be shared!

Who are the needy that we are called to give to? Engage the Holy Spirit to lead you towards those who are in need of help. They are all around you, in your neighborhoods, workplaces, families, congregations... Believe that you have been placed and equipped by God, and are in position to serve a purpose for His kingdom each day. Strive to live with your eyes and heart open, and be Spirit-guided as you seek to share the love and compassion of the Lord. You don't have to do this work alone. As Paul taught the early church, the community of believers together can identify the needs of others and utilize their shared gifts and resources to aid groups of people who are in dire circumstances.

Conclusion

Giving is love. God is love. Our desire and willingness to give is rooted in the love that has been showered upon us by our God. Giving what we have is a reflection of this love back to Him and to all around us. Our Heavenly Father has led the way in showing us how

love drives giving when He sent His Son to redeem humankind with His sacrifice. Through Jesus Christ, we have been made rich, and God has supplied us with the things we need in order to be able to care for the needs of others. Let's be captured by the love of God and unconditionally share our love for Him and for those in need by sharing and caring for others. We demonstrate our love, for God and others, when we give.

Reprint of Autumn 2017 Vision Newsletter

GIVING IS FAITH

So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. 1 Corinthians 3:7 NIV

Disciples of Jesus Christ put their faith and trust in Him, and follow His teachings. Jesus teaches us the following in Luke 6:38 – **Give, and it will be given to you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over will be put into your bosoms. For with the same measure that you use, it will be measured back to you.**

In this teaching, Jesus is directing the listeners to have a willingness to give, and He assures them that if they are obedient in their giving, they can be confident that God will always care for them. For the one who is generous, they will receive back what they need in full measure. Are you willing to put your faith in that teaching? Be reminded that Hebrews teaches us that *faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen*. When Jesus is the One you are looking to and who your hope is in, He will give you the strength to walk by faith and give without the worry that you will not have enough for yourself.

When we follow God willingly and obediently in our giving, we demonstrate our faith. All that we have, whether it is a little or a lot, is a gift from God. It is by His grace alone. Just as God has been generous and faithful to us, we are called to be generous with all that we have received. But sometimes fear overwhelms faith. With the uncertainty of the time we live in, the concerns that many have over their employment and the economy, fear of insecurity can be an obstacle that diminishes one's desire and willingness to give. Be encouraged during those turbulent times of life to steady your faith in Jesus, who is the author and finisher of faith (Hebrews 12:2). He has done all things necessary for us to endure in our faith. He will always be faithful to us and the Scriptures are proof of this. Read about the Israelites, and the experiences of Abraham, Moses, Joshua, David, etc...Through their experiences, we see how God fulfilled His promises and remained faithful to them all. And just as Jesus taught the disciples not to worry about what they will wear and what they will eat, we should take this encouragement to heart and hand over our worry and fear to Jesus (Matthew 6:31).

Paul taught the following to the believers in Corinth: **So let each one give as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound toward you, that you, always having all sufficiency in all things, may have an abundance for every good work (2 Corinthians 9:7-8).**

If the question wells up within you about whether or not you can afford to give of your money, joy, time, etc... keep this lesson from Paul in mind. If one who is obedient and faithful with what one has been given and shares it as the Spirit guides them, they will experience how God continually provides.

Think for a moment about the work a Sunday School teacher does. They give their time and use their gifts, passions, and energy to teach young students. They share what they have been given. They don't know exactly what the child will grow up to be like, but they have hope that their work will inspire that young person to grow up with a thirst for the knowledge of God. Or think about the work of parents. Parents give to their children out of what they have received. They set an example and, in faith, hope that their children will grow up and follow their lead. This goes beyond the material things and extends to the giving of time, a listening ear, compassion, and so on. Again, parents do not know exactly what their children will grow up to be like, but they give of themselves in faith, hoping that they make a positive impact. God knows our good deeds and when we act according to His will, we believe He will bless all that is done, bringing us closer to Him and others. In this way, our giving is faith.

When we give by faith, then what we share with others will be acceptable to our God. In the story of Cain and Abel, the two brothers brought their offerings and presented them to God. The Bible tells us that *the Lord respected Abel and his offering, but He did not respect Cain and his offering* (Genesis 4:4-5). The reason why God accepted one and not the other wasn't explained in Genesis, but the author of Hebrews offers us some clarity in Hebrews 11:4 (ESV) - **By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he was commended as righteous, God commending him by accepting his gifts. And through his faith, though he died, he still speaks. Abel's offering was acceptable in the sight of God simply because of his faith.**

Because of his faith and his desire to do the right thing, he was commended as righteous. And even after his death, Abel's faith still spoke loudly. His actions were, and still are, an example for all to follow. The intention isn't for us to give out of obligation or because we will receive a reward if we do. We are to give out of our love for the Lord and out of our faithfulness to Him. We are to share what we have with the right heart's intention. Then, our offering will also be commended as righteous, and our faith will speak loudly to the world around us.

The concern of God is not how much we have, but how faithful we are. Our willingness to give demonstrates our faith in God and our confidence that He will always care for those who have surrendered their hearts to Him. In Luke 12:48, as part of an answer to Peter, Jesus said, **"For everyone whom much is given, from him much will be required; and to whom much has been committed, of him they will ask the more."**

Jesus is emphasizing here that great privilege brings great responsibility. The greatest privilege given is to be children of God. When we believe that we received that title through faith, then whether we have a little or a lot, we will be led by the Holy Spirit to utilize what we have in the service of Him.

Giving is faith because it is out of our confidence in God and our devotion to Jesus that we obediently share what we have in full knowledge that our God will always care for us.

This doesn't mean that we should have the expectation that if we give \$10, God will reward us with \$100. Or that if we serve with our car, that He will one day reward us with one that is brand new. Our God will continue to be faithful to us and will provide us with those things we need in order to continue to serve Him by serving others. May this teaching on **giving is faith** strengthen your understanding of God's faithfulness to you and your desire to share with others because of your commitment and faithfulness to Him.

Reprint of Spring 2018 Vision Newsletter

A SEASON OF THANKSGIVING

Many of the holidays we celebrate in our church are preceded by a season that builds our anticipation of the celebration. For Christmas, we have Advent. For Easter, we have Passiontide and Holy Week. For Pentecost, we have Eastertide.

Let us also create a season of Thanksgiving to carry us towards this holiday. During this season, we have the opportunity to be intentionally aware of what God has given us, to increase our joy in Him, and to strengthen our trust in Him. Starting on the first Sunday of October, each service leading up to Thanksgiving Sunday will focus on an aspect of giving thanks to God:

- 1. Gratitude for God, the Father**
- 2. Gratitude for Jesus Christ**
- 3. Gratitude for the Holy Spirit**
- 4. Gratitude for the church of Christ**
- 5. Gratitude for the salvation power for the departed**
- 6. Gratitude for our congregations and our childhood in God**

We encourage you to think more about these six aspects of gratitude and how you can help create this season of Thanksgiving in your congregation. You may also want to use the themes of *Giving is love* and *Giving is faith* to help guide these ideas.

Reprint of Summer 2018 Vision Newsletter

GIVING IS JOY

Overtaken by God's incredible love and faithfulness to us, we recognize the honor it is to reflect His love by sharing it with those around us. We love because we believe in Christ. We believe because He loves us. We have joy because Christ has invited us into a relationship with God. Because of the love, faith, and joy that we have received from Him, we give because we know we are loved, we know who we are, and we know where we are going.

The Source of our Joy

The source of a Christian's joy is their childhood in God. Jesus revealed this truth directly to His disciples after they returned from their journey to Palestine. Jesus appointed 70 of His followers to go throughout this land, where He was about to go, to proclaim the coming of the kingdom of God. Jesus warned them that they would not be received well in all the places they would go. They were going to be "lambs among wolves." However, when their journey was complete and they came back to Jesus, they returned with joy (Luke 10:17). They were filled with joy because they had been successful. God had used them, and they had witnessed the manifestation of the power of Christ in their work. They declared their happiness over the fact that the demons were subject to them in Jesus' name. So because of their success and the power they had experienced, they were happy. Jesus responded to them by redirecting their focus to the true source of joy – *"Nevertheless do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rather rejoice because your names are written in heaven"* (Luke 10:20).

Jesus taught these followers to be careful and not to misplace the basis for their joy. This lesson is important for all of us today. God's blessing is for spiritual life. How often does our joy fluctuate and depend on what is happening in our lives – our family matters, our work life, our social circles, etc...? Do we only rejoice when everything is well? Does our joy disappear when we struggle? What does that tell those around us?

Our joy is founded and rooted in our childhood in God. When this truth remains at the forefront of our lives, then no matter the ebbs and flows of life, our joy is evident. We are secure in a loving relationship with our Heavenly Father. We are children of a King and are under His provision and care. He has demonstrated His love for us when He sent His Son to rescue us from our sins. His love has been poured into us through the Holy Spirit. This is our joy! It is an unchangeable truth and is the motivation behind all that we do. Experiencing this joy prompts us to give.

Sharing what we have

As a church, a united community of believers, the joy of our childhood in God should inspire us to share and help one another. This was also in the hearts of the believers in the first church. This is exhibited in Acts 2:42-47:

And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods and divided them among all, as anyone had need. So continually daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.

We learn from this example that the first believers chose generosity rather than earthly greediness. They recognized that they were all equal before the Lord, and they made a decision to devote themselves to growing in their knowledge of Him. Their joy led them to share, to give to each other, and celebrate together. They praised God together for His goodness and their new life in Him. Luke tells us that as they did this, because of their joy and activity, they were a witness to those around them, and the congregation grew.

When our life in God is our joy and drives our actions, then others will be impacted by our joy because we will give and share with them voluntarily and without prejudice. Does your relationship with Jesus Christ fill your heart with joy and drive your actions? If you don't know, we encourage you to speak with a minister or a fellow believer who exudes joy to grow in your understanding.

Joyful Giving: 2 Corinthians

Apostle Paul was seeking financial help from the church in Corinth, for the church in Jerusalem. His intent in urging the Corinthians to take part in the offering was to give them the opportunity to use their abundance to help the believers in Jerusalem, who were in poverty. He explained to them how to give properly, and that their offering should be a generous offering rather than a grudging donation. God's generosity to them was to be an incentive for their own generous giving. Their giving would be a thanksgiving to God; it would meet the needs of God's people; and it would unify Jewish and Gentile believers.

As we practice giving out of the joy that we have from God, let us consider the words that Apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians in 2 Corinthians 9:7 *So let each one give as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver.* When we mature in the mind of Christ, we will no longer give *grudgingly or of necessity*, but rather intentionally and with thought. Our giving becomes our decision, and because it is what we want to do, we give joyfully. Joyful giving is done freely, not grudgingly. This is where giving becomes faith, love, and joy intertwined.

Paul assures the congregation to trust in God's provision. *And God is able to make all grace abound toward you, that you, always having all sufficiency in all things, may have an*

abundance for every good work (2 Corinthians 9:8). Our childhood in God secures our future. He will give us all we need to do the *good work* that He has prepared for us to do (Ephesians 2:10). This security frees us to give joyfully, generously, and confidently.

As believers in Jesus Christ, we give generously because we have received all from our generous God without conditions. Let us never forget that we were all lost and unworthy of grace. Yet, our Heavenly Father generously offered His Son to take our place to atone for our sins so that we could be children of God. That's more generosity than we can even fathom. When we joyfully give our resources to the church and those in need, it reminds us that everything we have is itself a gift from God. This is what Paul eludes to when he writes, *for the administration of this service not only supplies the needs of the saints, but also is abounding through many thanksgivings to God...* (2 Corinthians 9:12). When we give to help others, it not only meets their needs, but also is an offering of thanks to God for what He has provided for us. And so, we can joyfully share with others what the Lord has given generously, and give without worry because we know He will always care for His children.

Joyful giving is done thoughtfully and with intention. Through the assistance of the Holy Spirit, we are able to see those who are in need and we are prompted to assist. We want to give when prompted, in hope that the one receiving will experience the joy we have, and glorify the Lord.

As faithful followers of the Lord Jesus, we understand that those who are far from the Lord have needs also, and we believe in the saving power of Jesus Christ. We love them because we are all made in the image of God, who so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son. We share freely the good news of salvation so that the name of Jesus can be made known to all, and so everyone may come to realize that true satisfaction can only be found in Him.

Joyful Giving brings a foretaste of the Kingdom

When believers are united in their joyful giving, then the congregation becomes a foretaste of the kingdom of God. Pray together within your congregation, your family, your circle of friends, and ask the Lord to help you all to be joyful givers. Pray that God will enable you to see the world around you in such a way that you can clearly recognize the needs of others and act upon the prompting of the Holy Spirit to share what He has blessed you with.

Reprint of Autumn 2018 Vision Newsletter

GOD PROVIDES

Recently I came across a word in 2 Corinthians 8:15:

He who gathered much had nothing left over, and he who gathered little had no lack.

At first, this may seem like a paradox or riddle, and yet it has a special meaning with regards to giving and thanksgiving. It was written by Paul to the congregation at Corinth to inspire them to join the other congregations of Macedonia to give to their poorer brethren in other areas. You may recall hearing about this in a September divine service. These early brothers and sisters, even though persecuted and indigent, supported each other, inspired by the true love of Christ. We read in verse 5 – *but they first gave themselves to the Lord, and then to us by the will of God.* Because of their circumstances, we can see that their giving followed the model of the widow that Jesus commented on in the temple – *but she out of her poverty put in all that she had...* (Mark 12:44).

Let's go back to the riddle. This was a verse Paul actually quoted from Exodus 16:18 that described the gathering and distribution of manna. We can imagine the families and how those who were abled gathered more, and those who were older, disabled, or very young gathered less. However, when the gathering was finished, they all redistributed their "harvest" so that *he who gathered much had nothing left over, and he who gathered little had no lack.* This was necessary because Moses said to gather only what they needed for the day and leave nothing left over for the next day. In other words – God would again provide for them.

Here we can see some wonderful aspects of God's ways. He gave the manna, sufficient for each day, as much as was needed for each person. However, He expected His people to trust Him to provide for them again the next day. He also expected His people to distribute this gift in a way that all could be helped and sated.

The Apostle Paul taught this realization of God's ways to the first Christians. Thus, they realized that even if they had little, this little was a gift from their God, and, in thankfulness for it, they gave to others. Jesus also showed this when He gave thanks for the few loaves and fishes before feeding the five thousand. He gave thanks for the "little" and then gave it out.

May these teachings of God's ways also live today in His children by:

- Recognizing *all the gifts* we have been given – time, resources, freedom, and so many others.
- Expressing our thankfulness to our loving Father, the Giver of good things, in our offerings and sacrifices.
- Giving and sharing what we have been given, realizing our dependence on our benevolent Father, and trusting in His divine providence for the future.

Reprint of District Apostle's introduction letter from Autumn 2018 Vision Newsletter

SEASON OF THANKSGIVING

The Summer Vision included an article about being more intentional in the time leading up to Thanksgiving. Starting on the first Sunday of October, each service leading up to Thanksgiving Sunday will focus on an aspect of giving thanks to God:

October 7	Gratitude for God, the Father
October 14	Gratitude for Jesus Christ
October 21	Gratitude for the Holy Spirit
October 28	Gratitude for the Church of Christ
November 4	Gratitude for Salvation for the Departed
November 11	Gratitude for our Congregations & Childhood in God

As we walk through this Season of Thanksgiving each week, here are some questions for you, your family, and your congregation to consider. Try going through these questions as a family at the dinner table, or in fellowship with the congregation after a service. Or, you could even pray through these questions as you come to the end of the day.

Gratitude for God, the Father

- What characteristics of God, the Father are present in His creation?
- What emotions does His creation evoke in you?
- How does the Father's creation inspire trust within you?

Gratitude for Jesus Christ

- How is the message of Jesus's gospel present in your life?
- In what ways does Jesus' life influence your own actions?
- What can you do to grow in forgiving and loving others as Jesus did?

Gratitude for the Holy Spirit

- Why is the Holy Spirit important to you?
- How has the Holy Spirit guided you in life?
- What truths have been illuminated for you by the Holy Spirit through divine services?

Gratitude for the Church of Christ

- How does your life bring glory to God?
- As believers in Christ, how can we overcome our differences to be unified?
- How do you help the church proclaim Jesus Christ?

Gratitude for Salvation for the Departed

- How has God shown mercy to you?
- How is God's faithfulness displayed in His desire to save all?

Gratitude for our Congregations & Childhood in God

- Why is worship and praise an important element of showing our gratitude to God?
- How can you show your gratitude for ministers and others who serve in your congregation?
- What changes can you make in your family and congregation to grow closer together?

Reprint of Autumn 2018 Vision Newsletter

GIVING IS MISSION

As part of the family of God, we are on a mission. It was given to us by Jesus Christ through the apostles. And when we choose to follow obediently and give to the furtherance of the church, then we are choosing to give to the mission of the church.

Jesus' mission when He came to the earth was to rescue humankind from their sin and re-establish their relationship with God, the Father. Nothing stood in His way or distracted Him from completing that mission. The devil endeavored to tempt Him away. The Pharisees accused Him of breaking the law so that He would be condemned. Even His disciples stood in His way from time to time before they fully understood the will of the Father. Through it all, Jesus continued on His journey to give life and peace to all who would believe in Him. Through the giving of His life, Jesus gave us all the opportunity to enter into His kingdom. He gave us all the chance to be forgiven, to be re-born, and to live in eternal fellowship with the triune God.

Before ascending back to His Father, Jesus placed His mission into the hands of His disciples.

Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.

Matthew 28:19-20

When filled with the Holy Spirit, the apostles shared the gospel of Jesus and the church of Christ began. Jesus intentionally created this institution, charged it with His mission, and then placed the responsibility for managing it into human hands. We are the church, and we are called to take up this mission.

As believers grow spiritually and mature in their faith, they gain the understanding that all they have is given by God and belongs to Him.

With the guidance and inspiration of the Holy Spirit, believers learn to trust in God and recognize how they can use what they have been given to give generously to others, so that all people may come to know Jesus.

This means we don't just give to missions, but that Christian giving, in and of itself, is the mission to which we are called: to give a portion of that which we have for the sake of the gospel. Jesus Christ gave life to the dead, both spiritually and physically; Christians humbly follow His example by giving of themselves to the spiritual and physical welfare of others.

The mission statement of the New Apostolic Church is tied directly to the Great Commission:

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 serving Him and others.

Giving is mission because givers move the mission forward. Because Jesus willingly gave His life on the cross, the mission advanced. Because the apostles left the room in Jerusalem and gave their lives to proclaim the gospel, the mission progressed. If the first Christians hadn't been willing to share what they had been blessed with, whether it was great or small, how far would the message have spread? Jesus led the way for us, and He is our example to follow. We want to make His mission our mission; and as He was willing and generous to give His all for us, let us adopt the same willingness and generosity to see the mission of His church fulfilled.

What will it take for the mission to be fulfilled? What will need to be given? God sent His Spirit to lead decision-making, but not an endowment to fund the mission. He left that to us. The institutional and visible church is dependent upon the financial support of the believers to fulfill its divine purpose. When we look upon our world through the lens of the love of Christ, then we readily understand that financial assistance, along with our time and gifts, is needed for the message to be carried forward.

To reach out to others and teach the gospel requires our willingness to devote ourselves to the teachings of Jesus Christ and surrender to the impulses of the Holy Spirit. Why would we do this? Simply because we recognize the mission of God is to save us. And we've been called for a purpose.

Our faith in Christ is a gift, and our role in the mission of Christ is a privilege and an honor.

When we are fully aware of how we came to be in relationship with God, then we devote ourselves to learning more about Jesus, and give our will over to the Holy Spirit.

When we take up the mission of the church, we find that we are called to share our stories of faith with others to show how we have been saved and transformed. We give of ourselves in this way to help others see the power of Christ. We may feel inadequate in our knowledge of

the gospel, and we may be afraid to talk about Jesus because we've never done so before outside of the church, but give yourself fully to His mission and experience how He will provide for you. This can be seen again and again in the book of Acts. Some examples are when Peter and John spoke before the Sanhedrin in chapter 4; Stephen boldly proclaiming the gospel in chapters 6 & 7; Philip teaching the Ethiopian eunuch in chapter 8; Peter going to Cornelius and his family in chapter 10; when Paul and Silas were imprisoned in chapter 16, and when Paul is shipwrecked in chapter 27.

Where do we start? Look around at those who are closest to you. Spouses can share and remind each other of the good news. Parents can teach their children through reading Scripture, praying together, and by being an example in their willingness to give and share with others. In our neighborhoods, let's not confine ourselves to our homes, but see whom God has placed around us, and seek His guidance in how we can impact our neighbors for the sake of the gospel. And finally, as we go throughout each day, let's be mindful of the mission, and resolve ourselves as disciples of Jesus to give what we have to help others experience the great love of God.

We encourage you to give yourself to this mission, to be united with other believers in demonstrating your willingness to share and give to the continuing spread of the gospel. Be open-hearted to the prompting of the Holy Spirit as He guides your giving, and every day, seek to do your part to further the mission by sharing the gospel and glorifying God.

Reprint of Summer 2019 Vision Newsletter

A SEASON OF THANKSGIVING

As we move further into this season of harvest and gratitude, we naturally set aside time to focus on the goodness of our heavenly Father and all that He has given to us. While we reflect on His kindness, let's also contemplate how we can share with others what we have received from Him. How can we cultivate this season of Thanksgiving in our families, congregations, and communities through our own giving?

Consider the following during the time leading up to our celebration of Thanksgiving Sunday.

1. Giving is love. (An excerpt from the 2017 Autumn Vision Newsletter)

Our desire to give begins and ends with God. John wrote in 1 John 4:16, *God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him.* It is love that has brought us from the brink of despair into fellowship with God. It is the love God has shown us that fuels our passion to share with others what we have been given. When we recognize that we are unworthy to receive all that God has given us, we must respond in love towards our God and our neighbors. This love prompts us to give freely from what we've been blessed with.

How have you experienced God's love this year?

2. Giving is faith. (An excerpt from the 2018 Spring Vision Newsletter)

Our willingness to give demonstrates our faith in God and our confidence that He will always care for those who have surrendered their hearts to Him. In Luke 12:48, as part of an answer to Peter, Jesus said,

For everyone whom much is given, from him much will be required; and to whom much has been committed, of him they will ask the more.

Jesus is emphasizing here that great privilege brings great responsibility. The greatest privilege given is to be children of God. When we believe that we received that title through faith, then whether we have a little or a lot, we will be led by the Holy Spirit to utilize what we have in the service of Him. Giving is faith because it is out of our confidence in God and our devotion to Jesus that we obediently share what we have in full knowledge that our God will always care for us.

How is your faith expressed through your giving?

3. Giving is joy. (An excerpt from the 2018 Autumn Vision Newsletter)

Consider the words that Apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians in 2 Corinthians 9:7 – *So let each one give as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver.* When we mature in the mind of Christ, we will no longer give grudgingly or of necessity, but rather intentionally and with thought. Our giving becomes our decision, and because it is what we want to do, we give joyfully. Joyful giving is done freely, not grudgingly. This is where giving becomes faith, love, and joy intertwined.

When believers are united in their joyful giving, then the congregation becomes a foretaste of the kingdom of God.

Pray that God will enable us to see the world around us in such a way that we can clearly recognize the needs of others and act upon the prompting of the Holy Spirit to share what He has blessed us with.

4. Giving is mission. (An excerpt from the 2019 Summer Vision Newsletter)

As believers grow spiritually and mature in their faith, they gain the understanding that all they have is given by God and belongs to Him.

With the guidance and inspiration of the Holy Spirit, believers learn to trust in God and recognize how they can use what they have been given to give generously to others and to the church through their offerings, so that all people may come to know Jesus.

This means we don't just give to missions, but that Christian giving, in and of itself, is the mission to which we are called: to give a portion of that which we have for the sake of the gospel. Jesus Christ gave life to the dead, both spiritually and physically; Christians humbly follow His example by giving of themselves to the spiritual and physical welfare of others.

How do you contribute to fulfilling Christ's mission on earth?

Reprint of Autumn 2019 Vision Newsletter

THOUGHTS ON ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

As human beings, we desire acknowledgement. For some, having their activity acknowledged might even be considered a necessity. In many human endeavors, acknowledgement is provided through either a kind word or gesture, and sometimes even through criticism. Acknowledgement serves as feedback, helping us to know that the things we are doing matter, that our work is being done properly and effectively, and that it (and we) are appreciated.

This desire for acknowledgement reflects the circumstances and attitudes of the world around us. People expect lightning fast responses to inquiries, almost immediate delivery of goods, and instant gratification. And social media doesn't help. Almost immediately, one can receive feedback on their thoughts, opinions, haircut, wardrobe, good deeds done—you name it. We desire acknowledgement, and we desire it quickly. It's no surprise, then, that this attitude can all too easily carry over into the church.

Even Christ's disciples wanted to be acknowledged. They showed this very clearly when they argued amongst themselves as to which one of them should and would be the greatest (we find that they had this argument on two different occasions in the book of Luke, actually!). *Twice* they argued over who was the greatest. And you remember Christ's response: *"For he who is least among you all will be great."* Christ's response was direct, to the point, and clearly highlighted the importance of humility.

What is our motivation to serve and to sacrifice? Is our motivation humble, or is there some pride involved? Do we serve out of love for Christ and neighbor, or do we serve to be recognized and acknowledged?

In Proverbs 3:6 it says *"In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths."* There is only one who is worthy of acknowledgement, and that is the Triune God. Only He is worthy of praise and recognition. Anything that we accomplish is accomplished by His grace, and with His strength and authority. Paul speaks to this in his second letter to the Corinthians when he says *"Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as being from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God."* (2 Corinthians 3:5) Paul was an incredible servant of God, but even he realized that apart from God, he was incapable and inadequate. If there was any level of sufficiency, it was to be attributed to God. Anything that Paul was able to do, and any impact that He was able to make, could only be attributed to the power of God working in and through him. Paul reiterates something similar again in his first letter to the Corinthians: *"...and my message and my preaching were not in persuasive*

words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power.” (1 Corinthians 2:4) Paul could have easily sought recognition and acknowledgement for his “persuasive words of wisdom,” but made the humble decision instead to acknowledge the power of the Holy Spirit working through him.

We can find some additional guidance from Paul in Romans 1:8-9: ***“I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, that your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world. For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of His Son, that without ceasing I make mention of you always in my prayers.”***

First, it’s important to note that Paul is thanking God for the believers and their faith; his thanks is not directed to the people themselves. Second, he refers to their faith that has served as a witness to others. In other words, their actions have served as a testimony to the gospel rather than any individual or group ‘advertising’ their faith or good works. Finally, **as a way of giving thanks to these souls**, Paul assures them that he prays for them constantly. In this letter to the Romans, Paul acknowledges their works, *but not in a manner that honors them*. He thanks God ‘through Jesus Christ.’ Jesus Christ is the Author and Finisher of God’s work of salvation, not any individual human being.

As children of the most high God, our motivation must always be love—love for God, and love for those whom He has called us to serve and to shepherd. The more we realize that God has called us, the less we will seek recognition and acknowledgement. If we come to expect these things, then we will be constantly disappointed. More often than not, the things that we do for the Lord and for His children won’t be recognized or appreciated, at least by those we serve. Many times, they go unseen and unnoticed.

...your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.

Matthew 6:6

There is One who does see what is done, however, and His reward and recognition is to be valued far more than any reward or recognition we could receive from anyone here on this earth. Our Heavenly Father is omniscient; He is the knower of all things. In Matthew 6:6 He is described as a Father who *“sees in secret, and will reward you openly.”* What a powerful and hope-inspiring thought! The Almighty One sees everything that is done in His name and to His honor and glory—even those things that are done in secret—and will someday *openly* reward those that have faithfully loved, served, and followed Him. And what is this great reward? Salvation through Jesus Christ!

Let’s resist the natural desire for recognition and acknowledgement, dear brothers and sisters. Rather, let us rejoice over the fact that *“great is our reward in heaven.”* (Matthew 5:12) It is there that our names are written. This truth, combined with our love for God and for our neighbor, compels us to fulfill our calling, and to carry out the great commission of Christ.

Reprint of Winter 2019 Vision Newsletter

Culture

Small Groups

EXPERIENCE THE MIDWEEK

It has now been a little over a year since the new midweek experience was introduced to the USA. Reflecting on 2014 brought observations about what worked and what needs to work better. Even as you are adjusting to and discovering the possibilities with this still-new concept, I am doing the same, hoping that future scenarios can be created that will allow all to be engaged and feel closer to God.

It's hard to provide exact measurements of how successful the midweek experience has been so far. Attendance numbers cannot be the only measurement we look at. The less visible signs of success are in each one's soul, and this is what we want to focus on; not just numbers.

Acts 4:31 speaks about a group of people: *And when they had prayed, the place where they were assembled together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the word of God with boldness.* Every time we gather with one another, whether for a divine service or midweek experience, we want to be shaken by the Spirit. The midweek experience, through discussion of and digging deeper into our faith, should give us a renewed strength and understanding of who we are as disciples of Christ.

Many people have had experiences like this over the last year in the midweek experience format:

Small groups have been a huge success for us. Since our membership is spread over a wide area geographically, it was difficult for some members to make it to a midweek service at the church. We took the approach of setting up our small groups in different locations that made sense to where our members live. This has made it easier for some to participate than in the past.

I will never forget the feeling I was able to experience during our small group a few weeks ago. I was overjoyed when one of the men, whom I never thought would join small group, shared an amazing experience of faith with us. We never get a chance to talk together like this any other time and I was so touched that he longed to reach out and share his story! I truly feel that the health of our congregation is growing – we are learning so much more about our faith and about each other.

At first, the midweek experience was a scary concept, so our shared leadership team took a methodical approach. We started with word services that morphed into group discussions. By May 2014, we held all group devotionals. We trained facilitators and then made the move to small groups. Of course, we enjoy a traditional service once a month, but the rest of the Wednesdays are small groups. The entire experience has been unbelievable. It seemed impossible at first, but with God, all things are possible.

Transformation is a part of life and our church, so we cannot stand still. The intent is not to change what we believe, but to create a space for deeper understanding of God, His Son, and His teachings. We need to find the balance between the traditional and progressive, so that all members feel comfortable in their congregation, but also inspired and enlivened in their faith.

With this being said, the plan for the midweek experience in 2015 is the same with the options of word service, worship evening, group devotional, small group, and a traditional divine service once a month. What has been changed is the intentional focus on small groups, which foster deep and intimate discussions.

To do this, every week there is a Midweek Bridge Video that groups should use for discussion topics and questions. As a bridge between the previous and following Sunday divine services, these videos make each Sunday service more approachable and applicable to you, allowing you to continually find value from them. They allow further time to delve into the Sunday services, keeping the topics and themes present and relevant throughout your week.

We hope that by providing these videos, small group discussions will allow everyone to be involved. To help accomplish this, facilitator and participant guides created especially for each week are provided to create further questions and discussion.

My wish is that the value of having small group discussions is felt by all. We can learn more about each other by learning about Christ together.

Reprint of Spring 2015 Vision Newsletter

MAKING IT WORK: SMALL GROUP DISCUSSIONS

Recently the church office heard a story of a weekly small group being held. This one small group meets at 3pm on Wednesdays. All of the participants in the small group are retired and prefer to not drive at night. Meeting in the afternoon also allows for them to have fellowship. Their discussions usually run for 60 to 75 minutes. Afterwards, they always share a meal, whether it is a potluck supper or going out to a local restaurant. During their dinners, they share their lives with one another and like to talk about some of the topics that came up in that day's small group discussion. By the end of the discussion and fellowship, the small group spends between 3 and 3.5 hours with each other. As a group, each one has drawn closer to each other because they share their faith, victories, and challenges with each other, witnessing the Lord's hand in each of their lives. When one is sick or has had an operation, the small group is their support system; they send cards to each other, pray for each other, and provide strength and pastoral care for one another.

There is one major observation we can make about this small group. They make small group work for them! They start at a time that makes sense for their group. They decide to make fellowship a part of their small group experience each week because they have the time and the desire to do so. They share life with each other through group discussions and fellowship.

It is important to remember that while there are general guidelines for what a small group is and should be, each small group is different. If it works to have your small group at 9am, 3pm, or 8pm, then meet at that time. If your group can more easily meet on a Monday night or a Thursday afternoon, then meet on those days. If refreshments are important to your small group, bring some snacks to share or even make time to have breakfast, lunch, or dinner together. If your small group members would prefer to meet in a home as opposed to the church, then meet in a member's home. We can see how effective this is from the midweek experience survey. Out of 949 people that participate in small groups, 430 go to a small group in a home and 74% of them describe their overall small group experience as effective.

There are so many options that can lead to a successful, fulfilling small group. Consider some of these ideas and try them out if your group members are looking for a little more flexibility within the small group and would like to change things up a little.

Reprint of Summer 2016 Vision Newsletter

Culture

*Events and
Reports*

CONNECTED IN FAITH

Chief Apostle Schneider visited Venezuela on August 17th, which was a great experience of joy for all involved. During the weekend there was an Apostles and Bishops meeting, a worship evening, and a divine service that was attended by 4,513 members and guests. The United States has a special connection with Venezuela, along with various other countries in the Caribbean and Central and South America. These countries are part of our district and we have been working together for many years to spread Christ's message to all people. When we first started working with our brothers and sisters from these areas, we referred to their countries as "mission lands" because we had a mission to bring the teaching of the Gospel to them. Now, after much time has passed, the congregations in these countries are developing as we are and the Church has been established in all of these areas for many decades, some for 50 years already. The "mission" description might leave some feeling that they are less in some way and that they have less responsibility. Neither is true. The depth of faith in the congregations is no less than that in the USA, and from the perspective of material support, more and more they are developing the resources to be self-sufficient. They have been following the same Stepping Forward strategic plan and are being taught the same principles we are learning here. Because of this, we will no longer refer to them as "mission lands." Instead, they will be referred to as "linked international districts" because we are all truly connected to each other in one faith.

A part of the teaching that goes on in the Central and South American countries is done through emerging leader seminars. The 2014 meetings were held in El Salvador, Peru and Jamaica for current and future leaders of the church. Many of the teachings that we receive in the United States are also shared in these countries, uniting all of us together with the same goal of having healthy congregations. They are developing flagship or model congregations with their own characteristics, along with catechism training and iServe-type activities that allow them to reach out to the surrounding communities. Most importantly, the United States and these countries learn the same basic thing: to live and lead like Christ. These teachings, which relate to the spiritual and material aspects of the Church, were well received by these emerging leaders.

In **Jamaica**, the Caribbean leaders and emerging leaders from the Bahamas, Jamaica, Guyana, Trinidad, Dominica, Saint Vincent, Saint Lucia, and Haiti attended the weekend of meetings and services. The Jamaica weekend started off with the Ascension Day service in Jeffrey Town, one of the first congregations that has been in existence for 50 years now. The ministers took part in meetings on spiritual and financial matters. The District Apostle

held the spiritual session and it had the same theme as the Youth Retreats this year in the USA and Mexico: Rise. Leaders in our connected districts are asked to rise, and use what they have been equipped with by God in order to emerge, engage, and edify. Along with this, Apostle Orlofski held a seminar for the priestly ministries on effective preaching. In all of the meetings and fellowship, the comradery that the Caribbean brothers shared was especially noticed. Not only were they given the chance to know each other better, but they also learned that they experience many of the same problems and triumphs in their local congregations and various solutions could be discussed. The seminar weekend ended with a service in Kingston, the capital of Jamaica.

Each country had participants who were able to learn in these meetings and then take that knowledge back to their local congregations. For example, emerging leaders from different regions in Mexico were also invited to attend the emerging leader seminar in **El Salvador**. The El Salvador meetings included leaders from Venezuela, Panama, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Honduras, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Dominican Republic, and Mexico. These deacons brought enthusiasm and unique perspectives to the discussions that were held and they returned to their congregations with a new appreciation for the calling of an ordained minister, realizing the necessity for workers of ministry to help along. By working together with the priestly ministries, along with the direct support of the country's administration team, they were given strong incentives to take responsibility for specific projects in the Stepping Forward strategies in Mexico, knowing that they will be an important part of the future of the Lord's work in their country.

Similar to the meetings in Jamaica, the seminar in **Peru** involved leaders from Colombia, Peru, and Ecuador. This weekend concluded with a service in Lima with over 1800 attendees. On one of the evenings during the weekend, the ministers enjoyed a hillside dinner and also were part of a town hall meeting.

Reprint of Autumn/Winter 2014 Vision Newsletter

IN FOCUS: A NEW BLOG WITH THOUGHTS TO FOCUS ON

Starting in January 2015, a blog was created on the New Apostolic Church USA app and nac-usa.org that comes out every other Friday. This blog, called “In Focus,” highlights thoughts from previous Vision newsletters and other interesting articles. Breaking down the Vision articles into smaller, bite-size pieces helps the message to become clearer and puts specific concepts “in focus.” Whether the Vision is read in its entirety or on-the-go in smaller pieces, everyone can still be on the same page with the direction of the New Apostolic Church USA and the spiritual impulses we need in order to become more like Christ. Some other neat things you can find on the app are service clips of Chief Apostle Schneider and District Apostle Kolb, discussions on spiritual topics in the For Your Journey episodes, all of the Midweek Experience Curriculum videos and guides, weekly devotionals, and a USA congregational locator.

Reprint of Autumn 2015 Vision Newsletter

STEPPING FORWARD

We were asked to write an article for the *Unsere Familie* giving an update on the Stepping Forward strategy of the USA district. For your information, the following is what was printed in the magazine:

I would like to share with you some experiences that we have made recently in the NAC-USA district. Six years ago, the leadership of the district created a comprehensive plan to guide the future direction and decision making of our congregations based upon the unique circumstances found in our country. We named the strategy "Stepping Forward." Please allow me to provide a brief summary as well as report to you on our progress and challenges.

Stepping Forward was inspired by the Vision and Mission statements of the international New Apostolic Church. We distilled the statements down to the following hopeful outcome:

Healthy, growing congregations where souls are completed for the return of Christ.

Such a simple phrase, but how does it happen exactly? What are the intentional steps that each congregation must take that will move us forward toward health and inner growth? There are so many important things to do, but it seemed to us that they should be organized into four distinct objectives:

- **Improve the quality of our Divine Services:** The preaching, the music, the fellowship and ultimately the fervency of our celebration of Holy Communion with Jesus Christ.
- **Create a more Gospel centered congregational culture:** Learn to live, to lead and to make decisions like Jesus.
- **Improve our Pastoral Care:** Help each member to feel the love of God and the presence of Jesus in a very real way given their unique path of life outside the church walls.
- **Create a sustainable congregational structure to care for administrative matters:** Engage each member and lay minister alike to answer God's call to actively edify the body of Christ while living a balanced life.

With these objectives to guide us, we have taken and continue to refine these steps:

- **Formed "flagship" congregations where possible.** These are congregations which have joined together in a very proactive and intentional way to form stronger, larger and more sustainable communities.
- **Introduced shared leadership teams in our larger congregations.** One person is appointed by the apostle to lead the congregational efforts in each of the key areas

described in the four objectives above. Therefore a team of four individuals assist the rector and support his role in leading the congregation.

- **Linked International Districts**, previously known as mission lands, apply the same strategy and teachings in all the districts connected to the USA.
- **The Vision Newsletter** was developed to communicate with every household on a quarterly basis. Following this, we branched out into different media outlets as a way of communicating to the different demographics of our membership. The development of the NACUSA app continued this communication effort, as well as the creation of the Vision Journal, a compilation of all the Vision Newsletter articles arranged by topic of the components of the Stepping Forward plan.
- **Promoted “the Work of Ministry” program.** This Gospel based journey of discovery helps each member to discover their God given calling and giftedness with which to actively edify the Body of Christ. To be a follower of Christ is not a passive role and a healthy congregation requires the gifts and passions of all the members and ministers.
- **Created an Effective Preaching eLearning system for our ministers who preach our sermons.** The course provides a comprehensive approach to training. It is an online platform that helps our ministers in developing inner authority, sermon construction, preaching delivery skills, and utilizing feedback.
- **Developed a new approach to the Midweek Service.** Our challenging lifestyles, work schedules, traffic and distances have combined to make the traditional midweek service an event that was experienced by fewer and fewer members. We have moved to a more interactive and transformational approach designed to take the church to where our members live and work with greater scheduling flexibility. In this way the majority of our members will be able to connect with the church between the Sundays, and share the experience with friends and neighbors inside and outside the church walls.
- **Conducted Town Hall Meetings** and Regional Workshops across the USA. To help our congregations take these steps, a team of NAC-USA employees and volunteers travelled to 13 regional locations to provide hands on training.
- **Project and Work groups** of the NAC-USA are made up of volunteers and employees to create content and analyze resources. Some examples of these groups are the Children’s Work Group and the Effective Preaching Project Group.
- **re Charitable Ministry** – This is our new charitable organization that helps with national and international disasters, along with providing support to members participating in grassroots and international charitable endeavors.
- **Prepare & Enrich** – This program is designed to assist couples looking to evaluate their current relationship in anticipation of marriage or to strengthen an existing marriage.
- **The Synod was reorganized and an Executive Committee** was formed to oversee major capital expenditures.

All of the above is a work in progress with varying degrees of success to date. The Gospel of Jesus and God’s offer of salvation do not change. However, the fields to which The Master has called us to labor are dynamic. To be fruitful servants, our methods must continually evolve to keep pace.

MIDWEEK EXPERIENCE SURVEY

Dear brothers and sisters,

As I travel around the country, I've heard of challenges and concerns, as well as moments of intense spiritual growth, coming out of the midweek experience. Since its introduction in 2014, we have not formally collected feedback, until now. At this point, I would like to ask for your feedback to help us evaluate the current status of where we are on this journey. Your individual feedback is valuable to the apostles and me.

On the next page you will find a midweek experience survey. Whether you participate in a midweek experience option or not, I sincerely ask you to complete the survey with as much detail as possible. If there is more than one person in your household, please ask your rector for additional copies or print them from www.nac-usa.org.

The number of responses is vital to the accuracy and completeness of the picture painted by this survey. Therefore, encourage everyone in your family and congregation to respond.

This survey can be submitted online at www.nac-usa.org. However, if you choose to take the paper survey, please follow the instructions below. To respect the integrity of the survey and the time invested by you and all other participants, please submit only one response online or via the paper form. If you have any questions, email communications@nac-usa.org.

The deadline for submitting your response is Monday, December 14th.

Thank you for taking the time to fill out this survey. I look forward to receiving your feedback.

With my love and gratitude,
LRK

Reprint of Autumn 2015 Vision Newsletter



Midweek Experience Survey

Please fill out one survey per individual. Please print your answers.

CONGREGATION _____

1. Indicate the frequency of all available options during an average month in your congregation's current midweek experience. **NOTE: A small group is typically categorized as 3-10 people, and a group devotional would typically be a larger group.**

		Not available	Unsure of availability
<i>Midweek divine service</i>	_____ <i>times per month</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<i>Word service</i>	_____ <i>times per month</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<i>Group devotional</i>	_____ <i>times per month</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<i>Small group discussion</i>	_____ <i>times per month</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<i>Worship evening</i>	_____ times per YEAR	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

2. Out of your available options, indicate how often you participate. **NOTE: If you do not participate in an activity, please mark it with a "0".**

<i>Midweek divine service</i>	_____ <i>times per month</i>
<i>Word service</i>	_____ <i>times per month</i>
<i>Group devotional</i>	_____ <i>times per month</i>
<i>Small group discussion</i>	_____ <i>times per month</i>
<i>Worship evening</i>	_____ times per YEAR

3. Please rank these midweek options according to their impact on your spiritual growth. (1 = most impactful and 5 = least impactful) **NOTE: Please mark "NA" on any activity that you have never participated in.**

_____ <i>Midweek divine service</i>
_____ <i>Word service</i>
_____ <i>Group devotional</i>
_____ <i>Small group discussion</i>
_____ <i>Worship evening</i>

4. Please explain why you chose your "1" and "2" ranked experiences as having the most impact on your spiritual growth.

#1 _____

#2 _____

5. If you **DO NOT** currently attend a small group discussion, please check all the reasons below that apply:

- I am more comfortable with the way things were before.
- I feel less compelled to go to church if there is not a divine service.
- I am not interested in trying this new option.
- I am uncomfortable sharing my personal feelings/experiences with other people.
- I feel like I may not have anything to contribute.
- Small group discussions are not currently offered in my congregation.
- Other: _____

6. If you **DO** currently attend a small group discussion, please evaluate the following by circling only one number ranging from highly effective to not effective.

	Highly effective			Not effective	
Evaluate your facilitator's effectiveness in cultivating an engaging discussion (time-management, digging deeper, not letting people dominate, preparation, etc.).	1	2	3	4	5
Evaluate your small group's effectiveness in engaging in discussion.	1	2	3	4	5
Evaluate the NAC Midweek Experience curriculum videos and guides .	1	2	3	4	5
Evaluate the effectiveness of your small group experience in deepening your relationship with Christ .	1	2	3	4	5
Evaluate the effectiveness of your small group experience in increasing your Biblical knowledge .	1	2	3	4	5
Evaluate the effectiveness of your small group experience in building relationships with others.	1	2	3	4	5
Evaluate the effectiveness of your small group experience in giving and receiving strength and comfort .	1	2	3	4	5
Evaluate your small group's overall effectiveness in impacting your spiritual growth and transformation over the past year.	1	2	3	4	5

Where does your small group discussion take place? Check the answer that applies most often.

- Someone's home
- At church
- At a coffee shop
- Other: _____

7. Any other suggestions, successes, challenges, and/or stories that you would like to share?

OPTIONAL: If you are open to being contacted for further questions, please include the following information. Your name and contact information will not be shared publicly.

Name: _____

Email address: _____

Phone number: _____

2016 DEVOTIONAL JOURNAL

The yearly devotional journal will be discontinued after 2015, so there will be no 2016 journal. You are still encouraged to write down your thoughts before, during, or after the divine service so that you can continually learn from what the Spirit has provided. You may want to buy your own journal for taking notes. Along with having your own journal, you can access a weekly devotional on the NAC USA app or subscribe to receive the devotional via email at nac-usa.org. This devotional comes out every Monday and provides the Bible verse from the Sunday service the day before, thoughts to go along with it, and questions to provoke understanding and personal reflection.

A 2016 Children's Devotional will still be produced by the Children's Work Group. These will be available for order on our national website by mid-November at www.nac-usa.org.

Reprint of Autumn 2015 Vision Newsletter

JAMAICA'S 50 YEAR JUBILEE: A JOURNEY OF TRANSFORMATION

The beginning of the overseas work from North America began on the island of Jamaica. Jamaica was under the care of Canada until 2007 and is now cared for by the USA. A 50-year anniversary celebration of the establishment of our church in Jamaica was held during the weekend of August 1-2, 2015. On August 1, 1965, the church in Jeffrey Town, Jamaica was dedicated by District Apostle M. Kraus. It was out of that congregation that the church spread throughout Jamaica. To spread the news and joy of this anniversary, a marching band walked through the town to announce the jubilee celebration to the townspeople and inform them of the journey of transformation they have been on for the past 50 years. On Saturday, August 1st, a festive congregation praised and worshiped God with a daylong presentation of song, music, and history. Overall, there were more than 500 who attended the Saturday activities. Thankfulness was the theme and many participated in singing and watched pictorial presentations of pioneers throughout the 50 years. Musical presentations were performed by the Sunday school, youth groups and the different choirs from the surrounding congregations. Guests and church members could share in conversation and the day was filled with much joy as they celebrated each other and God for all He has done through the church in Jamaica. Several of the retired and active ministers who had worked in this country from Canada and the USA were able to participate in the celebration, as well as District Apostles Woll and Kolb.

On Sunday, August 2, District Apostle Woll conducted the service in Jeffrey Town and District Apostle Kolb conducted the divine service in the Kingston congregation, with 167 people in attendance.

These celebrations are not about accomplishments though, as District Elder Stephenson from Jamaica points out: "Our celebration is not about us, nor the Canadians, nor the Americans. It's not an event that excites us about achievements or accomplishments. It's about the Lord's grace; **His journey with us over these 50 years – A journey of transformation.** This is what we celebrate." The celebration of the jubilee continued through the year with various activities in all the Jamaican congregations.

Reprint of Winter 2015 Vision Newsletter

NAC MUSEUM: SUBMISSION INFORMATION

The museum of the New Apostolic Church USA is located in Chicago's North Side congregation. Many historical items and pictures have been donated and collected to contribute to the museum. Even after being open for almost 3 years, the museum still welcomes and receives submissions. If you have plans to donate items or pictures to the museum, please try to include as much information as possible (i.e. if it is a photo – include the date taken, where it was taken, and names of people who might be in the photograph). Providing these details will help with the placement of the item into the museum and provide a more enriching experience for those who stroll through the museum. So come visit sometime and take a look at the history yourself! Email communications@nac-usa.org to schedule an appointment.

Reprint of Summer 2016 Vision Newsletter

GUEST BOOKLET: A NEW RESOURCE

In our last edition, we wrote about our new THRIVE Membership Booklet and discussed the meaning behind the acronym. It is our hope that this booklet will be an important tool in explaining the basic fundamental aspects of our faith to those who will be baptized and sealed.

Today, we would like to introduce a complementary guest booklet. It is branded the same as THRIVE, but is created for the first-time visitor to our congregations. It gives a general overview of our Sunday divine service experience, the midweek experience, and the sacraments. It will include the order of our liturgy and be customizable for local information. With this brochure, we aim to make our guests comfortable with our procedures and familiarize them with our church and congregation. Each congregation should have received a package by the end of June.

Reprint of Summer 2016 Vision Newsletter

2016 LID EVENTS

The Linked International Districts have been busy in 2016 with events that have helped them grow in Christ.

Youth Weekend

Out of the many youth weekends in Central and South America, in August, youth in **Ecuador** gathered together for a weekend. They participated in a workshop about family structure and later, were able to share their culture with each other in a presentation of dancing and singing. The weekend concluded with a divine service, held by Apostle Diaz.

Emerging Leader Seminars

Emerging leader seminars this year were held in **Colombia, Peru, Guyana, Mexico, and Panama**. Current leaders and emerging leaders from all over each country were invited to participate. Some subjects that were touched upon were the future plan for each country, humility, worship, and a review of the Stepping Forward initiative. All in attendance were encouraged to continue to deepen their relationship with God and with our members. They were engaged in the teachings and showed an eagerness to learn.

Chief Apostle Visit

From April 5th to 10th, Chief Apostle Schneider traveled for meetings and divine services in **Peru and Colombia**. The Chief Apostle traveled to a divine service in Pucallpa, Peru, a city in the Amazon jungle, where Apostle Pedro Marin was retired after 40 years in ministry.

The Chief Apostle then traveled to Colombia where a meeting was held with the district apostles of the Americas, the first of its kind to be held. The conference was an opportunity for the Chief Apostle to discuss topics relevant to the American continents with the district apostles and their helpers.

The next day, the Chief Apostle, District Apostles, and USA Apostles and Bishops had a meeting to discuss spiritual and administrative topics.

The week culminated in a divine service on Sunday morning with Chief Apostle Schneider in Bogotá.

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2017 HUMANITARIAN PROJECTS: DOMESTIC & INTERNATIONAL

The New Apostolic Church's affiliated charity, re Charitable Ministry, has released its 2017 volunteer project line-up, which we are excited to share here. There are lots of opportunities to get involved, whether that be by fundraising, spreading the word, supporting participants, or going on a project trip yourself. For answers to all your questions, please email re.charitableministry@nac-usa.org and follow us on Facebook: www.facebook.com/re.Charitable.Ministry

If you want to secure your spot for any of these opportunities, please email us for an application form. Application fees for all projects are \$25 and are non-refundable, and will be applied to your registration fee if accepted.

CINCINNATI - ONE WAY FARM PROJECT WEEKEND

FAMILY / CHILD DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS

In 2017 we are introducing our first Domestic Humanitarian Project. The Cincinnati congregation has developed a relationship with an organization called **One Way Farm Children's Home**, whose mission is to break the cycle of abuse and disruption, and offer trust and hope to all children in need.

Our project with them will take place from June 1-4 with a maximum of 20 participants. We plan to stay at a nearby hotel to facilitate group time. The weekend will include work at the home (light construction and cleaning), time with the children, devotionals, Sunday service, and a BBQ with the children at the home. The registration fee will be approximately \$400 and will cover accommodations, food, and local transportation. Participants will also be responsible for getting themselves to Cincinnati.

This program does not have an age minimum (typically 21 years old), so think about bringing your family! Follow us on Facebook for updates and email re.charitableministry@nac-usa.org for an application.

ZAMBIA - MACKENZIE COMMUNITY SCHOOL PROJECT

EDUCATIONAL PROJECTS

In addition to its ongoing programs, re Charitable Ministry, from time to time, offers interested participants the opportunity to join in partnership projects with selected organizations. iChange

International, a Swiss-based charity, is the main carrier and sponsor of the **Mackenzie Community School** in Ndola, Zambia. For more information, please visit their Facebook page: www.facebook.com/iChangeInternational

This partnership project will take place from August 1-12 with a maximum of 8 participants. We'll be adding some classrooms (construction) to Mackenzie Community School. We'll stay at a simple guest house nearby and will have a day or two of rest over the weekend. Your registration fee of \$650 will cover accommodations, food, activities, and in-country transportation. Each participant is responsible for paying for and booking their own airline tickets to Ndola, and any passport or visa fees.

Follow us on Facebook for updates and email re.charitableministry@nac-usa.org for an application.

BELIZE - KING'S CHILDREN'S HOME WATER SYSTEM

WATER / SUSTAINABILITY PROJECTS

Already in the 5th year of a wonderful relationship, we'll again team up with the **King's Children's Home (KCH) and the Hattieville Resource Center in Belize**. We are especially excited because in 2017 re Charitable Ministry will be working on (and hopefully completing!) a large rainwater collection system for KCH. Once this project is complete it will reduce their water bill each month by half and will have a major impact towards greater long-term sustainability for the home. You can find them on Facebook to learn more: www.facebook.com/Kings-Childrens-Home-Belize

We'll be spending a total of 3 weeks in Belize, one in January (already full!) and two in June; June 14-21 (maximum of 12 participants) and June 24-July 1 (maximum of 8 participants). The project is broken into 3 phases that will be split up over the course of our 3 weeks:

PHASE 1: Rain Water Underground Tank - \$13,000
PHASE 2: Rotoplas Water Tower Reservoir - \$8,000
PHASE 3: Water Treatment System - \$4,000

Your registration fee of \$550 will cover accommodations, food, activities, and in-country transportation. Each participant is responsible for paying for and booking their own airline tickets and any passport or visa fees. Follow us on Facebook for updates and email re.charitableministry@nac-usa.org for an application.

DONATIONS & FUNDRAISING

As you can see, we have a lot going on next year. If you see anything that you are passionate about or that excites you, and you would like to donate or help us fundraise, please email us at re.CharitableMinistry@nac-usa.org for more information on the projects. Maybe your workplace is willing to sponsor or match your donations... Don't forget to ask!

Our participants completely cover all of their personal costs (accommodations, food, travel, etc.), so ALL funds donated to re Charitable Ministry for our projects go DIRECTLY to the projects. You can support us by donating through the eOffering site of the New Apostolic Church or by donating through PayPal: www.nac-usa.org/giving/re-charitable.html

Reprint of Autumn 2016 Vision Newsletter

RECENT EVENTS

Fall Family Day

On October 2nd, congregations around the country participated in Fall Family Day. After service with an interactive children's message, members gathered for fellowship and a brainstorming session on what they can do to better serve each other and the community. Based on Matthew 25:34-40, the goal of Fall Family Day was to unite the congregation in their approach to serving and sharing God's love with their families, congregation, and community.

Retirement

Bishop Gary Morse was placed into retirement on October 2, 2016 by District Apostle Kolb. The District Evangelist Alvarez was ordained and appointed as the new district leader for the Texas region.

Reprint of Winter 2016 Vision Newsletter

A WEEK IN THE LIFE OF OUR DISTRICT APOSTLE

As experienced by M. Stegmann

In June 2017, District Apostle Kolb and Bishop Stegmann visited members in Honduras, Belize, and Peru. During this trip, Bishop Stegmann kept a travel journal to share their journey with us.

Friday 6/16: In what has become normal, we had another hold-onto-your-seat-and-grab-tight-for-a-wild-ride trip. We met at the airport in San Pedro Sula, Honduras on Friday around 6:30 pm. Apostol Yepez was there to meet us with a driver, as we had about a two and half hour trip ahead of us to the hotel where the seminars and divine service were going to be held. On the way, we convinced Apostle Yepez to stop at a pizza place to get something to eat. At that point, we were quite hungry and not stopping was not an option. It was the best pizza we ever had; maybe the hunger had something to do with that. We continued on our trip and arrived at the hotel around 11:00 pm.

Saturday 6/17: We went to breakfast in the morning and, in a conversation with some of the wives, the District Apostle invited them to participate in the seminar with their husbands. They were very happy to attend and were very involved and excited to be there. The seminars lasted the entire day, followed with a dinner with ministers and wives.

Sunday 6/18: We drove to a nearby school where service with 178 people was held in the school courtyard. There was a roof, but no walls. There were also doves flying around all over the place, but they weren't a disturbance. The children welcomed us with a wonderful song and afterwards surrounded the District Apostle and gave him a group hug. After service, District Apostle Kolb greeted everyone and many pictures were taken by the members. From there, we returned to the hotel to lunch with some brothers and sisters before they started their 4 – 8 hour journeys home. Afterwards, we traveled to San Pedro Sula to be near the airport for our early departure the next day.

Monday 6/19: We got up at 6:00 am, had breakfast, and went to the airport for our flight to Belize. We got our boarding passes and I noticed there were no seat numbers. I was a little surprised until we boarded the “plane”. It was for about 8 – 10 passengers. You could literally shake the pilot's hand in flight. A volunteer with re Charitable Ministry picked us up at the airport and took us to the school/orphanage where the rest of the NAC volunteers were working. They showed us around and, afterwards, took us to our sleeping quarters. The

District Apostle and I shared a room divided by a partial wall. I hope my snoring didn't keep him up...

After some rest and a shower, we got ready for service in our congregation in Belize. We visited with the rector and his family for an hour before service at his home. It started pouring, and we had to cover up and walk to church. It was a good thing a car met us halfway and we could drive up the rest of the way. District Apostle Kolb held the divine service, and then the 62 people who gathered were invited back to the rector's home for food and fellowship. We had a wonderful time together, ate delicious food, and had great conversations. After some hours, we traveled back to our rooms.

Tuesday 6/20: Tuesday was a travel day to Lima, Peru with a layover in San Salvador. By the time we got through immigration, it was about 10:00 pm. The Apostle Flores was at the airport to greet the District Apostle with a group of about 20 young people and servants.

Wednesday 6/21: The day was filled with meetings with ministers from Lima and the surrounding areas.

Thursday 6/22: On Thursday, we traveled to the jungle city of Iquitos. In the evening, District Apostle Kolb held a divine service in a rented hall in Iquitos with 477 people.

In the jungle towns during these days, the people celebrate John the Baptist. They have special feasts, dances, and celebrations. One of the customs of the day is a meal they call, "Juanes," which represents the head of John the Baptist. It's a ball of rice stuffed with chicken, wrapped in banana leaves, and then boiled. It's about the size of a fist and a little dry. Everywhere we went, we were eating this. We couldn't get away from it. They served it for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. There wasn't a hamburger to be found.

Friday 6/23: We left the hotel at 4:00 am and traveled 2.5 hours by bus to the riverside town of Nauta, where we boarded a "speedboat". This boat looked like something out of an old movie, but it was called a speedboat because it traveled about 40 miles an hour. We went down the Marañon River, which is where it joins with the Ucayali River to form the beginning of the Amazon River. This was a 3.5-hour trip, zigzagging over the water to avoid loose, floating tree trunks and vegetation. In some areas, the river was so low that there was a danger of running aground. They served us sandwiches and yes, more "Juanes." We finally arrived to the jungle town of Requena, where there are riverside homes on stilts and shacks right on the water.

After getting off the boat, we got on motorcycle taxis that took us to a hotel where we could change clothes for service. After changing, we took the same taxis to a hall rented for the service. About 700 people were gathered. The choir was beautiful and the members were so very engaged in the service. Unfortunately, the District Apostle couldn't greet everyone because we had to get right back on the boat and travel back to Nauta before nightfall. You cannot travel on the river at night. We arrived in Nauta at about 5:00 pm and then got on the bus for the 2-hour trip back to Iquitos. When we arrived in Iquitos, we were taken to a

restaurant for dinner with some ministers. A group of young people presented some local dances in costume to celebrate John the Baptist. After dinner, we went to the airport and took an 11:00 pm flight to Lima. We arrived in Lima around 1:00 am and checked in to the hotel at 2:00 am. What a day! It started at 4:00 am and ended at 2:00 am.

Saturday 6/24: A rest day! Hooray! We spent the day resting and sightseeing.

Sunday 6/25: The divine service with over 1,300 people was in a beautiful auditorium in Lima, Peru. After service, the District Apostle had lunch with the ministers and their wives, and then we all went on our way back home.

In total, five divine services and two full days of seminars. What a week!

Reprint of Winter 2017 Vision Newsletter

THE NEW APOSTOLIC CHURCH IN MEXICO

On August 20, 2017, the New Apostolic Church in Mexico celebrated its 50-year anniversary. Let's take a glance into the past to explore how our church began here.

In December of 1966, District Apostle Kraus held a brothers meeting in the San Diego area, in which he asked the brothers why there were no congregations in Mexico. He encouraged them to find a way to begin serving the souls there and hoped that by the end of 1967, there would be an established congregation in Mexico.

Work immediately began to find a way to make contact with some families who lived in Tijuana. In the meantime, the local San Diego and Los Angeles congregations began to gather clothes and other items to donate to needy families in Tijuana. Early in 1967, one of the local brothers, Priest Bob Runge, who worked in a local gas station, approached one of his customers, who was very receptive to the idea of missionary work in Tijuana. The customer had family who lived near the border crossing in Tijuana. Ministers visited his family and others in the area, and even a local elementary school there helped to reach several local families.

The brothers found a local English-speaking resident who assisted with the language barriers. Visits were made every day. Many clothes were donated to these families and lots of candy was handed out to the children.

In June, District Apostle Kraus visited Mexico for the first time for a divine service in a rented space, called Monte Casino, near the border crossing. Many local residents and Americans came to that service, with over 400 in attendance. Priest Ewald Stegmann translated the service from English into Spanish.

Following that service, work really began in earnest. Over the next couple of months, more than 300 families were visited. On August 20, 1967, a permanent location, Monte Casino, was rented and weekly services began. The small handful of souls who attended was the beginning, and from there, the Church grew.

Just one year after having asked to serve souls in Mexico, in December of 1967, District Apostle Kraus sealed 98 souls and ordained 5 ministers.

During the following year, regular services were launched in five different locations in Tijuana: Colonia Marron, Colonia Aleman, Colonia Obrera, Colonia Libertad, and Colonia Francisco Villa.

In May of 1968, District Apostle Kraus returned to Tijuana for a large service in which he conducted 6 ordinations.

In September of 1968, ground was broken on the construction of the church in Mission del Sol. The church was dedicated by the District Apostle in April of 1969, along with the congregation in Colonia Francisco Villa (Pancho Villa). Over the next few years, churches in Colonia Obrera, Ensenada, and Guadalajara were built and dedicated.

The foundations that were laid in 1967 were strong and made the way for many New Apostolic Christians to practice their faith over the years.

Reprint of Winter 2017 Vision Newsletter

NAC USA MUSEUM

In June 2017, Chief Apostle Schneider held a divine service in Tinley Park, Illinois. During the weekend, the Chief Apostle, along with many other ministers and members, took the opportunity to visit the museum of the New Apostolic Church USA located in the historical Chicago church building. The museum is an ongoing project dedicated to preserving and teaching the history of our faith in the USA.

Through the museum project, we can better appreciate the history of our spiritual family, both the events that laid the foundation for our present and help to shape our future. All can participate in helping. This can be as simple as looking through the pictures and church memorabilia you have collected throughout your life. Whatever you find, please send to the museum at the address listed below.

Right now, we are working on completing our collection of information on the history of each congregation. If members have any information relating to the beginning of specific congregations, and the very early years of the 1900s, we would very much appreciate if you would share that with the museum. Since the Chief Apostle visit in June, some have sent pictures, jewelry, and other items, which are now part of the museum. This is a visible testimony of a rich, historical past that holds precious memories for many of us.

If you send pictures, please identify the occasion and people in each photo as best you can. Please also provide the history of any item, such as jewelry or artifacts. If you would like the picture or artifact returned to you, please indicate that when sending it in. We will copy the document or take pictures of it and then send it back. Otherwise, we will keep it in the museum.

Please consider helping with this project. We are part of an inspiring story of faith that is worth preserving for future generations.

Contributions can be emailed to: **NACMuseum@nac-usa.org**

Or mailed to: **New Apostolic Church National Museum
3753 North Troy Street
Chicago, IL 60618-4594**

PENTECOST 2018 | WASHINGTON D.C.

What a busy time leading up to the joyous celebration of Pentecost! The Chief Apostle and District Apostles began to arrive in Washington D.C. as early as the Tuesday before Pentecost Sunday.

Chief Apostle Schneider led the District Apostle Meeting International, a two-day meeting with all the District Apostles and District Apostle Helpers of the world. The spiritual part of the meeting focused on the return of Christ and our desire to be with Him.

While these meetings were going on, the wives were able to spend time in fellowship together and with others through various activities. Together, they packed backpacks filled with school supplies to give to children who are refugees in the USA. They were also able to participate in a small group experience on a portion of Acts 2:42 about the breaking of bread. These small groups were led in English, Spanish, and German, so that all could have a chance to be involved. The wives also visited a new museum in D.C. – the Bible Museum. There, they explored the history of the Bible, some of its stories, and also the impact that the Bible has had on people throughout history and the world today.

After this busy week, finally the Pentecost weekend arrived. Our theme for the weekend was *And they continued...*, as this is a reference to the work of the early congregation after they were filled with the Holy Spirit. Today we also have the desire to continue together in learning about Christ and growing in our faith as we share moments of fellowship and communion. And Pentecost is an important time when we can celebrate our unity in this continuation of our mission as Christ's disciples.

Already beginning on Friday, members began to arrive for the weekend's activities. Music rehearsals for the Pentecost divine service began early Saturday at the Hylton Memorial Chapel, where the Pentecost service would take place. Altogether, the choir, soloists, organist and pianist, with the conductors, rehearsed for a number of hours, all while the sanctuary was being set up for the divine service.

Also, at the Chapel was a NAC-USA Exhibition, which is something that the national church has never done before on such a large scale. Here, NAC-USA volunteers and administrative staff provided information at different booths about some of the initiatives and teachings happening in the district church. This was a time for members to ask questions and learn more about these newer resources and teachings. The booths at the Exhibition dealt with the

topics of Giving, FaithArc, re Charitable Ministry, Spiritual Gifts, Prepare & Enrich, the NAC-USA Development Institute, and the You're Home resources. Later in the afternoon, the Chief Apostle, the District Apostles, and their wives also had the chance to visit the Exhibition. This opened the opportunity to greet and converse with a number of our members. Local food trucks provided a chance to remain together and enjoy a meal together during the day.

Also during the Exhibition, everyone was invited to attend short presentations on different topics – NAC Talks. Since English is not the only language that is used in divine services in the USA, these talks also were offered in multiple languages. District Apostle Kriel, from South Africa, gave the first presentation about working with what you have, in English. District Apostle Deppner then gave the next talk, also in English, about church life in the Congo. Following this, District Apostle Montes de Oca spoke about Brazil and Bolivia, which was presented in Spanish. And the last talk was given by Evangelist Kiefer, the church theologian, about the life and times in the first church. His talk was in German, and translated into English. For each NAC Talk, the room was filled with people eager to hear from the international visitors.

After this great day of learning and fellowship, all looked forward to the Pentecost divine service the next morning.

The congregation gathered to worship before the service around 10:15am on Sunday. The music was a balance of traditional and contemporary songs, choir and soloists, along with instrumental selections.

Chief Apostle Schneider opened the service with Ephesians 1:13-14:

In Him you also trusted, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, to the praise of His glory.

With these verses, he brought to light that the gift of the Holy Spirit we receive in Holy Sealing is a seal that shows our childhood in God, is a promise of Jesus' resurrection power in us, is a guarantee that God will complete the work that He began in us, and is a pledge, which is the foretaste of the kingdom of God.

Chief Apostle Schneider then called District Apostle Joseph Ekhuya from East Africa, District Apostle Markus Fehlbaum from Switzerland, and District Apostle Andrew Andersen from Australia to assist in the divine service.

After the service, everyone spent time together in fellowship and enjoyed lunch from local food trucks. Some of the District Apostles and others stayed for meetings that continued into the next week, while everyone else, including the Chief Apostle, either went home or took some time to further explore Washington D.C.

Through these experiences, we could truly see how God had blessed all of the prayers and preparations for this time together, and provided us with a wonderful Pentecostal feast.

Reprint of Summer 2018 Vision Newsletter

TOMORROW, GOD-WILLING

Following is an article from one of our members, Lacey Smith, who participated in a year-long medical fellowship in Thomassique, Haiti, explaining her experiences there:

On my last night in Haiti, I sat eying a spider in the corner of my room from the thatched chair I had come to call my own. While the familiar whirl of my fan and the din of the crickets filled the heavy air, I thought about the year I had spent in villages, beneath mango trees, and under a sun made of fire.

I thought about the stories I had gathered - stories of hardship and endurance and cholera and malnutrition. Stories of a place and a culture both vibrant and complex. Stories of hurricanes and palm-roofed houses, of health committees and clean water initiatives, of village birth assistants and local doctors that rose above and beyond what was asked of them by their profession.

I thought about these stories, and I understood that, in thirteen months, these narratives had restructured my world view. For despite a life that seemed difficult and unforgiving, the men and women that lived these narratives were stronger and more forgiving. They were kind, funny, and frustrated at times, but ultimately collaborative in a world that seemed divisive and iniquitous. Before my fellowship, I had understood this kind of compassionate resilience in a parabolic way - as one internalizes Sunday School lessons, applicable yet still analogic. During my year as a Global Health Fellow, I was handed the opportunity to witness what “love of neighbor” should, could, and does entail.

My thoughts were disrupted by a buoyant knock on my open door.

“You worry too much about spiders,” my friend Kiki told me, following the course of my gaze. I laughed and un-furrowed my spider-furrowed brow.

“Only for one more day.” I said.

“Only until tomorrow, if God wants.” Kiki said.

In the language of Haitian Creole, one rarely says only the word, “tomorrow.” The phrase in its entirety is always “*demen, si Dye vle*” or “*tomorrow, God-willing.*” This linguistic nuance always made me grin. It was as if, embedded in the vernacular of Haitian life, there was a

spirituality that framed my experience – that reminded me that the stories I gathered from yesterday, from Haiti, are meant to be a part of my tomorrow. That as a future physician, community member, daughter, sister, and friend, I have every reason to love my neighbor as deeply and as unequivocally as I am loved by God. I remember feeling that this is something that I wouldn't forget. I also remember hoping that God forgot to include spiders under the term "neighbor."

The tomorrow after that last night, I left the clinic and ended my fellowship. However, my connection to that place and those people still remains. Currently, the charity of the New Apostolic Church USA, **re Charitable Ministry**, is forming a relationship with the clinic's US-based organization, Medical Missionaries. If you or someone you know would like more information on the Global Health Fellowship in Thomassique please go to: <http://www.medmissionaries.org/id208.html>

Lacey obtained her undergraduate degree in Health and Human Sciences from Loyola Marymount University, in Los Angeles. During college, she volunteered as a clinic assistant at the Venice Family Clinic, acted and sang in several productions for the LMU Theater department, and served as an emergency medical technician for the university. Lacey is currently a US-Ireland Alliance Mitchell Scholar pursuing a Master of Science degree in Immunology and Global Health at National University of Ireland, Maynooth. After Ireland, she will attend Harvard Medical School.

Reprint of Summer 2018 Vision Newsletter

CHIEF APOSTLE VISIT: CHARLOTTE, NC – FEBRUARY 2019

It's good to see you. With these words, our Chief Apostle welcomed us to the divine service in Charlotte, NC on February 10. Not only the approximately 700 in attendance seated in the hall, but all of the congregations across the USA and many in Central and South America connected online received this greeting. These opening words of the service brought with them the assurance that, to Jesus Christ, everyone is important; He forgets no one! The Chief Apostle encouraged us to show the same feelings to those around us – that they matter to us and we are thankful for them.

From this welcoming thought, the Chief Apostle proceeded to walk through the sixth chapter of John, pointing out the activity of Jesus and the people seeking Him. Those that followed Jesus had different motives; to be helped and healed, to be ruled by Him and freed from the Romans, to create a better society by following His teachings. None of those things were inherently wrong, but the true reason Jesus came to earth was to overcome sin and offer eternal life. And that was the reason that the small group of disciples stayed with Him, which they said so clearly when questioned by Jesus – “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life” (John 6:68). The disciples didn't stay with Jesus because of His deeds, but rather because of who He was. Our Chief Apostle encouraged us to check our motivations for coming to Jesus, and also taught us what it means to be a disciple of Christ and how to point others to Him.

District Apostle Michael Ehrich from South Germany served along, and Apostle Reinhard Hecht was given the opportunity to serve once more before being placed into retirement. The Chief Apostle characterized him as being a man on fire for Christ. Apostle Hecht has been active in the apostle ministry since 2001, serving in Tanzania and the southeast quadrant of the United States, including the Carolina, Georgia, Florida West, South Florida, and Detroit districts. To ensure the continued care of these congregations, District Evangelist Ferguson, from Raleigh, North Carolina, was ordained into the apostle ministry.

All of the apostles and bishops from the United States were invited to participate in the weekend, and took part in a meeting with the Chief Apostle on Saturday morning. It was the first time Chief Apostle Schneider visited the “the deep south” of the United States, and he enjoyed the warm hospitality of the members there.

Reprint of Spring 2019 Vision Newsletter

LOVING YOUR NEIGHBOR

Denver Metro

The Stepping Forward plan inspired the Denver Metro congregation to look into their community and come up with ideas to get involved. Out of the ideas submitted, a food drive won out. Two of the congregations in the Denver area collected food and donated it to a small food pantry not far from the Denver church where several members had volunteered. When the time came to centralize the Denver-area congregations into one, their new building lent itself to creating their own food pantry. After much research and working with other organizations and churches in the area, the Denver Metro congregation opened up a food pantry for their neighborhood. Along with food donations, our members spend time with the people that come into the food bank and connect them with other community resources if they are looking for assistance.

They have now been serving the Denver community for three years and have set up a network between various food banks in the area to share resources, source food, and learn how to better service their food pantry guests. In just 2018, they served over 2,500 people and donated over 6,000 pounds of food. One of our members who volunteers at the food bank says she has learned that there is need and generosity all around us – even in unexpected places. The congregation has also recently started a senior lunch program on Wednesdays in collaboration with a community organization. Members open the church and serve, while the organization provides the food at a reduced cost, giving seniors a place to gather together to build community and friendships.

Bethpage

Around five years ago, the Bethpage congregation started to have food drives around Thanksgiving time to donate to Long Island Cares, an organization dedicated to stamping out hunger in Long Island. To further help the community and local organizations, and to provide fresh food to those in need, Bethpage started a garden on the church property. During the summer and harvest season, they donate fresh fruit and vegetables one Sunday a month. On the other Sundays, the congregation shares the harvest with one another. Last year, Bethpage donated around 3,000 pounds of canned and fresh food.

Erie

The Erie congregation built a raised bed garden in 2017 in order to grow vegetables to donate to organizations in the community. In 2018, they harvested and donated 13 different varieties of fresh vegetables to local food banks, which is something they are often lacking. Now in its third growing season, the garden team is working to involve more members in the congregation to help care for the garden and allow it to thrive so it can continue serving the Erie community.

Reprint of Summer 2019 Vision Newsletter

NATIONAL PRIEST CONFERENCE

By God's grace, about 500 USA priests and the apostles gathered together at the National Priest Conference over two weekends in September. We participated in seminars and conversations, all pertaining to the work of a priest in our church. We experienced a multitude of blessed moments and I would like to share with you a few special experiences.

On Friday evening, the event began with an opening address defining the overall objectives of the conference. We considered the sacrifices and efforts of our past "fathers and mothers in faith" and their boldness and confidence in Christ during the trying and difficult years of the establishment and development of our church in America. Also, in their time, they were the catalysts and contributors of many developments, not the least of which was spreading the gospel over many nations.

Due to a number of recent congregational anniversaries, where old, faded photographs reminded us again of our pioneering members and ministers, in a humble act of respect, together with all the priests, we stood for a moment of silence. Again, we turned to our predecessors in the celebration of Holy Communion for the departed and felt moving moments as we together, in spirit, celebrated at the Lord's table. Unified in the body and blood of Jesus, we believe that those who have gone before remain in step with Christ's advancement of His church.

Please allow me to express my deep and heartfelt thanks to all priests for engaging in the conference, and to their wives, families, and congregations who gave them up for these weekends. Personally, I was strengthened and renewed, and I shall never forget the unique experience of having Holy Communion together with all the priests and the apostles of our nation.

Reprint of District Apostle's introduction letter from Autumn 2019 Vision Newsletter

MOSAIC: NATIONAL PRIEST CONFERENCE OF THE NEW APOSTOLIC CHURCH USA

Unlike any other event ever hosted in the USA district, the National Priest Conference in September was a historical gathering. Over the course of two weekends, almost 500 priestly ministers came together to be renewed and strengthened in the understanding of their ministry.

At the beginning of each weekend, September 6 – 8 and September 20 – 22, the ministers had the opportunity to attend an exhibition that highlighted and reinforced the various resources and programs in the USA district. A place for asking questions and diving deeper, ministers were able to gain insight into topics such as spiritual gifts, Faith Arc, small groups, music and worship, greeter and member resources, benevolence, giving, and perhaps the most applicable, minister development.

The District Apostle officially opened the weekend by sharing his thoughts on the importance of each minister's personal relationship with God and what it means for them to be part of the mosaic that He has created. A mosaic, which was the theme for the conference, is made up of preformed elements that when put together, create a larger image or pattern of beauty. These diverse elements come together to form a coherent whole, just as God's servants as part of the Body of Christ contribute to His mission on earth.

This theme, Mosaic, carried throughout the weekend as the ministers explored the different elements of the divine service and how they can fit together to create a Spirit-inspired experience for all members that deepens their relationship with God.

Groups of approximately 50 priestly ministers rotated between presentations given by the apostles on pastoral care, music and liturgy, preaching, the preparation for and celebration of Holy Communion, and sacraments and blessings. At the end of Saturday's sessions and activities, the ministers were able to meet with their own apostle and continue the conversation on the important aspects and expectations of their ministry.

The high point of each weekend was the opportunity to celebrate the Lord's Supper together as the apostolate and priesthood of the USA district. Needless to say, these moments created a deeply moving experience that shall always be remembered. Each one could perceive that the celebration of Holy Communion is the highest form of fellowship on this earth, which God desires for all people. The divine service themes for the weekends were the sacrament of Holy Communion and the holiness and wonder of God, the Holy Spirit, respectively.

As each weekend came to a close with the divine service experience and closing thoughts from the District Apostle, the purpose of the conference was highlighted – that each priestly minister understands and embraces their calling from God, and that this calling be fulfilled through their ministry. This fellowship and sense of unity amongst the brothers was truly an unforgettable experience.

Reprint of Autumn 2019 Vision Newsletter

ONE THING I LEARNED AT THE NATIONAL PRIEST CONFERENCE...

An Apostle told me that one of our priests says the confirmation vow every morning.

“I renounce Satan and all his work and ways, and surrender myself to You, O triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in belief, obedience, and the earnest resolution to remain faithful to You until my end. Amen.”

After I heard this, I also began to do this in my morning prayer. In reciting the words, I felt a strength come over me, firstly declaring war on Satan and making my resolution of faith anew. This was followed by a feeling of humbleness and warmth in the affirmation of my love and trust in the One who has always loved me.

In so doing, we gird ourselves for the day ahead, focused on the love and power of the Almighty, boldly facing whatever the evil one may put in our way. This is the advice of Apostle Paul to the Ephesians:

Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore, take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.

Stand therefore, having girded your waist with truth, having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace; above all, taking the shield of faith with which you will be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God... (Ephesians 6:11-17)

- LRK

Reprint of Autumn 2019 Vision Newsletter

	<p>Divine Service Experience</p>	

JOY IN FELLOWSHIP

Chief Apostle Schneider, in his video message to all in the beginning of the year, mentioned that fellowship in the Christian community is an experience that can give us Joy in Christ. A part of this fellowship takes place during Holy Communion. As we go into the season of Passiontide, the establishment of Holy Communion is very relevant to us as Jesus instituted it at the Last Supper.

How do we experience fellowship during Holy Communion?

The Catechism explains Holy Communion as a meal of fellowship and provides three different types of fellowship that we are able to experience if we truly believe in the strength and transformational power of Holy Communion. Let's take a deeper look at them.

1. The first experience of fellowship in Holy Communion is between Jesus Christ and His Apostles. Through the partaking and celebration of Holy Communion, Christ enters into fellowship with His Apostles. This experience is directly related to the original fellowship between Christ and the disciples at The Last Supper.
2. As believers who celebrate Holy Communion, we also enter into fellowship with Jesus. Our partaking and belief in this fellowship of Holy Communion is necessary for salvation. As Jesus says in John 6:54, *"Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day."*
3. Because we go up and receive Holy Communion individually, it might not cross our mind that it is actually an experience of fellowship with one another. By assembling as a congregation, we worship together and share each one's proclamation of faith and belief in salvation in the celebration of Holy Communion.

After examining these three avenues of fellowship during Holy Communion, we find that we have much cause for joy in Christ each time we come into His House.

Holy Communion also has what the Catechism calls an "eschatological character," which refers to the endtime when Jesus will come again. As a congregation joined together in Holy Communion, we are awaiting the fulfillment of the promise that Jesus made at the Last Supper: *"I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes."* (Luke 22: 18) It is with this promise that we experience an intimate fellowship with the Lord and each other through Holy Communion.

AMEN

Amen is a Hebrew term, which means something is solid, true, faithful. When Jesus preached, He often said, "Amen, amen, I say to you," which really means, "What I say is the true word of God." He wanted to show that He is the Son of God, the truth, and His Father speaks through Him. Each amen we say in a divine service has a particular meaning and it is something we should understand.

We say amen at the end of the preaching to recognize that it is the word of God. It is a profession of faith and truth. When the congregation says this amen, they confirm it is really God's word. In turn, this means we agree and believe what is said because it's the word of God. We commit to do what was said in the sermon.

We also say amen after our prayers. This amen expresses that we want and need what was prayed for, and that God can provide it. Sometimes one prays and doesn't really mean it. When we say the Lord's Prayer, we pray, "Forgive us our sins as we forgive our debtors." Forgiving others is not always easy, but we should be earnest in speaking and agreeing with those words by saying amen. The amen at the end of every prayer is important because it means we sincerely agree with each statement in the prayer.

Amen is said after the absolution, which means that we believe our sins are forgiven. Sometimes we don't have enough faith that God really delivered us, but saying amen after the absolution means that we truly believe we have been forgiven. Not only do we proclaim our belief in the forgiveness of our individual sins, but also that my brothers' and sisters' sins have been forgiven.

When we say amen after receiving Holy Communion, it is a wonderful profession of faith. We believe that this is the body and blood of Jesus, that He died for me, and that He loves me. When you receive Holy Communion and say amen, it is a personal one; we say that amen alone. After the consecration, the whole congregation says amen, which is a profession of faith, but then comes the personal one. It applies to my life, to my soul, and it signifies my personal relationship with Jesus. We also say amen when the departed receive Holy Communion, which displays our belief that the departed really received the communion. The whole congregation believes that salvation is possible in the yonder world.

Amen is said twice in an ordination. The brother first says amen after his ordination, which means he believes he has received this new commission from God and that He will give him

all he needs to fulfill it. Then the whole congregation says amen. They believe and agree that this man was commissioned by God and accept him as being sent by God.

When the congregation says amen after the blessing for marriage or for confirmation, it shows those who receive the blessing that the congregation believes God has blessed them and the congregation commits themselves to helping them enjoy the blessing.

*This article is based on Chief Apostle Schneider's thoughts from the Venezuela Apostle Meeting in August 2014.

Reprint of Spring 2015 Vision Newsletter

CHOIR DRESS

I would like to address the matter of a choir dress. Over the past years, it has come up in a number of districts and congregations and we have discussed this matter in the circle of the apostles, bishops, and district leaders.

As our understanding of the Gospel deepens, we recognize with more and more clarity that our primary focus should be the condition of our relationships and changing our inner being to be more Christ like. Overemphasis on external matters will not bring us salvation and it can weaken our teaching because it is not based on the Gospel. For this reason, in the future, black and white dress for choir members will not be required in our normal Sunday divine services.

I realize this is a variation from our history. Let us recognize that a dress code is not a defining element of our Church, but rather we are defined by our relationship with our future Bridegroom, Jesus Christ, and by our oneness, which is not achieved through externalities such as uniform dress.

Brothers and sisters, I encourage you to again step forward and not make this simple matter a stumbling block. Let's continue to focus on the true elements of preparing for the return of Christ. Since we are true believing Christians, such matters should not derail us nor rob us of our joy in Christ.

- LRK

Reprint of Spring 2015 Vision Newsletter

DECORATING THE ALTAR

Our discussion of Thanksgiving altar decorations should begin within the context of our theological and liturgical beliefs. The New Apostolic Church liturgical tradition brings sacrament and word together in one place at the altar, where they are both focal points of the divine service experience. We may contrast this to the Catholic tradition that uses an altar for sacraments and a pulpit for the word. Additionally, many American Christian churches base their approach on the Reformed Church or Calvinistic style, which does not use an altar at all.

In the Old Testament, an altar was constructed where sacrifices were made to please God. When Christ made the ultimate sacrifice, He became the altar. Nothing else can compare with His supreme sacrifice. Through His word and His sacrament, the altar now represents divine authority. The Word of God is proclaimed at the altar, reminding us of His promise and grace. The sacrament of Holy Communion is the presence of Christ's sacrifice for us and it is also consecrated and celebrated at the altar.

Music and worship prepare us to receive the preached Word of God. The divine Word, including the proclamation of the forgiveness of sins, prepares the way for the highpoint of the celebration of the Sacrament of Holy Communion. It is important to recognize that music and worship are offered in ways that do not distract us from Word and Sacrament. Likewise, the altar decorations should support, not distract us from, the precious main elements of the divine service.

Of times in the past, we decorated our Thanksgiving altars with canned goods or patriotic symbols such as flags. Both of these items are inherently good; the canned goods serve a wonderful humanitarian purpose and our flag evokes a strong and positive emotional connection for many souls. They may have an honored place within the church building.

However, given our understanding of what the altar represents within our Theology and Liturgy, it should be adorned predominantly by the earnings of Christ. Please make every effort to reflect this understanding when making your Thanksgiving plans. Without minimizing the importance of Thanksgiving Day, let us limit the decoration design to flowers, fruits and vegetables in a way that does not distract our attention from its higher purpose.

Reprint of Summer 2015 Vision Newsletter

OUR UNDERSTANDING OF HOLY COMMUNION

The question sometimes arises, “Should I go up for Holy Communion if I haven’t completely forgiven someone or if I still harbor negative feelings towards my neighbor?” In order to partake in Holy Communion worthily, one must believe in Christ and His sacrifice and be baptized. Our admittance to Holy Communion is grounded on the relationship that was created with God in our baptism – through the sacrament, we (or our parents) vowed faith and allegiance to Jesus Christ.

Our New Apostolic doctrine states that we believe the body and blood of Jesus is added to the bread and wine of the wafer and that His real sacrifice is present in Holy Communion. When we decide to partake in Holy Communion in front of the altar, it is as if we are standing in front of the cross during Christ’s sacrifice and are witnessing His death for our sins. Considering this idea is central to what we believe about Holy Communion, who then could actually stand worthily before the Lord?

Thus, this sacrament is also connected with the forgiveness of sins, although the absolution itself is not a sacrament. We believe the proclamation of the absolution insures that our sins are forgiven. While this is true, there is no way we can have knowledge of every sin we have committed or every lingering negative feeling we may have towards one another. And sometimes we simply struggle to forgive because the injustice committed against us is so great.

Already some years ago, the Chief Apostle expressed a vital key to this situation that if one wants to forgive, but struggles to do so, and fervently seeks the strength from Jesus to do it, then they should participate in Holy Communion.

Deciding to partake in Holy Communion is a highly personal decision. It is something that requires a deep faith in the victory of Christ, a heart that is humble, and the willingness to repent. It is important to remember that the experience of Holy Communion brings us the closest we can come to Jesus Christ on the earth and this communion with Him is an essential part of our salvation.

*This article is based on thoughts from the Catechism and a theology presentation by Evangelist Kiefer, the church theologian.

Reprint of Autumn 2016 Vision Newsletter

MOMENTS OF WORSHIP

During the year, we have many opportunities to worship together as a congregation around different holidays. Each moment of worship is special because it allows us to express to God what He really means to us. When we worship as a congregation, we not only grow closer to God, but closer to each other.

As we enter the second half of the year, where worship evenings for Thanksgiving or Christmas will be planned, we thought it might be helpful to expound on some ideas for worship that may fit with your congregation.

Most of us are familiar with the days of Christmas programs. These programs were a way to heighten the celebration of Christmas in the congregation, especially for the children. Over the years, the Christmas program seemed to evolve into more of a performance than a time of worship, with children memorizing poems, singing songs, and doing skits with costumes and scripts. The same things can still be done, but with a focus on worship, instead of performance. District Apostle Kolb encourages that the Christmas program is renewed in congregations, so that it is a moment of heightened worship where we share with God our joy and gratitude in sending His Son to earth. This is a time for us to focus our attention on the love of God that is expressed in the Christmas story and express to Him through Bible readings, songs, music, and spoken word what has been given for us.

You may also consider another idea for Christmas. This year, Christmas Eve falls on a Sunday, and while there will not be a divine service on Christmas Eve (only on Christmas Day), it could be possible to use this as a time to come together and worship. One idea to consider could be a Christmas Eve worship evening held in the evening with expanded worship pointing to the calm and stillness of night, and the anticipation of what is to come. The Christmas Day morning service would be filled with carols that express our joy at the glory of God, coming to earth as a child. We should strive to make each service in the Advent and Christmas seasons unique expressions to God of our thanksgiving and worship.

Other ideas for holiday worship throughout the year might include involving the local community in some way, caroling around the town, candlelight vigils, or a night of prayers focused on thanks and praise to God. Some of these ideas can also start in the Thanksgiving season, with a worship evening focused on thanksgiving and the Creation, or decorations in the church that inspire our congregation to share their thankfulness with each other.

No matter what holiday it is, we can always find ways to worship together as a congregation. In our worship, families are brought together, generations are brought together, community and church are brought together. Worship contributes to our holy responsibility to invest in our relationship with God and with those around us. Let our times of celebration, especially around holidays, also be times of worship.

Reprint of Summer 2017 Vision Newsletter

DO THIS IN REMEMBRANCE OF ME. CELEBRATING HOLY COMMUNION

On the same night in which He was betrayed, Jesus instituted Holy Communion in the presence of His disciples during their celebration of Passover. Holy Communion, also known as the Lord's Supper, the Eucharist, and the breaking of bread, is the moment set aside for Christians to gather to remember Christ's sacrifice and all that He accomplished for them through His selfless act of love. The celebration of this sacrament can never be taken lightly nor can it be allowed to become mundane; every time is an opportunity for a soul to remember and fellowship with their Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Why do we continue to celebrate Holy Communion during our divine services today? Simply because Jesus Himself is the origin of it, He is its focus and content, and He commanded that it be continued. When Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper in the Upper Room, an element of this institution was His command **to repeat** this supper in remembrance of Him as He said, *"Do this in remembrance of Me"* (Luke 22:19). The Apostle Paul re-iterated this point and expounded upon it when writing to the Corinthians. In 1 Corinthians 11:23-26, Paul says,

*For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you: that the Lord Jesus on the same night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, "Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; **do this in remembrance of Me.**" In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This **do, as often** as you drink it, **in remembrance of Me.**" For **as often** as you eat this bread and drink this cup, **you proclaim** the Lord's death **till He comes.***

Notice the command being repeated – "do this in remembrance of Me." And then the repetition of the words, "as often," indicating that this celebration wasn't just to be a one-time event. "You proclaim" indicates that this meal is a moment of professing our faith. And finally, "till He comes" tells us that we are to continue remembering what He has done through His death until He fulfills His promise to return.

It is clear from Scripture that we should continually celebrate Holy Communion, but the New Testament doesn't dictate how often we are to celebrate it. In the New Apostolic Church, we have the opportunity to participate in Holy Communion every time we come together for a divine service. While that opens the way for us to share in fellowship with Jesus each week, it also opens the possibility for our celebrations to become routine and dull, and for us to become callous to the moment. Some may ask themselves, "Why do we have to do this same thing repeatedly?" In addition, it's possible that for some, Holy Communion means it's

time to nudge the person next to them because their mind has gone elsewhere during the service. And sadly, for some of us, it's just an indicator that the divine service is coming to its end.

As believers in Jesus Christ, we must do our best to protect ourselves from becoming apathetic to the celebration of Holy Communion and keep it from becoming part of a routine. Holy Communion is an integral part of our life with Christ, and is a moment that we should **look forward to, prepare ourselves for, and be fully present in.**

Our lives are very busy and time flies by for many of us. In order to keep up with all of the things we need to accomplish and everywhere we need to go, our minds are constantly working to remind ourselves of those things. In order to celebrate Holy Communion properly, we must intentionally set aside time to remember what Jesus has done on our behalf. This act of remembering cannot just be done in the moments immediately preceding Holy Communion. Time must be spent throughout the week to remember how great the grace of Jesus is.

How can we do our best to protect ourselves from diminishing the importance of the Lord's Supper in our life?

First, we keep our focus on Jesus Christ. Take the time to remember that Jesus' death on the cross was a historical event. It really happened!

- It happened because our Heavenly Father loves us so much that He wanted to restore His relationship with us.
- It happened because it was the only way for us to be forgiven of our sin.
- It happened because we were powerless against sin and could not enter into fellowship with our Heavenly Father on our own.
- It happened so that the Scriptures could be fulfilled.
- It happened so that we could be rescued, set free, and receive the promise of eternal life

When we celebrate the Lord's Supper, we feast spiritually by faith on all the promises of God that were purchased by the blood of Jesus.

Second, in preparation for this meal, we have to consider what it means to be forgiven. What impact has Jesus' act of grace had on your life? What does it mean to you that you no longer have to live with the guilt of your sin? What has Jesus set you free from? As you answer these questions, it's very possible that you will end up standing, sitting, or kneeling in awe of Jesus. Take the time to worship Him and give thanks for all He has done for you. In these moments, you may discover a deeper understanding of the Lord's Supper. Imagine how powerful our celebration could be if we would all come together prepared in this way.

Third, Paul cautioned those participating in the breaking of bread to do so worthily by taking the time to examine themselves prior to coming to the table (1 Corinthians 11:28). We are to come with a proper attitude of humility and repentance. Recognize that you did not earn

your place at the table by your works and good deeds, but that your place was secured by the grace of Jesus Christ and that you have the opportunity to take your place only by faith. Examine your life and see where sin has crept in, and then, through repentance, invite Jesus into those places so that you can turn away from the things that seek to separate you from God. Humbly reflect on any offense you committed against a brother or sister, and resolve yourself to make it right with them. Strive, as Paul wrote to the Philippians, to *let your conduct be worthy of the gospel of Christ* (Philippians 1:27).

Holy Communion is one of the most precious gifts Christ has given to His church. When we participate in the Lord's Supper, we meet with the living Christ and receive the benefits of communing with the Bread of Heaven. Never take the opportunity to share in this moment lightly, and encourage each other to celebrate Holy Communion with the proper preparedness, reverence, and sensitivity.

Reprint of Spring 2018 Vision Newsletter

NAC USA ONLINE UPDATE

Starting in September, NAC USA Online – our website that allows members to watch webcasted services – will require a username and password. Because the website is a product of the NAC USA District, a username and password is the best way to ensure that it serves the USA members.

In order to be set up with a username and password, individual users of NAC USA Online will need to give their rector an up-to-date email address by Sunday, August 26. Submitting your email by this date will help avoid disruption to viewing the webcasted services through NAC USA Online. Shortly thereafter, you will receive an email with instructions about how to set up your username and password.

On-demand video clips of Chief Apostle and District Apostle services will be able to be accessed without a login on www.nacusaonline.org and the app.

Reprint of Summer 2018 Vision Newsletter

NEW BAPTISMAL CHALICE

Holy Baptism only happens once in a believer's life. Baptism with water is the first and fundamental act of grace of the triune God for those who profess their faith in Jesus Christ. Through this sacrament, original sin is washed away and the believer enters into a relationship with God. It is through Holy Baptism that a person becomes a Christian and is brought into the church of Christ (CNAC 8.1). A person's life is transformed when they are baptized.

Because of the importance of this holy event, we are introducing a unique baptismal chalice for the sacrament, starting in 2019. This practice is common in other New Apostolic congregations around the world who also use a baptismal chalice that is distinct from the communion chalice.

Already when it stands on the altar, the baptismal chalice will signal to the congregation that today is a special day; a new believer is joining our community.

Reprint of Winter 2018 Vision Newsletter

GLUTEN-FREE COMMUNION WAFERS

For those that suffer with Celiac disease, gluten-free communion wafers are available for Holy Communion. For those with this disease, it can be a health risk to be exposed to any gluten product, whether directly or indirectly. For this reason, the topic was discussed recently at the National Synod (October 2018) and an approved procedure was specified for dispensing the gluten-free wafers. Ministers who serve gluten-free communion wafers will wear an indicator and stand with the other communion servers.

Because the cost to produce the gluten-free wafers is 16 times more than the standard wafers, we ask that only those with Celiac disease take the gluten-free version.

If you need gluten-free communion wafers in your congregation, and/or to understand the serving procedure during Holy Communion that will take effect in 2019, please speak with your rector.

Reprint of Winter 2018 Vision Newsletter

CHANGES TO NAC USA ONLINE: FINDING COMMUNITY IN CHURCH

CONNECTING TO THE VISION AND MISSION

The vision and mission guide all that the Church does. To reach our vision, we follow our mission. The first step, teaching all people the gospel of Jesus Christ, is crucial in being able to follow the rest of the mission. Many projects or programs are aimed at reaching out to all so that people may hear the gospel and come to be baptized with water and Spirit. We've put a lot of focus on this phase of reaching and teaching, but this is not the only part of the mission. We cannot stop once this part is done. Reaching out to people is just one aspect of a relationship with others. In a divine service from 2017, Chief Apostle Schneider said, "We have to go to the people. The transmission of the gospel needs personal contact."

We have to do more than just reach out to people to teach them something; we have to connect with people. When we are connected together, we are creating a church in which people feel at home. Only with a connection, can we truly provide soul care and cultivate a warm fellowship. Only with a connection, can we fully share God's love with others and help inspire joy in serving.

NAC USA Online – a place where people can listen virtually to the sermon every Sunday – aims to teach the gospel of Jesus Christ. There are some genuine reasons as to why people need online services in order to hear the gospel. For these people, NAC USA Online is a solution that allows them to connect in some way. But this is not the full experience. The solution of NAC USA Online only speaks to the first part of the mission of reaching out to teach the gospel, and falls short of the other aspects of the mission. The complete connection, soul care and fellowship and sharing God's love with others, is lacking when one only attends services using NAC USA Online. Due to this, we encourage our members to live their faith with a community of believers within the church.

THE NEED FOR COMMUNITY FOUND IN CHURCH

Jesus was often teaching in crowds; and His apostles often preached to crowds, which we can see evidence of in their letters. Their letters were not just addressed to one Ephesian or one Corinthian, but rather to the Corinthian and Ephesian congregations. In these instances, we can see how community can help people learn and grow. We find this community in the church. Not a virtual community, but a physical congregation. A divine service is essentially made up of several components – worship, sermon, sacrament, fellowship, and blessing.

Broadcasted services can only provide the sermon and blessing element. The other components are diminished when experienced outside of the congregation.

Worship

The Catechism offers one definition of divine service as the fellowship of the believers gathered in the worship and praise of God (CNAC 12.1.5.3). While our individual worship is crucial in our relationship with God, we also want to make time for corporate worship, where we come together as believers and praise God. So, even when one individually worships God while connected to an online service, it is not an equal alternative to the corporate worship that Christians experience together in church. Corporate worship gives us an opportunity to publicly declare our love for Him. There is a certain feeling of wonderment and conviction when people are gathered in one place to praise God, and this feeling cannot be fully grasped when experienced from a screen.

Sacrament

Holy Communion is the sacrament we are able to experience every divine service. Holy Communion is a meal of profession. The profession of the death, resurrection, and return of Jesus Christ is part of the profession of the Christian faith. When one is watching service online by themselves, this element of profession in Holy Communion is diminished because they are only professing their belief to themselves. While a personal profession is powerful, there is significance in publicly professing one's faith to other believers (cf. Matthew 10:32).

Holy Communion is also a meal of fellowship. The presence of the Lord's body and blood establishes our fellowship with Him and other believers. In this fellowship of the Lord's Supper, the true nature and true form of the church of Christ are clearly revealed. It is very difficult to feel this important sense of fellowship in Holy Communion when separated from the congregation.

Fellowship

The fellowship experienced in other elements of the divine service experience are also lacking when viewing services only through NAC USA Online. True Christian fellowship is closely related to Holy Communion, where we experience fellowship with Jesus Christ. This connection to Christ is the basis for our fellowship with other believers. Fellowship is when, united by the fellowship of God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the community of believers shares their lives with one another. It is more than just gathering together in one area or sharing a meal with each other. And it is more than just the congregation waving to the camera in their church so that those connected via the broadcast feel included. In the congregation, we are prompted to engage with other people, and God wants this. If we don't engage with other people, then we cannot serve them as we are called to do. To share the grace of God, we have to step forward and join the fellowship of believers.

CONCLUSION

In September 2018, logins were introduced for NAC USA Online. Everyone was allowed access to live broadcasted services if they obtained a login. This change was a step in the

direction that NAC USA Online will take over the coming year. We know that there are very real reasons as to why people need online services. And for these reasons, NAC USA Online will continue broadcasting live services from specified locations. Starting in mid-2019, there will be one broadcasted service per time zone and one Spanish service.

These reasons for viewing live broadcasted services on NAC USA Online include:

- Congregations with few or no altar servers
- Linked Members and/or shut-ins

If these members cannot experience the true fellowship and community only felt through actual presence at a divine service, they can at least hear the preached Word. For all other people, members or guests, actually being in a divine service is what we offer and what we encourage.

There may be a few other reasons why one would use NAC USA Online – members with short-term illnesses, members who are traveling, etc. Members who use NAC USA Online for one of these reasons tend to have more of a choice in deciding if they will be able to attend divine service in a physical church. Because they have this choice, and because we know that the divine services experienced only through NAC USA Online are lacking in multiple aspects, we encourage these members to go to church when possible and, when not possible, to log into NAC USA Online to access divine service clips from the Chief Apostle and District Apostle, also available on the New Apostolic Church USA app. We hope that this will help equip each one to have a maturing faith.

NAC USA Online cannot replace coming to church if one is able. Christians throughout the ages have professed belief in the “church.” This makes it clear that the church is not an external or trivial thing, but is an essential element of Christian faith. Without the church, it is impossible to be a Christian (CNAC 6.4).

It is in the presence of a community of believers that the Spirit reveals Himself. And when we gather with this community, we give the Holy Spirit an opportunity to use us to serve others. This service, towards others and towards God, is what will bring us closer to our vision and ultimately, the goal of our faith.

Reprint of Spring 2019 Vision Newsletter

**Divine
Service
Experience**

*Events and
Reports*

REGIONAL WORKSHOPS

In keeping with our summer “connections” theme, we would like to report on a unique set of regional leadership training workshops conducted across the USA over the past 6 months. A revolving team comprised of both NAC-USA employees and dedicated volunteers traveled to 13 different regional locations to make connections with local congregational leaders. In each location, a full Saturday of workshops was dedicated to sharing information and providing hands on training in selected subjects that lead to improved congregational health. Attendees from large and small congregations within the region came together to learn and share.

The morning sessions were dedicated to a renewed conviction that we are called, empowered and equipped by God to serve others within the body of Christ. We all have the opportunity to be impactful within our congregations and communities “that all may feel the love of God”.

The remaining agenda was organized into three separate learning tracks with breakout sessions:

Music & Worship

Small Group Facilitation

Leadership & Work of Ministry

In total, over 1,000 participants attended the sessions. Existing relationships were strengthened and new ones were formed. Real life experiences, common problems and solutions were discussed freely. The results of these healthy connections are emerging across the district.

Reprint of Summer 2015 Vision Newsletter

NEW COURSE FOR MINISTERS

As a church that embraces change, we want to be in a state of continual learning. Striving to learn more allows us to grow in ways that will help us reach congregational health, by cultivating our culture, divine service experience, pastoral care, and structure.

In the beginning of April, the New Apostolic Church USA released a new product for ministers, called the Effective Preaching course. This is an online teaching program that helps ministers improve their preaching skills, which will in turn enhance the divine service experience. It had been discussed that there needed to be a central resource for ministers on preaching, since that is a fundamental element of the divine service. The group assigned to this project used many different resources to create the material for the Effective Preaching course. For example, they utilized input from professional public speakers and incorporated information from the past New Apostolic powerful sermon program and other preaching resources.

The Effective Preaching course is one course comprised of four main topics: Developing Inner Authority, Sermon Construction, Preaching Delivery Skills, and Utilizing Feedback. Another interesting element of the course is that after the online experience is completed, local ministers will have small group discussions, in person, to discuss the information, truly making it a team effort to digest the information and learn how to enhance preaching in the divine service.

We hope that all ministers find this course beneficial to themselves personally and to their congregation. For all current ministers who preach in a divine service, the Effective Preaching course will be a requirement in the future.

Reprint of Summer 2015 Vision Newsletter

	<h1>Pastoral Care</h1>	

WALK WITH ME

Going forward, the USA Apostles and I would like pastoral care to be a more intentional focus in each of our congregations. One might ask, what does this entail and whom does it involve? Perhaps the first thing we all think of when addressing pastoral care is the responsibility of the minister.

In its most general sense, pastoral care refers to the ministries/services usually performed by a pastor. Some denominations of the Christian faith use the phrase to refer to more specific aspects of a pastor's ministry, such as counseling and visitation. The core idea of "pastoral care" is that pastors are to care. The word pastor comes from the Latin word for *shepherd*. A pastor is to be a shepherd or caretaker of God's flock.

Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. 1 Peter 5:2-3

"From this we derive that ministers have the task of 'tending' the flock of Christ and of preparing them for the return of the Chief Shepherd, Jesus Christ. They do this 'willingly' and 'eagerly.'" (Catechism 12.4)

Pastoral care isn't confined to the responsibilities of the ministers, but it is also the task of the entire congregation. This relates to practical help in life. In one of His parables, Jesus says...

For I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me. Matthew 25: 35-36

Pastoral care is a model of emotional and spiritual support that can be found in all cultures and traditions. The goal of pastoral care is to support one another in pain, loss, and anxiety, or in triumphs, joys, and victories.

In Luke 24:13-35, we learn of five simple aspects of pastoral care from the encounter the Lord Jesus had with the disciples on the road to Emmaus. This encounter started with the disciples feeling sad, frustrated, angry, and uncertain about the future. Jesus recognized the situation and drew close to them with empathy towards their situation. He first had to

understand what was troubling their hearts. In the time that Jesus spent with the disciples, He endeavored to help change the way they felt by loving them and never judging them, and guiding them in a way to move forward. We are all able to learn from this encounter of how the Lord Jesus provided care for the disciples. Let us now look into each of the five aspects to help us grow in our understanding of pastoral care.

The first aspect Jesus demonstrated was how to **recognize what is happening**. If we do not recognize that we have a needy neighbor, how can we care for them? This recognition happens when we first love God and come to our divine service experiences, as well as congregational activities, with an *attitude to serve and not be served*. By not focusing on ourselves, we will be more likely to see if those around us need our care. We can be aware of one's need for care in how they greet us or what they talk about in conversation. This is just a simple opportunity of how we can recognize what is happening in someone's life.

Once we have recognized what is happening, we can look at the second aspect, which is to **spend time together**. Letting someone know that you have time for them demonstrates care and true desire to help. Spending time together can apply to a variety of moments, such as simply talking at church after a divine service or connecting for a few moments at a small group. If there needs to be a more specific time to be set aside, a get together can be scheduled. When you have these moments together, try to be empathetic instead of just acknowledging their situation. When we try to put ourselves in the shoes of others, it will make our care more impactful.

The third aspect Jesus showed was His ability to **listen**. James 1:19 tells us how to do this: *"be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry."* (NLT) God gave us two ears and one mouth. We should listen twice as much as we speak, but sometimes we rush in too quickly with advice or our experiences with similar situations. What we need to do is try to understand the perspective of other people. When we listen, we radiate a feeling of closeness that can create a rapport. Listening is a sign of putting the other person first, which means we don't resort to talking about our own experiences or trying to formulate a solution. Positive body language and posture exudes that you are listening attentively, thus showing understanding and focus.

Everyone always likes to get answers. Perhaps when you extend care to someone in need they may seek answers from you. How should we go about this as Christians? This brings us to the fourth aspect, which is **providing answers and counsel**. First we must recognize that we are not professional counselors and should not provide advice and counsel for people on topics and issues that need professional or medical help. In matters of spiritual questions, we take a path pointing to our faith by using Scripture in a timely manner or using the Catechism in understanding our doctrine. In matters of natural life, we can offer help by discussing the pros and cons of a decision or situation; from this we can deduce a direction on a decision that answers the question, "What will bring me closer to God?"

Our answers and direction should be based on the Gospel and that which brings a soul closer to God. Christ can be the solution for every need and problem that arises in life. If

Christ is our solution, then through His love, we can help others to draw near Him in their own situations in life. When this connection of closeness to God grows, we will not want to leave Christ, but will want to remain as the disciples did.

Finally, Jesus left the disciples after He recognized their situation, accompanied them, listened, and provided answers and direction. The fifth aspect is to **move on**. Moving on means that by teaching the Gospel, we are creating an opportunity for a soul to practice self-responsibility. The road to Emmaus is a road that must be walked. The walk started out in disbelief and sadness. It ended in joy, excitement, love, and true devotion. The same can happen to each one of us as we bring pastoral care into a congregational focus. As we read in Galatians 6:2, *“Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ;”* we see it is all of our responsibility to help and care for one another on our journeys.

Reprint of Summer 2016 Vision Newsletter

RESPONDING TO TRAGEDY

With instant and in-depth news coverage, each one of us is keenly aware of the many tragedies that have happened all over the world in the last year. Because it seems that we wake up to horrifying headlines on the news almost every day, it's important to remember our response and reaction to each instance. As a church, we are not equipped like a 24-hour newsroom is to make statements on every tragedy. Due to this, we should not always wait for or expect the Church to make a public statement but we should all take the opportunity to respond in a Christian way, by praying for the people involved and offering assistance when we can. We can display Christ's love by responding to the call to serve those around us who find themselves hurting.

- We pray for the victims and their families, while also praying for and forgiving those who may have caused the tragedy.
- We remember those who may have perished, that they can find the grace of God.
- Individually or congregationally, we can find a way to serve those affected, whether through a donation or fulfilling some other need in the community.

Ultimately, we reckon with the tragedies that happen in the world because we trust God and lay everything in His hands. During times of trouble, let's focus on this trust and our own response to how we can help those who have been affected.

Reprint of Autumn 2016 Vision Newsletter

WOMEN IN THE BIBLE: EXAMPLES OF PASTORAL CARE

In the Summer Vision it was stated that pastoral care isn't confined to the responsibilities of the ministers, but it is also the task of the entire congregation. Pastoral care can be provided by the young and the not so young, men and women alike. The New Testament provides us with several examples of women providing pastoral care that helped people grow in their relationship with the Lord and helped facilitate the growth of the early Christian church. Five women who played a part in the work of the first church were Lois, Phoebe, Lydia, Priscilla, and Mary Magdalene. From each one of them we can find encouragement for pastoral work today.

Pastoral care begins for all with our own families. How can we expect to care well for people when we leave behind those who God has given us to care for within our own households? **Lois** was a devout Jewess who took care of her household and brought up her daughter and her grandson in faith by teaching them from the Old Testament Scriptures. We learn this from Paul's second letter to Timothy: *"when I call to remembrance that genuine faith that is in you, which dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice, and I am persuaded is in you also."* (2 Timothy 1:5) Timothy became Paul's "son in the faith." He had been prepared for his work by his grandmother who wasn't afraid to share with her family what she believed. We cannot be afraid today to speak about our faith in Jesus Christ with our families. We must tell them why Jesus is the hero of our life and one must take the time to share God's Word with them by reading the Bible on a regular basis. The foundation for a strong faith begins with the work of faithful women who seek to build up those closest to them with the truth and knowledge of Jesus.

Life is busy today and we spend a significant amount of time away from home. That's why it is important to firstly spend time teaching our families about Jesus. In all places, you have the opportunity to teach others about Jesus because you have the honor of being servants of the Most High. **Phoebe** was such a servant of Jesus as we can read in Romans 16:1-3 – *"I commend to you Phoebe our sister, who is a servant of the church in Cenchrea, that you may receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints, and assist her in whatever business she has need of you; for indeed she has been a helper of man and of myself also."* Phoebe occupied a position in the church that gave her the opportunity to be a teacher to all female inquirers of the faith and to give aid to the temporal needs of the poor. We have the opportunity today to walk in Phoebe's footsteps and care for other women who are in need of encouragement, friendship, hope, and teaching. When prompted, listen, smile, speak, and act in the best way you can to shine the light of Jesus into the lives of those around you.

Sometimes you may hold yourself back from getting involved because you feel like you have nothing to offer, but as followers of Jesus, you can be assured that you've been blessed with spiritual gifts and therefore have all you need to jump in and help others. In addition to your spiritual gifts, take stock of all else you have been blessed with: your house, car, job, etc... and remember that you have been blessed to be a blessing. Allow the example of **Lydia** to encourage you to become an effective steward of all you have been given so that you can become a blessing to others. Lydia lived in Thyatira and was a producer and seller of purple dye. Due to the water in the area being so well-adapted for dyeing, no other place could produce this unique type of purple cloth. The purple dye made the city universally renown and very prosperous. As a producer of this dye, Lydia became a successful business woman and was able to own a spacious home that was cared for by servants.

In Acts 16 we can read how Lydia came to faith in Jesus Christ as God opened her heart to the Gospel she heard about from Paul's preaching. Her transformation of life was evidenced by her eagerness to give Christian missionaries shelter in her home. She displayed her love for Jesus through the kindness she showed for others and her willingness to share what she had been blessed with to further the work of the early Church. Even Paul and Silas' imprisonment for being accused of causing trouble in the city did not deter her from serving and receiving them into her home after their release. As a business woman, welcoming these prisoners back into her home may have not been the best plan, but she recognized that salvation work was more valuable. Whether it is opening your home for a small group, forming a women's ministry, or assisting in mission work, there are many opportunities to share what you have been given for the glory of God.

Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 16:19 that *"Aquila and Priscilla greet you heartily in the Lord, with the church that is in their house."* In the days of the first church, poverty and persecution made separate buildings for worship almost impracticable, and so private, sanctified homes became the house of God. **Aquila** and **Priscilla** consecrated their home to God as a gathering place for the saints. As humble and simple tentmakers, they made a decision to serve the Lord with all that they had. They didn't allow their modest belongings to hinder their serving. As a husband and wife team, Aquila and Priscilla together chose to set apart their home as a holy place where all who would enter could learn about Jesus Christ. Perhaps one could ponder whether our home is a place where all who enter can experience Jesus Christ through what is talked about and shared by those who live there. Be encouraged today to set apart your home as a holy place for Jesus.

One last example of women playing roles in pastoral care is **Mary Magdalene**. In Luke 8 we learn that she had been healed from being plagued by seven demons and had become a companion of Jesus and His disciples. Being set free from her affliction, she became a loyal follower of Jesus and sought to do much for the One who had done so much for her. She first showed her devotion and gratitude by practicing her faith in her following and ministering to Jesus and His disciples, and later by being a proclaimer of His resurrection. She was given the honor to be the first one to see Jesus after His resurrection. After the Lord appeared to her, she went and told the disciples what she had seen and heard. She announced to them the good news that He had defeated the grave and had risen on the third day as He had

taught. (ref John 20:18) Caring for others includes the sharing of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The proclamation of the Gospel isn't something that is reserved for a limited group of people, but is a message that should be shared by all who have accepted the offer of grace from Jesus Christ. Allow the good news of Jesus to be on the tip of your tongue as you seek to encourage and edify others through pastoral care. There is no better news to share than the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and as Mary Magdalene modeled, it's a message to be shared by women and men alike.

For pastoral care in our congregations, all are needed and none are excluded. Be encouraged by the five women mentioned. Let us learn from their example and discover how you can make a difference in your home, congregation, and community by:

- Talking about Jesus with your family
- Teaching
- Being an effective steward of all you've been blessed with
- Setting apart your homes for the Lord
- Proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ

Reprint of Winter 2016 Vision Newsletter

CONNECTING OUR MEMBERS

Over the past decades, a “bread letter” was created and mailed to provide elements of pastoral care for geographically isolated members. It has provided an important link between the church and our brothers and sisters separated from their congregations. This practice still continues today, but has gone through a few adjustments. It remains a vital part of soul care for our linked members, those individuals separated from a physical congregation. At present, around 240 packages are prepared and mailed every other month.

The contents of the package include:

- A pastoral care letter written by one of the USA apostles, including the absolution
- The divine service guide so that the members know the essence of the services being conducted in the congregations
- Consecrated Holy Communion wafers for the entire household

Questions may arise regarding the validity of sending consecrated Holy Communion wafers via the mail. Our catechism sheds light on this subject and explains our understanding that the consecration remains valid until it is received by the soul for whom it was intended. In our congregations, the consecration is repeated in each divine service for the members present in the respective congregation. This celebration of the offer of Christ is according to our liturgy.

In following the teaching of our church, Apostle Orlofski regularly visits the Chicago office, and in a solemn ceremony in the Chicago Northside church, consecrates the Holy Communion wafers to be mailed out in the linked member packages. For these members, the consecration remains valid for the two months as intended. We recognize that the eternally valid sacrifice of Jesus Christ as offered within the sacrament of Holy Communion is only fully valid to the degree that it is believed and received by a prepared recipient, celebrated in the fellowship of believers. Because this may not be possible for our linked members, they still receive some benefit in sharing in the body and blood of Christ.

This process, coupled with the possibility of connecting to live divine services through NAC USA Online, allows our linked members the possibility to hear the Word of God and celebrate Holy Communion. In this way, we hope they are able to continue to deepen their relationship with Jesus Christ and prepare for His return.

Reprint of Winter 2019 Vision Newsletter

Pastoral Care

Faith Arc

CONFIRMATION: WELCOME TO OUR CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

The confirmands this year heard in their special confirmation service that “The Teacher has come and is calling for you” (John 11:28). God is calling us to meet Him, and when we answer that call, we can always feel His presence. The confirmands answered the call of the Lord to serve Him and others and prepare for His return by saying their confirmation vow:

I renounce Satan and all his works and ways, and surrender myself to You, O triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in belief, obedience, and the earnest resolution to remain faithful to You until my end. Amen.

When we surrender ourselves completely to God, we can experience true joy in the knowledge that He has a plan and that we are a part of it. After the confirmands made their vow to God, they received a blessing. This blessing strengthens the confirmands as they strive to renounce the devil and keep their vow to profess Jesus Christ in word and deed.

As a profession of faith, confirmands on their confirmation day accept and recognize that they are part of the Christian community, specifically the New Apostolic community of believers. Being a part of a community means that we care for and support one another.

Reprint of Summer 2015 Vision Newsletter

FAITH ARC

When we look at other people, we assign them to a certain season of life almost without realizing it: she is a baby, he is a teenager, she is middle-aged, he is a senior. Once we've recognized this about a person, we narrow it down ever more: she is a student, he is a father, she is a wife, he is a widower. While some of the seasons of life depend on one's age, not all seasons have the same start and end times for every person. Experiences, combined with how one's maturity develops, can determine when one moves into their next season of life.

Because our congregations are filled with people at all different stages in life, we have to be intentional in making sure that each soul is integrated into the Body of Christ. We want to make sure that the "baton" gets passed from season to season and that nothing is segmented. Since 2011, the NAC-USA has been working on an overarching concept called FaithArc. It is a strategy that supports the continual development of a soul as it transitions to different life stages. The way that people learn changes over time and the FaithArc responds to that change. We want to foster a culture of learning that is continuous – each person in their season of life can continue to learn and grow and also help others to do the same. This requires a relationship to exist between congregations and families. God gave us the community of believers, and to steward this gift from Him, we want to use those relationships to grow.

We can look at Deuteronomy 6:4-9 for guidance on how to help ourselves and others grow:

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Loving God has to be more than just in our words, it needs to be part of all of our actions, when we're at home or when we're out, when we're resting or when we're active. This is how we can teach others about the love of God, specifically children as they grow and change so quickly and observe the words and actions of those around them.

The FaithArc has many components to it, especially for the younger souls of our congregations. As part of the first phase of the FaithArc, some changes are being made to the existing

children and youth programs. On Sunday, October 16th, District Apostle Kolb will outline these initial adjustments in a **Next Steps** video that will be played on demand in the local congregations after the Sunday morning service. This **Next Steps** video will actually be recorded the previous day at a young adult conference in Chicago.

Those who are 18 to 35 years of age, whether married or unmarried and with children or no children, are invited to attend this conference in Chicago, October 14th - 16th. Along with a social element and the **Next Steps** introductions, the young adults will be given opportunities to provide feedback on upcoming developments in the Church, as well as learn and grow spiritually. Visit www.nac-usa.org for more information about the young adult conference.

Reprint of Summer 2016 Vision Newsletter

FAITH ARC

The FaithArc was introduced in the 2016 October webcast. It is the strategy for the continual spiritual development of a soul to a deeper relationship with Jesus Christ, whereby they become integrated into the congregation as His disciple. The FaithArc affects various elements of the church, including Sunday School, Confirmation, youth, young adults, parents, youth leaders, and the congregation, as a whole. The first visible changes to come into effect will be for Confirmation and we want to clear up any confusion that there may be over some of these changes.

The changes to Confirmation are being made because of an increased realization that youth may separate themselves from the church after making their Confirmation vow because their spiritual development may have needed more time to grow in order for them to make an informed vow of their commitment to God. The first change that comes out of this realization is that Confirmation is no longer the entrance marker of when a student enters the youth group. This adjustment allows the Confirmation age to be at a time when a student is truly ready to make their vow. Because of this, the age of Confirmation has increased from 14 to the time when a youth is in 10th or 11th grade (typically ages 15-17). The flexibility between the two grades allows a youth to decide, in collaboration with their parents, youth leader, and rector, the appropriate time for them to be confirmed. This change of moving towards an academic grade-based model means that after this year's Confirmations (2017), there will be a gap until the next Confirmation services are held.

Previously, confirmands would have started their Confirmation classes around Eastertide, after the previous class of confirmands was confirmed. With the FaithArc in place, this is no longer the case. The essential content of Confirmation classes is now included in the new youth small group curriculum called THRIVE, and there are no separate Confirmation classes. Through the new curriculum, a youth will receive the necessary preparation to make their Confirmation vow in their 10th or 11th grade year. The THRIVE youth curriculum starts when a student enters the youth in the Fall of their 8th grade year and finishes when they graduate high school. The THRIVE curriculum, along with the beginning of the new youth group ages (when a student is between 8th and 12th grade), will begin in the Fall of 2017.

Since there are no separate Confirmation classes, Confirmation teachers may wonder what their new role will be.

The youth leader is responsible for the THRIVE youth curriculum being taught and may utilize existing Confirmation teachers to help facilitate the youth group discussions when they start in Fall 2017. This will allow them to continue with their passion of teaching teenagers important spiritual lessons.

If you have more questions about the changes to Confirmation or other aspects of the FaithArc, you can visit www.nac-usa.org/connect/faith-arc.html and click on "Faith Arc FAQ" in the sitemap on the right side of the screen.

Youth

This new youth group has refined and defined goals, based on the international mission and vision statements. They are:

- in order to better 'align their lives to the Gospel of Jesus,' the new youth program will deepen spiritual maturity
- in order to 'reach out to all people,' the new youth program will expand the missional reach God has given us in our spheres of influence
- with an amplified focus on soul care, the new youth program will build stronger relationships with students and engage parents in the process

Confirmation

Why are these changes to Confirmation being made? This decision is rooted in the realization that many have distanced themselves from the church after making their Confirmation vows. This triggered some additional investigation and even a national survey of youth parents a few years ago. Our investigation suggests that confirmands were often not spiritually developed enough to make an informed vow of commitment to God at the time of Confirmation, and so the age has been increased. The flexibility between 10th and 11th grade is intended to accommodate the natural variation from individual to individual that is neither better or worse.

All of these decisions have been made to adapt the organizational process that helps prepare a soul for Christ's return to be more fitting for the present context.

Young Adults

How can young adults become more integrated into the congregation? If the young adults (those 18-35) choose to still be involved in the youth group in some way, it is expected that they do so with an understanding that they are now adults that are helping out in the youth group rather than participants. They can help serve the youth group by facilitating youth small group discussions, mentoring, providing transportation, among other ways to get involved. In addition to the opportunity to provide support to the youth group, young adults have the ability to be catalysts in almost every area of the congregation. They should help bring together all ages of a congregation. The adults in the congregation have a responsibility to help the young adults feel the love of God by intentionally reaching out to them as they transition out of the youth group.

Parents

A new resource for parents that will be available starting in April is our “Partnering with Parents” email. Each month, those subscribed will receive 2 short emails and 1 short video on a relevant parenting or family monthly topic. It is encouraged that parents get together to discuss these materials and support each other on the journey of raising Christian children. To subscribe, visit www.nac-usa.org/connect and select “Parenting and Family” from the subscription dropdown menu at the bottom of the screen.

Reprint of Spring 2017 Vision Newsletter

CHILDREN'S MINISTRY UPDATE

We are very excited to share with you enhancements to the Sunday School curriculum that will begin this Fall 2017! You may recall some Children's Ministry changes that were introduced in the Next Steps webcast from last October, and now that Fall is quickly approaching, we wanted to outline the specific changes and how they will impact children, parents, and teachers.

What is changing?

- The Sunday School calendar year will now align to the academic school year calendar, and children will begin Sunday School the year they enter kindergarten. The curriculum will provide lessons from September to June. Congregations can make local decisions for the months of July and August, but are encouraged to consider a VBS type of experience during one of these months.
- The new Sunday School curriculum will be organized into a K-5th grade curriculum and a 6th- 7th grade curriculum:
 - o The K-5th grade curriculum is a 6-year curriculum comprised of faith-based topics, concepts, and Bible stories that were previously taught via the "Beginner" and "Primary" lessons. The lessons have been updated and will include new learning material from the NAC International group.
 - o K-5th grade Sunday School children can be taught in one class OR divided into multiple classes, according to grade levels and/or the number of children in your congregation. *For example, you may group children into two classes, K-2nd graders and 3rd-5th graders. Larger congregations may have three or more classes, depending on the grade levels and/or number of children and teacher volunteers in your congregation.*
 - o The *Getting Started*, *Activities*, and *Journaling* sections of each lesson provide suggested ways to differentiate the lessons for the different age children in your groups. These suggestions will be identified as for:
 - All Ages
 - Grades K-2
 - Grades 3-5
 - o The 6th-7th grade curriculum will serve as the curriculum for Religious Instruction and will continue to use the current Religious Instruction lessons.
 - o We have incorporated the new FaithArc logo into the formatting of our lessons. (All "Children" components of the FaithArc will continue to be represented with the color purple.)

What are the benefits of these changes?

- Teachers and congregations have more flexibility in deciding how to group children into classes.
- Teachers of the K-5th grade curriculum can plan together, share ideas with one another, and teach together.
- A family with children in K-5th grade now only has one lesson to prepare and share at home.
- The newly organized curriculum allows for older and younger children to experience and discuss lessons together, which will foster a “mentoring” atmosphere among our children.

Will there be additional communication and training for Children’s Ministry teachers and leaders?

- In an effort to better equip and communicate with the Children’s Ministry teachers and leaders, we will be utilizing our church’s administrative management system (iMIS) to communicate regularly with our Sunday School and Religious Instruction teachers.
- In order for the system to be effective, all Sunday School and Religious Instruction teachers will need to ask their rector or iMIS administrator to identify them as a “Children’s Ministry Teacher” in iMIS.
- In addition to communicating with you about Children’s Ministry developments, we will use the iMIS system to create the necessary access for future online trainings and background checks.
- Instructions on how to add someone as a “Children’s Ministry Teacher” were sent to all rectors and district leaders via the Minister Companion website. **Please ask your rector, or the person in your congregation responsible for iMIS, to add you to the “Children’s Ministry Teacher” committee in iMIS.**

Will a children’s journal be made available this year?

- In recent years, the Children’s Work Group has created a children’s sermon journal that had the Sunday sermon Bible verse, as well as some questions and activity prompts that were specific to the topics for that day or month. Starting this year, a new type of journal has been created that will promote active listening and engagement for the children.
- The new sermon journal encourages children to listen for key words or phrases from the sermon, and to think about how they can pray for others. This is yet another tool that parents can use to engage in conversations with their children about the sermon to help keep the Sunday messages alive and applicable.
- These sermon journals will be available for order on our website in August so children have them in time for the Fall semester’s Sunday School Kickoff in September.

What if I have questions?

- If you have further questions or need assistance in deciding how to best incorporate these changes into your congregation, please send an email to wgchildren@nac-usa.org and indicate **Fall 2017** in the subject line of your email.

Thank you for all that you continue to do for our children and families.

- WG Children

Reprint of Summer 2017 Vision Newsletter

CELEBRATING OUR VOW

Confirmation is that act of blessing in which young New Apostolic Christians take upon themselves the obligations their parents undertook on their behalf at their Holy Baptism and Holy Sealing. From then on, these Christians, who have reached a point of spiritual maturity, bear full responsibility before God for everything they do or neglect to do. They commit themselves to resist Satan and remain faithful to God in front of Him and the congregation with the words: **I renounce Satan and all his work and ways, and surrender myself to You, O triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in belief, obedience, and the earnest resolution to remain faithful to You until my end. Amen.**

The confirmation blessing happens only once, but the vow is something we are expected to keep alive every day. When we are mindful of these words, we constantly renew our endeavor to avoid evil and ungodly things, and diligently follow the path of the gospel. When we keep the promises we made in this vow, we are true to our belief in the triune God and our intention to conduct our lives in faith and obedience toward God. Every day, we strive to transform our nature using Jesus as our example.

Being in charge of our own spiritual lives is a responsibility. God expects us to keep growing in and discovering more about our relationship with God, so that He becomes the most important part of our lives. While each of us has to go on our own spiritual journey, that does not mean we are alone. The congregation and the Church are here to help each one along. Salvation is offered in fellowship, and it is in this community that we can support each other on our journeys.

This spirit of being unified in our journey and vow to God gives way to a unique experience. As we heard in the beginning-of-the-year message from the District Apostle, because making the confirmation vow has shifted from the year the student turns 14 to when they are in 10th or 11th grade, there will be a couple of years when youth will not be confirmed.

However, we still want to celebrate and remember the essence of Confirmation. This is the reason there is a Confirmation celebratory service scheduled for May 6. It will be an opportunity for those of all ages that have been confirmed to reflect on the vow they've made to Christ and the blessing they received upon that vow. It will be a way for us to keep encouraging one another to grow, and deepen our relationships with each other and God.

FAMILY DINNER CONVERSATION

With the holidays approaching, there may be some new opportunities to connect with family and friends. Sometimes parents and families want to have more conversation, particularly around the dinner table, but perhaps they just don't know where to start. Here are some potential conversation starters to consider this holiday season.

Family

If you were to switch roles with me for a day and I had to attend your school, how do you think I would do?

If you were to switch roles with me for a day and you had to do what I do all day, how do you think you would do?

If you were going to plan our next family trip or vacation, where would we go and what would we do?

What is one chore you enjoy doing around the house? Why?

What is your favorite family memory/memories?

Spiritual

What is one thing God has taught you or shown you lately?

What is one verse that you have read or heard that has really been your favorite?

What is your favorite praise and worship song or Christian song lately? Why is it your favorite?

If you could be a Bible character who would you be?

What is one question you have had about God or our doctrine lately that we as a family could study and find out more about?

Of all the miracles that Jesus did, which one would you have wanted to be there for and why?

Reprint of Autumn 2018 Vision Newsletter

FAITH ARC: ROAD TO CONFIRMATION

With the launch of Faith Arc in 2017 came changes to the youth group, as well as Confirmation.

Leading to these changes, there was an increased realization that youth may separate themselves from the church after making their Confirmation vow because they needed more time to develop spiritually in order to make an informed vow of their commitment to God. The first change that came out of this realization is that Confirmation is no longer the entrance marker of when a student enters the youth group. This adjustment allows the Confirmation age to be at a time when a youth is truly ready to make their vow. Because of this, the age of Confirmation has increased from 14 to the time when a youth is in 10th or 11th grade (typically ages 15-17). The flexibility between the two grades allows a youth to decide, in collaboration with their parents, youth leader, and rector, the appropriate time for them to be confirmed. The decision to make the Confirmation vow and receive the Confirmation blessing is a very important milestone in a youth's journey of faith. When making this decision, age, maturity level, and understanding of faith need to be considered, and so this intentional flexibility is important.

These changes were made after years of prayer, consultation with educators both inside and outside of our church, and much discussion and contemplation with the Apostles, Bishops, and National Synod.

Those youth who decide to pursue Confirmation will begin a preparation process called, "Road to Confirmation." To help ensure that those making their Confirmation vow are best equipped to do so and understand core competencies of the Christian faith and New Apostolic Church doctrine, the "Road to Confirmation" process includes the youth completing self-paced online courses. This process also engages parent(s) or guardians(s), the youth leader, and the rector or other ordained minister from the congregation in strategic checkpoint conversations with the youth in the months leading up to Confirmation Sunday.

The "Road to Confirmation" process:

The initial conversation

- This is a conversation with the youth and parent(s)/ guardian(s), initiated by the rector and/or youth leader, to determine if the youth that is currently in 10th grade would like to pursue Confirmation in the upcoming spring.

- The “Road to Confirmation – Initial Conversation Guide” is available in the “Road to Confirmation” section of NDI (NAC-USA Development Institute)

The self-paced online courses

- 6 courses that take an estimated 2 hours and 20 minutes to complete
- Available on NDI

Checkpoint conversations

- Parent(s)/guardian(s), the rector, and youth leader are expected to engage in strategic “Checkpoint Conversations” as the youth completes their coursework in the months leading to their Confirmation day.
- Who conducts which “Checkpoint Conversations,” as well as questions to discuss, are provided on the “Road to Confirmation Checklist,” available November 19, 2019 on NDI.

The final conversation

- After the “Road to Confirmation” online courses are completed, all of the “Checkpoint Conversations” have taken place, and shortly before the youth’s Confirmation day, a final conversation will take place. This ideally would be with the ordained minister that will conduct the Confirmation service. The youth can decide to invite any combination of parent(s)/guardian(s), rector, and/or youth leader to this final conversation. This will be a conversation to ensure the youth has an understanding of the Christian faith, the New Apostolic Church doctrine, and is ready to make their Confirmation vow and receive their Confirmation blessing.
- The “Road to Confirmation – Final Conversation Guide” will be available on NDI March 1, 2020.

The complete process, online courses, conversation guides, and deadlines for those pursuing Confirmation in 2020 are available on NDI (Faith Arc—Youth—Road to Confirmation).

Any questions can be directed to youth@nac-usa.org

Reprint of Autumn 2019 Vision Newsletter

Pastoral Care

*Events and
Reports*

RISE! YOUTH RETREATS 2014

What shapes your identity? Have you wondered “why did God create me?” What does it mean to “Labor in Love?” These questions and more were answered during this summer’s regional youth days.

Throughout the summer, 7 regional youth retreats occurred around the country in Los Angeles, Billings, Chicago, Erie, the Carolinas, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. Of the 7 locations, 4 were host to both American and Canadian youth. Some youth even traveled up to 20 hours to be together. All of the youth weekends had the same theme, “Rise.” This theme was evident in the seminars as well as the divine service on Sunday.

The divine service centered on the story of David and how he rose to the call to slay Goliath. David was equipped with the experiences and training God had allowed in his life, and he emerged from the struggle with his brothers and those around him with confidence to fight for what he knew God had led him to. David engaged in the opportunity by utilizing his gifts, and he ultimately edified God and His people, which is parallel with our edification of God.

SEMINARS

- Gospel Identity: Rise to a consistent identity that is deeply rooted in the Gospel of Jesus Christ
- Gospel Driven Life: Rise to your call and live a life that aligns with Scripture
- Gospel of Love: Rise from judgment to love and genuinely create an environment to Labor in Love

Reprint of Autumn/Winter 2014 Vision Newsletter

NATIONAL YOUTH LEADER CONFERENCE | JUNE 2017

Over the Pentecost weekend at the beginning of June, district youth leaders and local youth leader representatives from around the country came together in Florida to discuss the youth ministry component of the Faith Arc. Through presentations and brainstorming breakouts, this group of 43 leaders discussed topics such as:

- Goals of youth ministry
- Youth THRIVE small group curriculum
- Youth leader online training
- Take 5 - monthly YL communications
- Engaging parents
- Spiritual disciplines
- Budgeting and evaluations
- Young adults

The points from Saturday's meeting were reinforced during the Pentecost service when Chief Apostle Schneider encouraged the global congregation to concern themselves with the salvation of the next generation and that we should love our young people as Christ loves them. Knowing this is a great task, the Chief Apostle went on to explain how the circumstances of our time are not an excuse and don't diminish our responsibility to relationally invest in others and allow them to see the effects of the gift of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

If you're involved in youth ministry and are not receiving the monthly youth leader communication, Take 5, on the third Thursday of the month, please contact your rector, district leader, or district youth leader to be added to the youth leader committee in iMIS.

Reprint of Summer 2017 Vision Newsletter

PRAYERS FOR VENEZUELA

The crisis in Venezuela continues: the price of basic groceries has increased to about five times the minimum wage, medicine shortages mean that people are suffering and are in pain, the unemployment rate is alarmingly high, and masses of people are migrating to surrounding countries to have a chance at better lives. Because of this turmoil, it has not been possible for apostles from the U.S. to visit with the members in Venezuela. District Apostle Montes de Oca from Brazil, who is able to travel into the country, agreed to make a visit to some of the congregations to provide pastoral care and support them in this difficult time.

In total, he traveled to seven cities and served over 3,100 souls in divine services and minister meetings. Regarding his visit, the District Apostle shared that the brothers and sisters are admirable, never once complaining of the difficult situations they live in. A letter he received during the trip from a young sister perfectly expressed the exemplary position of the members' hearts. In the middle of the letter, she wrote: "In these difficult hours please pray that our faith does not fail and we do not depart from grace." She added, "It is beautiful how our ministers continue to work with joy...the problems do not stop them because they love our heavenly Father."

This sister truly illustrates that when one is faithful to Christ, they can remain joyful and endure anything with God's help, as our members in Venezuela are doing. For this trip and the efforts of District Apostle Montes de Oca, we express gratitude and joy to our Heavenly Father. Let us also persevere in our prayers for those who have been able to escape the troubles in Venezuela, and for those who are still in the country, daily struggling with the situation there.

Reprint of Spring 2018 Vision Newsletter

GIVING TO OTHERS...

This past year, I was touched by the pure act of a child in our district. After receiving the yearly birthday card from our church, he decided that he wanted to donate the money inside to St. Jude Children's Research Hospital. Truly, this child is an example of giving is love.

Inspired by this act and his suggestion, the apostles and I agreed that half of the money from the children's birthday cards this year would also be donated to St. Jude's. We would like to continue this charitable act, on behalf of our children, in the future.

This is a special example for us. Our children, as part of the body of Christ, spread His love and hope with the little they possess. As parents, we can also talk to our children about what it means to give to others and why giving is important. The time and resources we give to serve others glorifies God and speaks of Him to those around us. Our desire is that He is evident in our lives through our serving.

– LRK

Reprint of Spring 2018 Vision Newsletter

VENEZUELA

Due to the strained relations between the countries of the United States and Venezuela, neither District Apostle Kolb nor Apostle Fendt has been able to visit the members in Venezuela for the past two years. With the passing of Apostle Diaz last year and the retirement of Apostle Lara this year, the full weight of caring for the members lies with recently ordained Apostle Barrera. Please remember him in your prayers.

Please also continue to pray for our brothers and sisters, and all others, in Venezuela. Though we may not see much coverage on news stations, the crisis in Venezuela continues. Food shortages and increasing prices have caused outbreaks of looting and violence. Some are turned away at the border when trying to escape the country. More infants, children, and adults are suffering and dying from preventable diseases, again due to a lack of medicine/ medical equipment and increasing prices. It is hard to truly understand these facts when we don't see or experience them ourselves, but these are horrifying conditions that no one should have to live in.

Unfortunately, it is difficult to donate supplies or funds because the Venezuelan government often does not accept humanitarian aid. However, please keep praying for the situation there and the people who are living through it. We must have faith that God hears our prayers and sees our desire to intercede for our brothers and sisters who are going through such difficult times.

Reprint of Summer 2018 Vision Newsletter

YOUNG ADULT CONFERENCE - BACK TO BASICS

From September 21- 23, about 100 young adults from around the country gathered in Detroit for a conference. The theme for the weekend was **Back to Basics** – a deeper look at our faith and what it means to be a follower of Christ.

After arriving, the group was able to meet and spend time with each other at a welcome mixer on Friday evening. Beginning this night and continuing to the end of Saturday, a prayer room was made available to the young adults. This room had different prayer stations, each one focusing on and prompting different elements of prayer.

Saturday, the conference began with a message from District Apostle Kolb about the church's strategy of making disciples and building a solid foundation for this to happen. Various sessions carried on throughout the day. Young adults learned about certain topics, such as:

- Prayer
- Journaling
- Christian and church history
- Studying Scripture
- Spiritual gifts
- Doubt and faith
- Worship
- Solitude and silence
- Reconciling relationships

In some of the topics, the young adults were given the chance to practice the ideas presented. They also participated in small group sessions that focused on the basic elements of our faith.

Along with these topics, the young adults were able to pose questions to our international church theologian, Dr. Reinhard Kiefer, who was also at the conference, in Q&A sessions throughout the day.

On Sunday, the group took buses to the Sterling Heights congregation to join them in divine service. District Apostle Kolb preached a message based on Romans 10:10, inspiring us to speak about God's goodness in our lives.

After lunch, the young adults had the afternoon open to talk, ask more questions of the church theologian and the District Apostle, and spend time together. We hope that the opportunities created this weekend to connect to God and to each other have transformed and empowered our young adults to go into the world and live their faith.

Reprint of Autumn 2018 Vision Newsletter

HOLY COMMUNION POCKET CHALICES

An element of pastoral care in our congregations are the periodic visits by our priests to members who are shut-in, sick at home or in the hospital, or in institutions and cannot attend divine services. If desired by the member, and where possible, the priest celebrates Holy Communion with them.

As shown, the pocket chalices used to hold the communion wafers from years ago were ornately decorated. Sadly, these types of chalices are no longer available to us and we now have a simpler style. Some ministers may even have an older version, given to us by our fathers or a senior minister.

For this reason, I ask that if you no longer use your chalice, please consider passing this on to your rector or a newly ordained minister. Not only does this allow the active ministers to make use of a vintage pocket chalice in continuing to serve Holy Communion, but it is also a way of passing down a piece of our history and sharing it with our younger generations. Also, if you wish, it can be sent to our Chicago office.

Thank you for your consideration.

– LRK

Reprint of Winter 2019 Vision Newsletter

	<h1>Sustainable Structure</h1>	

STEPPING FORWARD

Allow me to begin this summer edition of Vision with a warm, heartfelt thank you!

Firstly, thank you for your positive response to the Midweek Experience over the past year. I realize for some, perhaps this was a shocking experience to transform from listening in a divine service to openly participating in lively spiritual discussions. But more and more, I have received messages that many have embraced this way of learning, enjoy it, and look forward to each midweek discussion. I know this will deepen our understanding of the Lord and His mission for us.

Secondly, thank you for accepting and participating in the series of workshops that were held in the various congregations across the nation. They were to impart more tools to the various leaders to improve our congregational health and I am thrilled that so many could share in this unique endeavor.

Thirdly, thank you for embracing our new young Christians who professed their Confirmation vow to Christ and joined our congregations as participating, adult members. Their passion and spiritual gifts are warmly welcomed and are vital to the development of our future church.

As this year continues, I call upon our serving ministers to accept and participate in our new online Effective Preaching program. After over a year's work by some of our apostles, ministers, and staff, we are happy to introduce a contemporary course to improve the preaching capabilities of our ministers in offering powerful Sunday sermons.

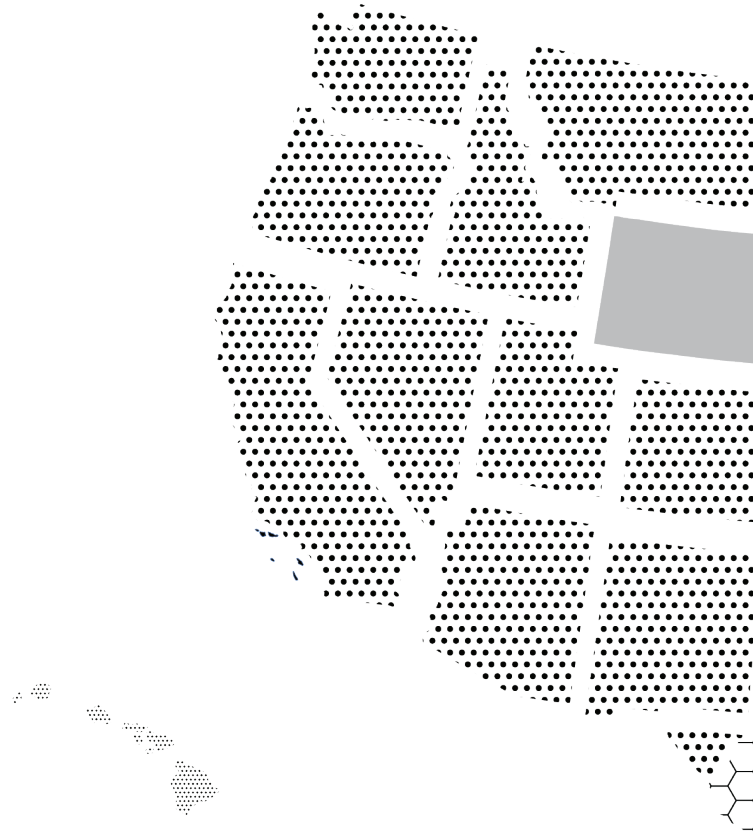
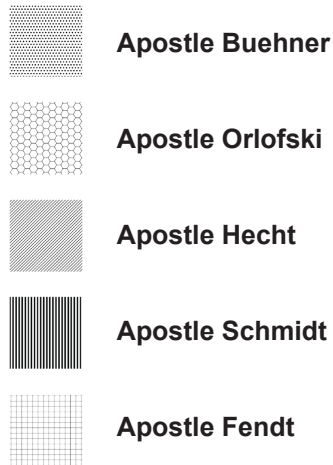
All of these are efforts to advance our district in our strategic plan – Stepping Forward. We have introduced the same plan in our linked international districts in the Caribbean and Central and South America as well and they have embraced it. It is hard work! But with the strength and joy of Christ, it is possible for us to continue our transformation into the people He wants us to be.

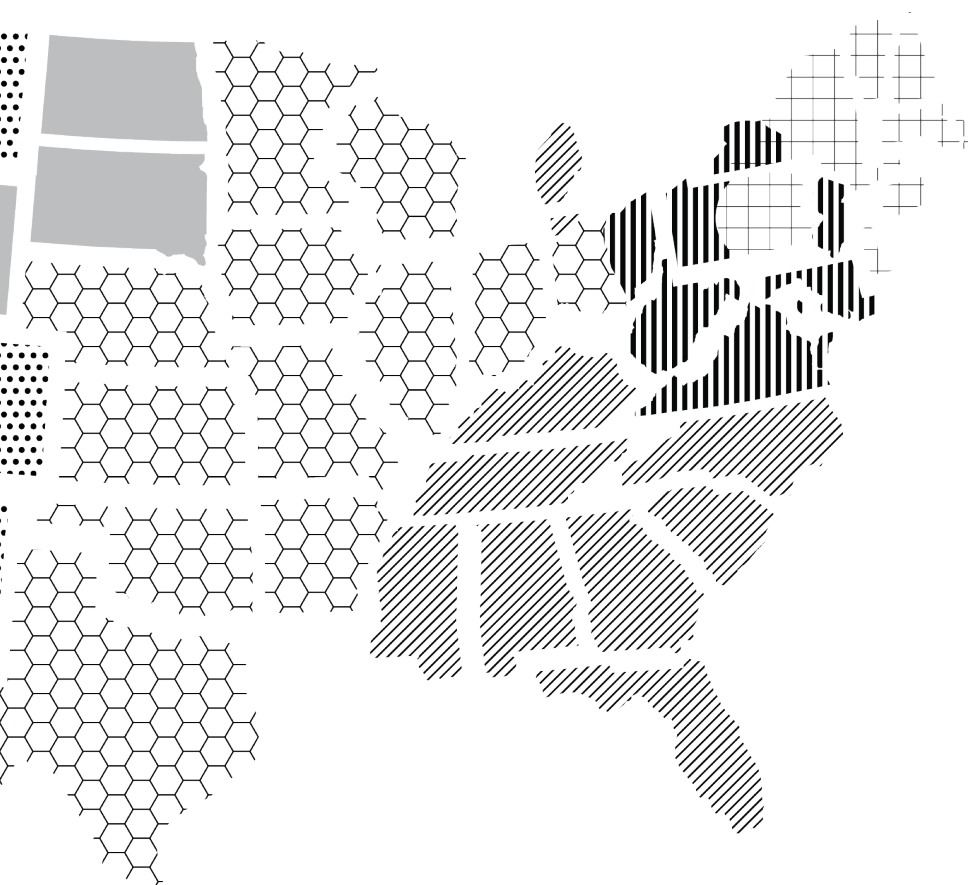
May He grant us continued success in this fruitful undertaking.

Reprint of District Apostle's introduction letter from Summer 2015 Vision Newsletter

USA DISTRICT REORGANIZATION

The New Apostolic Church USA has gone through some changes in the past few months in regards to the organization of the USA district. In the June Woodbury divine service with Chief Apostle Schneider, Apostle Wilbert Hoffman was placed into retirement from his ministry. He was responsible for the pastoral care of the northwestern region of the USA as an Apostle since 1999. With his retirement comes the need to reorganize the regions slightly so that all are cared for by an Apostle. Please look at the map to see how the district is now organized.





SYNOD UPDATES

From September 25-27, district leaders, bishops, and apostles were invited to the National Synod, the annual meeting that deals with governance issues and provides transparency of projects and programs to the leadership of the NAC USA. In this year's Synod, representatives from some of the flagship congregations were also invited to participate in the meeting. Some of the items discussed in the Synod included:

- **Work Group Updates** – Project managers of the work groups Leadership, Effective Preaching, Work of Ministry, Children, Youth, Small Group, and Giving provided updates on the work they have been doing over the past year.
- **Midweek Experience** – The challenges and successes of the midweek experience were also discussed. There was a survey in the Autumn Vision regarding the midweek experience that provided feedback on each individual's experience of the midweek options.
- **Children's and Youth Services** – It was discussed that children and youth services can be opened by the officiant and another "focused" minister or teacher may hold the majority of the sermon to connect it better to the children or youth.
- **Member Booklet** – This is a booklet that will be released in the upcoming month. It will be given to all new members as they decide to be a part of the New Apostolic Church and also to existing members. Besides telling readers what the New Apostolic Church believes in, the booklet also details what they can expect from the church and what the church expects of its members.

After discussion with the Apostles and Bishops, there are two new guidelines regarding ministers:

1. ***When an individual or a couple require a blessing or a sacrament***, it is important to understand the difference between the two. Sacraments bind a person to the Triune God. The sacraments of Holy Baptism, Holy Sealing, and Holy Communion are experiences that bring one further into the church of Christ and also links one with their congregation. Blessings are deeply personal experiences where God's help, strength, and love is sought in a particular moment of life (i.e. anniversaries, weddings, etc.). Because blessings are personal and may not necessarily happen in front of an altar, an individual or a couple may want to choose a specific minister to deliver the blessing. However, a specific minister cannot be requested to administer a sacrament. As we step forward, please keep this guideline in mind.

2. In the past, ***ministers called to serve in the divine service in which they were to be retired*** may have used the occasion to reflect on personal feelings and experiences. In our understanding of the divine service, our Heavenly Father speaks to us by the prompting of the Holy Spirit. Because of this, it is not really appropriate to share personal sentiments in a divine service that don't pertain to the Gospel message. When called up to serve at the altar for the last time, I've asked ministers to refrain from using the occasion to share their personal feelings and history. Naturally, a short expression of thanks may be appropriate.

Thank you for your acceptance of these changes from our former traditions.

Reprint of Winter 2015 Vision Newsletter

FINANCIAL INFORMATION: 2013/2014 OPERATING CHURCH RESULTS

The Church published an annual report for the first time in 2013 (for fiscal year 2012). The compilation and preparation of this printed report constitutes a significant, resource-intensive project.

Based on the positive feedback received, we subsequently discussed the frequency of such reports with the members of the Church’s annual leadership Synod. We feel that the increased transparency is a key aspect of the Structure section of our Stepping Forward program. It was therefore decided to publish a full, printed annual report every two years.

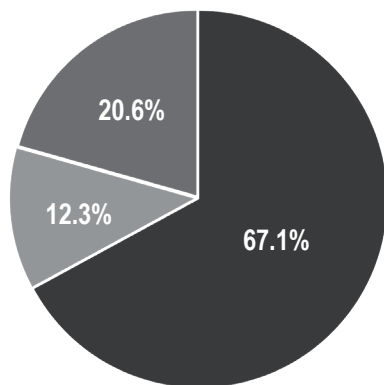
The next such report will be released later this year (2016), covering fiscal year 2015.

In the years between, an abbreviated version will be prepared and published in the Vision Newsletter. Please find below the comparative audited financial data for the years 2013 and 2014.

Reprint of Spring 2016 Vision Newsletter

2014 SOURCES OF FUNDS

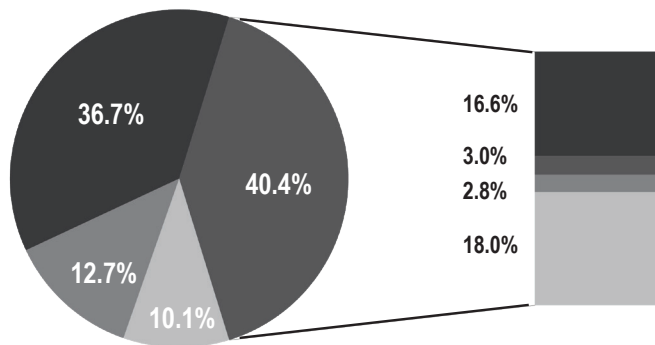
(% OF 2014 TOTAL)



Sources of Funds	2014	2013
Regular Offering	\$11,553,003	\$12,510,916
Thankoffering	\$2,484,883	\$2,198,826
Special Donations & Bequests	\$890,336	\$873,796
Other Revenue	\$131,492	\$90,104
Church Revenue	\$15,059,714	\$15,673,642
Net Endowment Income	\$2,212,176	\$2,131,433
Real Estate Income	\$546,524	\$321,728
Reserve Management Income	\$2,758,700	\$2,453,161
Sale of Buildings	\$4,630,814	\$2,506,324
Total Funds Available*	\$22,449,228	\$20,633,127

2014 USES OF FUNDS

(% OF 2014 TOTAL)



Uses of Funds	2014	2013
Congregational Supplies & Support	\$3,818,411	\$3,950,744
Church Programs & Events	\$688,131	\$637,079
Benevolence	\$639,136	\$680,401
Church Building Operations	\$4,146,915	\$3,711,965
Total Domestic Church Funding	\$9,292,593	\$8,980,189
International Mission Activities	\$2,328,663	\$2,279,746
General Administrative Support	\$2,913,278	\$2,832,627
Total Church Expenses	\$14,534,534	\$14,092,562
Church Building Activities	\$8,443,843	\$6,701,097
Total Church Funds Used*	\$22,978,377	\$20,793,659

*In both years the difference between available funds and funds used was covered by the church's building reserve.

MAKING DECISIONS

Oft times, the apostles, bishops, and I struggle with difficult decisions. As the Chief Apostle described in a Community article last year, we start with prayer asking for the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, we propose options using our mind and reasoning, we research for more information if needful, and then we discuss the matters at length. If necessary, there is further prayer, research, and discussion, and thereafter, we make a decision. Depending on the weight of the matter, the Chief Apostle may also be consulted for his thoughts; for instance, in the case of the midweek experience and faith arc, as you will read about in this edition of the Vision. However, he expects that in most matters, the decisions must be made at a district level so they are appropriate for the region.

We realize sometimes these decisions may not be popular and sometimes they may even cause changes or adjustments in the status quo. Please know that in all these cases, the conclusion was wrought with prayer and struggle, always with intent to discover the will of our Heavenly Father. We trust that He alone resolves any issue in the best way possible and according to His blessing, which in turn brings us closer to Him.

We read in Malachi 3:6 (KJV), *“I am the Lord, I change not.”* As we continue forward to the Day of Promise, we remain anchored to Jesus Christ and continue to walk in the Spirit. He is manifested in the unchangeable Gospel and in the wonders of His sacraments.

On the other hand, the Church, as we understand from our Catechism (6.3, 6.4.2), is composed of sinful humans, which continue to evolve and grow into what Christ expects of them. Hence, this evolution brings adjustment and change to develop to become the bride of Christ. Therefore, let us not grow weary of these course corrections and modifications – they bring us closer to our goal!

Reprint of District Apostle’s introduction letter from Summer 2016 Vision Newsletter

ANNUAL REPORT OF THE NEW APOSTOLIC CHURCH USA

As mentioned in the Spring 2016 Vision Newsletter, every other year, a full annual report will be printed for the members to see the financial transparency of the church. In the years between, an abbreviated version will be prepared and published.

The abbreviated report printed in the Spring 2016 Vision Newsletter covered the 2013 and 2014 fiscal years. To bring us up to date, you'll find a fuller report for the 2015 fiscal year printed in this Vision.

WORK GROUP UPDATES

WG Giving

The WG Giving has been working on a white paper that focuses on the spiritual foundation for giving. The team will be working on communicating the information in the paper to help our congregations grow a culture of giving. In addition to teachings on giving, teachings on stewardship will also be provided in 2017.

WG Leadership

In the past year the WG Leadership has put together a teaching on six leadership elements that will serve to be a guide for all workers in our congregations on what it means to be a leader in our church. The video teaching will be available on NDI during the 4th quarter of 2016. With the introduction of the Faith Arc this past October, the WG Leadership is currently focused on developing training for youth leaders.

WG Preaching

The next steps for this work group is to follow up the Effective Preaching course with additional resources and ways to implement the tools mentioned in the feedback module. Our goal is to re-inforce the teaching presented in the Effective Preaching course and provide additional teaching that will help those serving to grow.

WG Work of Ministry

Our goal is to equip and support souls as they discover their spiritual identity and spiritual gifts, thereby developing into mature and functioning members of the Body of Christ. We want to engage each congregation, large and small, so that Work of Ministry is the underlying foundational structure of the congregational culture, allowing all to live and lead like Christ. In 2017 we will be working with 11 congregations to test new materials that have been developed.

WG Small Groups

This work group was recently formed earlier this year with the intent to promote and support a growing small group culture in our congregations. We will be working on resources to help

- individuals take the next step in their faith through discussion and relationships
- facilitators inspire discussion and create a Christ-centered environment
- congregations organize and promote small groups

WG Children

Children grow to know and love Jesus as their Savior in our multi-faceted Children's Ministry. The first component is our graduated Sunday school program that progresses with children from Kindergarten to Middle School. These Sunday morning classes offer creative, age-appropriate Bible and Christian-living lessons, hands-on activities, music, and an "at home" pre-lesson for parents and children to share together. The WG Children researches, writes, and edits these lessons for posting on our national website. Additionally, the WG Children make a parenting newsletter template available every month that can be customized to the needs of your congregation.

WG Youth

The New Apostolic Church youth group offers a place to belong and share life. In addition to the exciting social element, the youth group also provides a safe place to ask questions and grow spiritually as teens continue to develop a personal relationship with Christ. The WG Youth helps create content for youth small group discussions, as well as yearly youth retreat weekends. Currently, the WG Youth is working on improved training and tools to help youth leaders better minister to the students in their care.

As parents and families are important elements of the Faith Arc, both the WG Children and WG Youth are currently in the process of creating tools to help better equip parents and families for discipleship. This not only applies to parents of young children or teens, but also the relationship between parents and their adult children.

WG Worship

In 2014 and 2015, WG Worship participated in a number of Regional Workshops across the country in order to enliven and strengthen the culture of worship in our congregations. We strive to help congregations in finding new ways to blend and unify their worship in the divine service experience, worship evenings, and in their lives. Our next steps will be two upgrades to the Music Companion website: the first, to fix the technical issues that we have been having, the second to expand the website into a robust resource for musicians, choir leaders, and A/V teams with more content and communication.

If you have experience or interest in any of these areas and would like to help, please email communications@nac-usa.org to see if the group has any available seats.

NEW CHURCH BUILDINGS

Denver Metro

The Denver Metro flagship congregation was formed in 2014 from the Northglenn, Littleton, and Denver congregations. A building was purchased in the center on the area's church population and was renovated. On April 17th, the new church was dedicated for this flagship congregation.

Astoria

After the Astoria and Ridgewood congregations in New York merged into the existing Astoria building, it was decided that an extension would be added onto the building. This extension would serve as the sanctuary, while the original structure would serve as a fellowship space. This new, expanded building was dedicated on December 4th.

Bethpage

The Bethpage Worship Center was dedicated on July 3rd of this year in New York and is the now the home to the Amityville and Westbury Chinese congregations. The building used to be a synagogue.

Sterling Heights

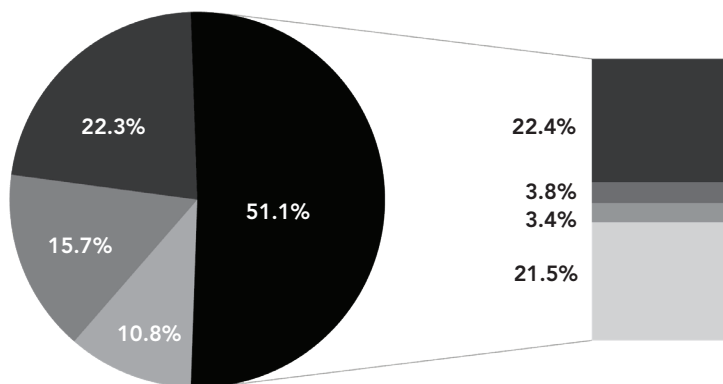
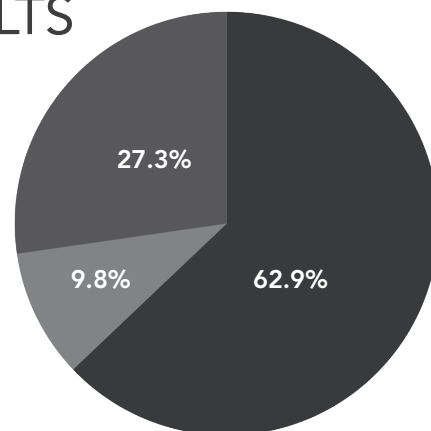
The Sterling Heights congregation in Michigan became the home of six area Detroit congregations. An existing church was purchased and renovated. A fellowship hall was added and the completed church will be ready for dedication by the beginning of 2017.

Reprint of Winter 2016 Vision Newsletter

FINANCES 2015/2014

OPERATING CHURCH RESULTS

SOURCES OF FUNDS	2015	2014
Regular Offering	\$11,570,763	\$11,553,003
Thanksgiving Offering	\$2,360,995	\$2,484,883
Special Donations & Bequests	\$1,058,724	\$890,336
Other Revenue	\$54,465	\$131,492
Church Revenue	\$15,044,947	\$15,059,714
Net Endowment Income	\$1,645,565	\$2,212,176
Real Estate Income	\$702,522	\$546,524
Reserve Management Income	\$2,348,087	\$2,758,700
Sale of Buildings	\$6,524,385	\$4,630,814
Total Church Funds Available	\$23,917,419	\$22,449,228



USES OF FUNDS	2015	2014
Congregational Supplies & Support	\$3,913,825	\$3,818,411
Church Programs & Events	\$657,934	\$688,131
Benevolence	\$597,985	\$639,136
Church Building Operations	\$3,742,049	\$4,146,915
Total Domestic Church Funding	\$8,911,793	\$9,292,593
International Mission Activities	\$1,889,861	\$2,328,663
General Administrative Support	\$2,744,115	\$2,913,278
Total Church Expenses	\$13,545,769	\$14,534,534
Church Building Activities	\$3,892,615	\$8,443,843
Total Church Funds Used	\$17,438,384	\$22,978,377

A BEHIND THE SCENES LOOK AT OUR ADMINISTRATION OFFICES

The NAC USA Church district has its main administrative offices in Chicago and Erie, with 26 employees to help run and manage the different projects and responsibilities that happen in these two offices.

There are also support offices in Panama, Venezuela, and Peru that help to manage the Linked International Districts in Central and South America. Let's take a look behind the scenes at some of the different tasks that occur in each office.

The **CHICAGO OFFICE** mainly houses the financial, legal, and operational departments of the Church. Along with that, member services and the National Building Office are also found in this office.

The **accounting, legal, and finance team** mostly work behind the scenes supporting our more than 220 congregations on a weekly basis. This ranges from helping with payments, preparing donor tax receipts, to handling insurance needs and dealing with legal and regulatory matters that all churches have to abide by. In doing so, we strive to assist our congregational teams in whatever they might need, fully recognizing their volunteer role and contribution. Financial assistance and management of funds for the Linked International District are also supported in the Chicago financial department. In addition, the team is currently working on new ways to support the local and national leadership of the church with ongoing strategic reports that can help in managing each congregation's affairs in a consistent, congregation-centric way.

Member services covers three main areas: printing, distribution and logistics, and statistics. These different areas involve handling the printing of monthly periodicals, shipping and mailing services, and managing inventory and fulfilling orders. The member database, iMIS, is managed and updated in the Chicago office and allows for international and domestic reports to be run.

The **National Building Office** manages all of the buildings and properties that the Church owns and rents. This year, the office is focused on breaking ground for the new congregations in Buffalo, NY and Garner, NC; searching for different buildings or properties that can be renovated for seven congregations around the country; and tackling 20 – 25 “repair and maintenance” projects, ranging in severity, at different congregations.

The **ERIE OFFICE** is mostly made up of the Communications and Program Development departments, along with a few other elements that are necessary to the running of the Church.

Program Development produces programs and resources for all of our congregations. Its goal is to connect the various congregational ministries and efforts of the Church and discover ways to encourage spiritual growth in children, youth, and families in their congregational life. This department provides information, training, support, and follow-up on issues that affect ministers and members in reference to national programs. Some of these resources that the department creates are the Vision Newsletters, the Midweek Experience Curriculum, FaithArc material, Effective Preaching courses, website and app content, and much more. The department also handles the translations of these materials. The Erie office also has a small recording studio where much of the Church's video content to support these resources and programs is filmed and edited.

The staff responsible for managing the **real estate** of the Church are located in the Erie office. They connect with the National Building Office in Chicago to take care of property purchases, sales, and investments, and also handle any building leases that the Church has.

Human resources is also located in the Erie office.

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY for the Church has some impact on almost every aspect of the church administration and congregational activity. This includes computers, phones, websites, several technology resources that assist our volunteer leaders to efficiently manage congregational administration (e.g. websites like NDI, Minister Companion, and NACStat, OneCallNow communications tool), and technology resources to communicate to and assist our members and guests (e.g. websites like nac-usa.org and NAC USA Online for Internet-based service broadcasts). Some important projects for the year include:

- upgrading our membership database called iMIS
- upgrading the website used by congregational delegates and rectors to update the iMIS database called NAC Stat
- upgrading the main server in our Chicago office
- updating all of our websites so they will be simpler to use and friendlier with smartphones and tablets

STAY CONNECTED WITH US...

Print

Quarterly Community magazine

Quarterly Vision Newsletter

Connected Newsletter for retired ministers

THRIVE Membership Booklet

On social media

NAC USA Facebook page

NAC USA YouTube page

@NACUnitedStates on Twitter

re Charitable Ministry Facebook page

District apostle Kolb Facebook page

On our app

CA and DA sermon clips

Midweek Exp videos/guides

For Your Journey videos

In Focus blog

Word of the Month blog

Weekly devotionals

USA congregation locator

Online

www.nac-usa.org

www.musiccompanion.org (worship & A/V)

www.ministercompanion.org (ordained ministers)

www.ndi.nac-usa.org (training and courses)

www.nac.today/en (international nac news)

Reprint of Summer 2017 Vision Newsletter

ANNUAL REPORT 2017

BUILDINGS & RENOVATIONS

Building Renovations

Major renovations for 2017 took place in the Clifton, New Jersey and Niagara Falls, New York congregations.

New Building

The new Phoenix Metro building was dedicated on April 2, 2017 by Apostle Earl Buehner. 192 people gathered for the dedication ceremony, divine service, and fellowship. After some unforeseen delays and obstacles in the process, the result is a beautiful space for worship where the members are thrilled to gather.

PROGRAM & DEVELOPMENT UPDATES

The annual NAC USA National Synod took place from September 22 – 24. This year's format was different from previous years, allowing participants more opportunities to engage with each other and administrative staff in discussion.

Throughout the day on Friday, an exhibition hall was open for all to attend. In the exhibition were booths focused around various new resources and programs available in the NAC USA. Since the National Synod, there have been some updates to and progress with some of these topics:

- **FaithArc:** For the THRIVE youth small group curriculum, the T semester began for the youth in fall, and the H semester is now available online for facilitators to download. Children's journals for Sunday divine services are also available for order on nac-usa.org.
- **Reflections on Giving:** The "Giving is love" theme began in the fall, starting with an article in the 2017 Autumn Vision Newsletter. There is also a package of resources, including a commercial, created around "Giving is love" that is available on Minister Companion. As we begin the new year, please continue to think about "Giving is love" and how these teachings apply to you personally. The next theme, "Giving is faith," will begin in the spring of 2018
- **You're home:** This package of materials and resources is available for all congregations to use. The first level is resources for greeters in the congregation and the second level

is a small group experience for guests and members to learn more about the basics of the New Apostle Church. Both of these levels are available in English and Spanish. The third level of materials is about the sacraments, which guides the discussion with the person becoming a member so that they can understand the important aspects of each sacrament. This third level will be available in 2018 by the end of the 1st quarter.

- **Spiritual Gifts:** A new small group resource that helps a person discover their spiritual gifts is now available. This small group series is designed as an introduction to spiritual gifts and was created to help us better understand who God has made us to be and how we personally fit into His plan of salvation. It contains eight sessions, each uniquely intended to help us be more introspective and better understand God's special purpose for each of us. This book was written by the Work of Ministry Work Group, made up of volunteer members and administrative staff.
- **re Charitable Ministry:** There are two serving opportunities in Belize for 2018 that still have spots open for registration. The dates for the trip are June 16 – 23 and June 23 – 30, and the participation fee is \$550 + travel. Please refer to the 2017 Autumn Vision Newsletter for more information and future serving opportunities.
- **Pastoral Care for the End of Life:** This is a new course that is now available on NDI, available for those who feel called to pastorally support those who are dying and their loved ones. This video course provides guidance on the church's stance on certain medical issues, medical terminology, and, through 6 in-depth scenarios, gives direction on how to approach difficult situations that members or their loved ones may be experiencing near the end of life.
- **Information technology:** The Minister Companion website was rebuilt and went live in September. Over the next year, the NDI and Music Companion websites will also receive upgrades.

If you and/or your congregation would like to learn more about one of these topics, please speak to your district leader. If additional information is needed, you can email communications@nac-usa.org.

FISCAL REPORT

In 2012, New Apostolic Church USA for the first time published an annual financial report to increase transparency about the use – and need – for our members' offerings and donations. This information was generally welcome and periodic updates have been provided since then via the Vision newsletter.

How are my church's financial matters managed? Understanding our 'Break-Even Plus' Approach

All church activities are managed based on a 'break-even plus' approach. This means that from a planning perspective our church's operating expenses generally cannot exceed our available offerings and donations. Any possible surplus (the 'plus' in this approach) is then available as the basis of our church's major building and renovation budget (capital investments).

How did my church do financially in the past years?

The past years have seen a continued decrease in offering, reflecting many different factors. At the same time, various new, major programs like Midweek Experience, Thrive and Faith Arc were developed, prepared and made available to all our members. This required a careful approach to managing expenses, including a continued consolidation of personnel costs.

Thanks to your unwavering commitment and offerings and by the grace of our Heavenly Father, the church has been able to achieve the aforementioned goal in the past years. Small annual surpluses (see chart 'Uses of Income') of varying size also have enabled us to continue necessary building and renovation activities, albeit at times at a limited level. At this point, our church supports and takes care of more than 220 buildings, while also pursuing consolidations and the founding of flagship congregations in selected areas, requiring substantial financial means.

Annual operating surpluses have been insufficient for a number of years now in funding all necessary and planned building activities. The building budget is therefore supported, as needed, by the proceeds from the sale of buildings, and revenue generated by the church's financial reserves.

The importance of giving and how it impacts my congregation

Understanding the spiritual value and importance of giving, whether in the form of prayer, time, or finances, is a cornerstone of every New Apostolic Christian's life of faith. Our new **Giving** series and materials take up this topic in a comprehensive and deeper form, providing insights into how giving, in all its forms, is eventually behind every activity, program and service of our church, even if not directly visible.

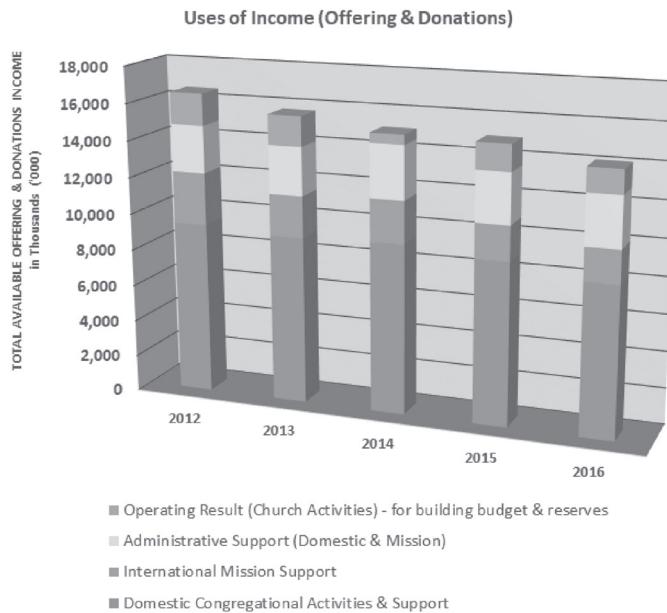
Many have given generously and substantially. However, in an increasing number of our congregations a trend is becoming visible that when only a few major donations are excluded, general giving levels are comparatively low. This should not be seen in a negative light. Instead, it offers all of us as 'the church' the opportunity to reflect on the many facets of giving and review how we discuss the necessary topic of finances and funding. One aspect of doing so is the new **Giving** series; other aspects include plans for increased transparency with our congregational leadership teams, guidelines and models to evaluate and understand the individual financial health of our congregations and districts, as well as concepts and support for local fundraising efforts.

Our commitment remains to manage all available resources to the 'break-even plus' approach explained at the beginning of this report and to ensure every congregation's basic needs are covered. The ability to support and carry each other is truly one of the major strengths of our church's structure!

CHART CATEGORY EXPLANATIONS:

Domestic Congregational Activities & Support –

this category contains all expenses incurred in supporting and managing our congregations; it ranges, for example, from rent and depreciation, insurance, utilities, minor repairs, fellowship supplies, flowers, printed materials, to the cost of developing new programs, hosting Chief Apostle visits and Youth days, supporting ongoing programs like Midweek Experience and Faith Arc, to the costs of Soulcare staff.



More than 50% of the expenses in this category fall into the first four categories listed (rent, utilities, minor repairs, insurances).

International Mission Support – our church continues to support the Lords' work internationally, among others, in the more than 30 mission countries under the care of our District Apostle (Caribbean, Central America and South America). This budget is generally set at a maximum of 15% of offering and donations.

Administrative Support (Domestic & Mission) – this category contains the expenses necessary to support more than 220 congregations and 30 countries with everything ranging from IT systems and services used by members, ministers and our congregations; necessary and required accounting and audit functions; state and local registrations; legal support; program development and training, as well as administrative staff expenses.

Operating Result (Church Activities) – the aforementioned expense categories do not include any funds spent on or required for capital investments, such as church buildings and major renovations. Our church's building budget is primarily funded out of any annual operating surplus as well as the proceeds from the sale of church buildings and revenue generated by the church's financial reserves. Building activities are adjusted as necessary, based on the funding available. More and more often, the church's general funding for such projects is combined with special offerings and donations by our members to achieve and implement specific building projects.

DISTRICT UPDATE

With the retirement of Apostle Reinhard Hecht and the ordination of Apostle Robert Ferguson in February of this year, an opportunity opened to realign some of the districts under the care of the apostles. This affords the apostles a more efficient and manageable working region for their periodic visits.

Going forward, the congregations of the Detroit district will be cared for by Apostle Karl Orlofski. The congregations of the Caribbean district, including Jamaica, Bermuda, Guyana, the Bahamas, and a number of smaller, English-speaking islands, will be cared for by Apostle Robert Ferguson.

Please join with me in praying that our heavenly Father will open new impulses as these apostles begin their activity in their respective areas.

Reprint of Autumn 2019 Vision Newsletter

FINANCIAL OVERVIEW 2017 / 2018

The church's annual synod in October 2019 ratified the annual audit 2018, a summary of which is presented on this page.

On the church income side, stable Thanksgiving offering marked a very positive aspect; regular offering income, however, decreased from 2017 to 2018, reflecting demographic and general attendance trends.

Some of these decreases were offset by stable and or higher income from renting out unused church properties and the church's reserves. The latter category can fluctuate significantly year over year, depending on the situation in the financial markets.

Two-thirds of the church's annual expenses are directly supporting spiritual activities in the congregations, districts and on the national level. The majority in this category falls on the maintenance and operation of the church's approximately 200 buildings around the country, which includes rent, utilities, insurance, as well as regular repair & maintenance (but not major new construction projects, see below).

Nationally developed and prepared Soulcare materials and programs and congregational activities form another major part, which also includes the church's Apostle employees. In 2018, our Chief Apostle visited the USA for a District Apostles Meeting (DAM), an event that rotates among all worldwide district churches. All participants commented on the special event in Washington, DC that the New Apostolic Church USA hosted in 2018.

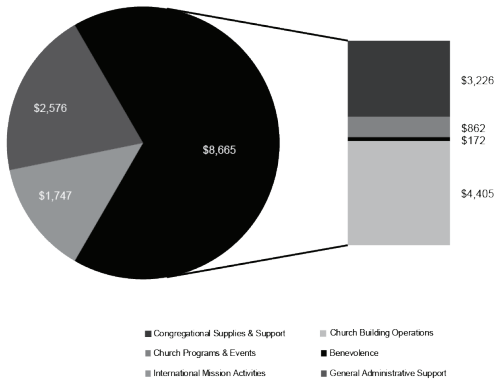
Support for the church's internationally linked areas, in particular in Mexico, Central and South America and the Caribbean, totaled approximately 13% in 2018. The remainder of the expenses was for the necessary administrative support of our congregations, including the church's office personnel.

Any surplus of annual income over annual expenses is added to the church's reserves and supports the church's ongoing operations and building activities (major renovations and new construction, acquisition). With various major projects scheduled for 2019/2020, the surplus of 2018 will be utilized for these purposes.

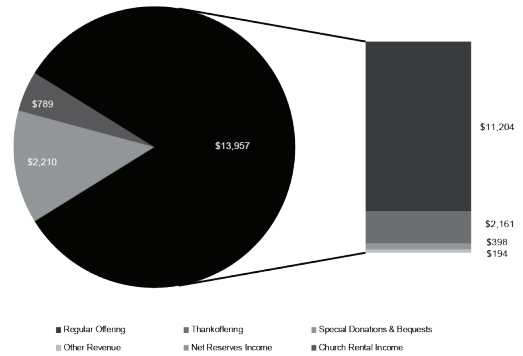
Reprint of Winter 2019 Vision Newsletter

FINANCIAL OVERVIEW 2017 / 2018

Uses of Funds 2018 (Church Operations)
(in \$ '000)



Sources of Funds 2018/2017 (Church Operations)
(in \$ '000)



Uses of Funds 2018 & 2017 (Church Operations)* (in \$'000)	2018	2017	% Chg. to previous year	% of Total Funds Used (2018)
Congregational Supplies & Support	\$ 3,226	\$ 2,893		24.8%
Church Programs & Events	\$ 862	\$ 541		6.6%
Benevolence	\$ 172	\$ 209		1.3%
Church Building Operations	\$ 4,405	\$ 4,512		33.9%
Total Domestic Church Funding	\$ 8,665	\$ 8,155	6.2%	66.7%
International Mission Activities	\$ 1,747	\$ 1,717		13.4%
General Administrative Support	\$ 2,576	\$ 2,744		19.8%
Total Church Expenses	\$ 12,987	\$ 12,617	2.9%	

* all information on a cash basis

Sources of Funds 2018/2017*	2018	2017	% Change to previous year	% of Total Funds Available (2018)
in \$ '000				
Regular Offering	\$ 11,204	\$ 12,269		
Thankoffering	\$ 2,161	\$ 2,066		
Special Donations & Bequests	\$ 398	\$ 796		
Other Revenue	\$ 194	\$ 367		
Church Revenue	\$ 13,957	\$ 15,498	-9.9%	82.3%
Net Reserves Income	\$ 2,210	\$ 1,396		
Church Rental Income	\$ 789	\$ 781		
Reserve Management Income	\$ 2,998	\$ 2,177	37.7%	17.7%
Funds from Church Operations	\$ 16,956	\$ 17,675	-4.1%	

* all information on a cash basis

Sustainable Structure

*Events and
Reports*

NEW EOFFERING WEBSITE: COMING IN AUGUST 2015

Six years after the original introduction of our church's eOffering platform we are excited to announce a major update. Our new eOffering platform is scheduled to go live in August. Announcements will be made ahead of time and you will be automatically re-directed to our new site once available.

The new site features an updated, cleaner user interface and will be available as a website as well as a mobile-optimized version, allowing easy use via your internet-enabled mobile phone or tablet.

In addition, we have worked with our providers to allow for user accounts, one of the features many of our members have inquired about. While a user account is not required to make a donation, it simplifies your regular and one-time donation process tremendously. Users will be able to maintain their mailing information, set up, review and update payment sources as well as review scheduled eOfferings. In addition, the site will allow for reporting on your previous donations in various settings. This will be especially helpful when reconciling your bank account or verifying your tax preparations.

Due to regulatory limitations, eGiving systems are not allowed to generate fully valid tax receipts at this point. You will continue to receive a donation acknowledgement receipt (DAR) from the church on a monthly basis as before. For comments and questions on the new eOffering site, you are welcome to contact us at offering@nac-usa.org.

Reprint of Summer 2015 Vision Newsletter

USA DISTRICT: NEW CONGREGATIONS

Portage, MI:

The congregation of Portage is the newly opened flagship congregation in Michigan. The new building, purchased in August of 2014, had always been a church building since its construction in 1968. The church is now the new congregation for over 200 members. Dedicated on October 11th of this year, the grand opening of the building for the community was November 8th.

Randolph, NY:

Dedicated on July 26, 2015, the Randolph congregation in New York is the new home to 65 members. The building used to be a medical center. The congregations of Olean, Cattaraugus, and Jamestown consolidated into the new Randolph congregation.

Reprint of Winter 2015 Vision Newsletter

WEBSITE EVENTS

As of January 1, 2017, the church administrative office will no longer be posting local congregational events on www.nac-usa.org under the “News” tab. This decision was made based on a couple different factors. Over the years, there have been less and less views of the events that get posted on the website. In addition, with the creation and popularity of Facebook, more congregations post their local events on their Facebook pages, instead of sending in event reports to be posted on the church website. Please also be aware of the responsibility of posting appropriate articles and photos on a congregational website of Facebook page. Lastly, the church has adopted a new media policy that requires the administrative office to obtain a signed photo release form for any person that can be identified in a photo. The signed form gives permission for the photo to be posted. This policy is in effect whether the photo is on the website, the official Facebook page of the church, or in any printed materials. Because of this policy, the church administrative office does not have the resources to keep track of the signed photo releases of all of the members in the district. While local events will not be posted on the website starting January 1st, national events will continue to be posted to inform the membership of what is happening on a national level. These reports of national events will only use photos that show groups of people. Thank you for your understanding on this update.

Reprint of Winter 2016 Vision Newsletter

BUILDING UPDATES – BUFFALO

After many months of hard work, the Buffalo congregation now has a new church building located in Cheektowaga, New York. The building was dedicated in August, and celebrated the merging of the Buffalo, West Seneca, and Tonawanda congregations.

The work of the church was established in the Buffalo region in the late 1880's. The first congregation gathered in the city of Buffalo, where several families met in each other's homes for divine services. Around the beginning of the 1900s, the congregation moved to a hall on Fillmore Avenue. Here, the congregation grew, and began offering Sunday School and became known for their advanced musical program including an orchestra that played in the balcony. After another move to a larger hall, the first actual church building was purchased in 1904 on Hickory Street, where 30 families gathered for services. A new church on Pine Ridge Road was dedicated in 1956.

In 2007, the Buffalo Riverside congregation merged with the Buffalo congregation under the Stepping Forward movement. This allowed new developments to take place within the congregation, such as an enhanced children's ministry, a focus on worship and the divine service experience, and an effort to discover spiritual gifts so that all may contribute to congregational life. In 2010, the Grand Island congregation also merged with the Buffalo congregation.

The design of the new church building is inspired by the prairie style of Frank Lloyd Wright, as seen in the horizontal lines and simplicity of the structure. Steven Marchincin, who has consulted for the building program of the New Apostolic Church USA for the past 20 years, designed it. Sadly, it was the last project that he worked on, as he passed away unexpectedly in 2017.

Reprint of Winter 2018 Vision Newsletter

BUILDING UPDATES

Puget Sound Metro

The Seattle and Tacoma congregations have come together to form the Puget Sound Metro congregation. In January, Apostle Buehner dedicated a church building for this newly merged congregation.

The church, which was converted from a retail space in a shopping plaza, has a large fellowship area, and is on one level, making it easier for all members to access and navigate. It also has classrooms and meeting spaces for the Sunday School.

Raleigh

Our church purchased a building for the Raleigh congregation composed of three rental units. The members meet in a newly renovated area, which was dedicated on May 19, 2019 by Apostle Ferguson. This modern building provides sufficient, easily accessible space for our congregation to worship in, and also provides additional income.

Reprint of Winter 2019 Vision Newsletter

**Stepping
Forward**
Glossary

STEPPING FORWARD GLOSSARY

Christian calendar: The yearly schedule that commemorates certain days and seasons related to Jesus Christ and God's plan of salvation. These seasons include:

- Advent – the period of anticipation of the birth of Jesus Christ, the Messiah that God, the Father, sent to save the world. It also represents our hope and eagerness for His second coming. Advent is celebrated on the four Sundays leading up to Christmas Day and starts the Christian calendar.
- Passiontide – the 40 days leading up to the Passion of Jesus Christ, which is His suffering and death on the cross. Passiontide is acknowledged by most Christian churches through reflection, meditation, fasting, and prayer. This time includes the days of Holy Week.
- Eastertide – the period of time starting on Easter Sunday and ending on Pentecost. This season celebrates the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the sending of the Holy Spirit.
- Season of Thanksgiving – in the NAC USA district, this is the two months leading up to the national Thanksgiving holiday. This time allows us to reflect on all that God has given us and to express our gratitude towards Him through serving, prayer, and worship.

Church multi-use properties: The next generation of church buildings designed with multi-use capabilities for greater community interaction and possible revenue generation. Our church buildings are our largest single material asset and are often underutilized.

Completion: This is the third element of the Stepping Forward strategy. Healthy, growing congregations will lead to our completion where souls are fully transformed into the image of Christ and the church is prepared as His bride.

Congregational merger: The process of creating a new congregation from two or more existing congregations. It is a long-term project that is guided by a standardized template of decision-making, involving all levels of congregational health and a proactive, facilitative, and transparent communication process. The implementation of a congregational merger is managed directly by the apostle and bishop or district leader in a hands-on and involved manner, as this process is a high priority and contains a deep downside if executed poorly.

Culture (congregational): Shared patterns of behaviors and interactions, cognitive constructs, and affective understanding that are learned through a process of socialization. These shared patterns identify the members of a culture group, while also distinguishing from those of other groups. In other words, culture can be defined as “the way we do things around here.” Our congregational culture should be to live and lead like Christ, with Him

as our example. This culture revolves around the fundamental concepts found within His gospel, such as compassion, reconciliation, tolerance, love, peace, understanding, humility, and service to others before ourselves. It also makes the assumption that every member will share with others their God-given gifts and talents for the edification of the body of Christ. Every member views their living in Christ as a lifelong, continual transformation. No one can ever feel entitled to the grace of God, as evidenced by the supreme sacrifice of His Son. It cannot be earned or justified by our outward appearance, family lineage, lifestyle, or length of time being New Apostolic. God's grace remains the object of a constant inner striving to be like Christ in all aspects of our lives and congregation. Culture is one of the four elements of congregational health.

Devotion: An act of prayer or private worship. Any source available to aid in this act is referred to as a devotional, such as a family prayer, Bible reading, or a gathering of souls to worship and pray.

Discipleship: The process and journey of being a disciple. A disciple is someone who is following Jesus Christ daily and encouraging others to do the same. Maintaining a healthy relationship with God is the first and most important thing a disciple of Jesus needs to do. This is especially true for individuals who are leading others in discipleship. Disciples should have a progressing relationship with Jesus in prayer, study His Word, keep their lives free from idols, and experience Christ in word and sacrament. Discipleship is a fundamental element of God's mission to the world. Disciples, those people who are following Jesus and encouraging others to do the same, are necessary because God is acting through His church in the world. It is only when we begin to understand what God wants for the world that we begin to understand what that could look like.

Divine service experience: The experience of a member or visitor before, during, and after a divine service. This includes the impact of greeters, public prayers, the sermon, worship and music, the liturgy, Holy Communion, and the surrounding connection with others (may include other sacramental acts and blessings). Divine service experience is one of the four elements of congregational health.

Edify: To improve, support, and build up. Christians are called to edify the body of Christ (Ephesians 4:11-12).

Emerge: To rise up and to come forward. We cannot remain as we are; we must perpetually evolve to improve ourselves and more effectively meet the challenges of our time. To be strong in Christ is an essential component of our ministry and is of the highest priority. This requires a change in our understanding and a new paradigm for church leadership.

Emerging leaders: The leaders of tomorrow. The selection, care, and nurturing of tomorrow's church leadership is a critical component of strategic planning. They will face challenging demands, and will need a proactive effort by the Church to hear their calling, be motivated to serve, and be prepared for ministry and leadership. Sufficient teaching, mentoring, training, and education will be crucial to their development. Emerging leaders lead like Christ (see definition for servant leadership).

Engage: To connect, to interlock, and to mesh. It implies that different components have come together towards a common purpose. Their interaction creates leverage and power that exceeds the sum of the individual parts, similar to the gears of machinery when working and engaged. A further and deeper definition is to attract, to draw into, to win over, and to involve. This creates a warmer relationship, a deeply personal decision to join a common purpose, and a desire to be part of a larger cause and make a commitment. One engages in a profession, a calling, or in marriage.

Equip: To provide and prepare the tools and provisions necessary for performance. The Church's attention is focused on equipping ministers and members with tools, information, and inspiration that will enhance their ministry and help them live a more balanced life.

FaithArc: FaithArc is the strategy for the continual spiritual development of a young soul in the congregation. The New Apostolic Church USA wants to create a path of discipleship for developing souls of all ages, with an emphasis on engaging them as young children, into youth, and then young adulthood. This can only be done with support from the whole congregation. The congregation has a holy responsibility to invest in the church, which includes devoting time into relationships with the people around them. By doing this, disciples show not only their love for each other, but for Christ.

Flagship congregation: A large congregation with sufficient scope to provide most or all of the components of congregational health. This congregation can be a primary source of providing a healthy congregational experience for members within a district or region, allocating resources accordingly (ministerial talent, building, program, and financial needs).

Giving: Giving allows us to give expression to our passions, interests, and feelings by offering ourselves and our resources to help advance them. As Christians, giving is an integral part of our faith and a vital part of our profession to the world that we are followers of Jesus. As believers grow spirituality and mature in their faith, they gain the understanding that all they have is given by God and belongs to Him. With the guidance and inspiration of the Holy Spirit, believers learn to trust in God and recognize how they can use what they have been given to give generously to others to help all people come to know Jesus and fulfill the Great Commission. Some deeper aspects of giving in all its forms are explored in the "Giving is..." series. Through this series, we can see how giving is love, faith, joy, mission, sacrifice, secret, and worship.

Greeter Program: A formalized, systematic strategy for enhancing the experience of members and first-time visitors to a church. The experience for welcoming people begins in the parking lot, from their arrival, to a follow-up weeks later. Guidance on creating a greeter program can be found in the *You're home* resources on NDI.

Growth (congregational): This is the second element of the Stepping Forward strategy. When a congregation is healthy, it has the ability to grow in spiritual maturity. Our mission and vision statements speak to growing congregations: they are places filled with people who reach out to others to spread the gospel, with the hope that they align themselves to the

teachings of Christ. Together and individually, believers grow in their relationship with God and prepare for the return of Jesus Christ.

Health (congregational): This is the first element of the Stepping Forward strategy. Health is an important aspect of a congregation's ability to grow and reach the vision of the Church. The vision statement of the Church describes healthy congregations and paints a picture of an ideal internal view of ourselves and our congregations: creating a place where people feel at home and can align themselves to the gospel of Christ. A healthy congregation should provide the following benefits to those who make up the Body of Christ: culture, divine service experience, pastoral care, and structure. These four elements should guide a congregation's thinking, actions, and decision-making. (See definitions for culture, divine service experience, pastoral care, and structure.)

House church: For a smaller congregation whose resources are stretched, this would involve conducting divine services within someone's home, as opposed to a formal church building. This requires a willingness on the part of the homeowner to provide a suitable space on a consistent and dependable basis. The intent is to provide a worshipful divine service experience with Holy Communion (if possible) within the warmer confines of a home. This experience could be similar to the dynamic at the Last Supper with Jesus and His disciples.

NAC USA Online: A place where people can listen virtually to the sermon every Sunday and aims to teach the gospel of Jesus Christ. We encourage members and guests to be in the divine service, but there are genuine reasons as to why people need online services in order to hear the gospel. For these people, NAC USA Online is a solution that allows them to connect in some way. These reasons for viewing live webcasted services on NAC USA Online include: congregations with few or no altar servers, Linked Members (those who live too far from a congregation), and shut-in members (those who are physically unable to attend their congregation, usually due to an illness). All members are able to access video clips of Chief Apostle and District Apostle services on NAC USA Online.

NDI: This is the NAC USA Development Institute, a website that provides online training available to ordained ministers and members. The website offers courses and resources on topics such as small groups, engaging the Holy Spirit, effective preaching, liturgy, grief, prayer, the Catechism, youth leader training, giving, and more.

Pastoral care: Care provided by ordained ministers and members to members of the church or guests through prayer, support, and encouragement in faith. Pastoral care is offered, but not limited, to the following: children, those experiencing grief, singles, youth, married couples, parents, seniors, and young adults. Pastoral care is one of the four elements of congregational health.

Planned giving: Members wishing to leave a financial legacy with the New Apostolic Church USA. Various options can be customized to reflect the desires and wishes of the donor. The "Planned Giving" section of nac-usa.org provides access to detailed information on bequests, wills, estates, and donor-advised structures to start the process of an enduring financial gift.

re Charitable Ministry: The humanitarian organization of the NAC USA district. The scope and reach of their programs and activities are directly related to the generous support of members. The charity focuses most of its efforts on supporting local congregations who are working in their communities through training programs and grants. Weeklong humanitarian trips give members a chance to get out of their comfort zone and work on focused projects, serving communities in another country. In times of natural disasters, the charity works with local organizations that are trained in emergency relief and have a strong presence on the ground, providing donations and resources where possible. If you have any questions regarding congregational training, getting involved in your community, or joining us on our trips, please talk to your rector or email re.charitableministry@nac-usa.org

Sermon: The prepared, Bible-based, spiritual discourse of a minister used during the divine service experience, which is inspired by the Holy Spirit. The sermon part of a divine service experience includes the time an officiant serves the congregation. An assisting ordained minister may also serve the congregation. The primary message of each sermon is outlined within the divine service guide, as published by the international Church.

Servant leadership: A style of leadership exemplified and taught by Christ. The focus of this leadership style is leading by humble serving, and it should guide all ordained ministers and any members who are in leadership positions in the congregation. Scripture gives us the basis for servant leadership:

- On two separate occasions, Christ explains to the disciples that the greatest among them will be the servant of all. He cautions them not to use their authority to lord over others. Jesus came not to be served, but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many (Matthew 18:1-5, Matthew 20:20-28, Mark 9:33-37, Mark 10:35-45, Luke 9:46-50).
- Christ set the example personally at the Last Supper when He washed the disciples' feet in a posture of extreme humility.

Shared leadership team (SLT): A collaborative leadership style of shared responsibilities within a congregation between its ministers and members based upon gifts, talents, skill sets, education, and training. The rector is sensitive to diversity, and skilled in helping the members discover their God-given calling and develop their talents. Making up the SLT, a leader represents each of the four elements of congregational health, and collaborates with the rector.

Small groups: Groups of three to ten people that gather together, usually weekly, to discuss various spiritual topics. Small groups create a space for spiritual growth, both in our own lives and together, as we build relationships with one another. When we gather to learn about God and His Word, we give Him room to work in our lives, to shape us and help us grow. Small groups capture the essence of our mission and vision statements – a place to feel at home, a place to experience the love of God and the joy of serving, a place to reach out to the people around us, a place to provide soul care and cultivate true fellowship, and a place to live out the gospel of Jesus Christ. When this environment is created in our small groups, we are truly living by Christ's example. Our own importance diminishes as we focus on edifying each other, as we listen to and respect each other, as we offer support to one another, and as we serve together and become a catalyst for change.

Spiritual gifts: Spiritual gifts are gifts from God that are revealed when we accept and engage the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the source of all spiritual gifts. Therefore, when we are sealed with the Holy Spirit, the potential is there for any or all of the spiritual gifts to emerge throughout our lives as God allows. Engaging these gifts is necessary for the development and preparation of the bride of Christ. God gives us a unique set of abilities for the noble task to bring glory to Him, to make our personal contribution to edify the Body of Christ, and to help us mature in the image of Christ. Using Jesus as our example, we look to transform our nature by exemplifying the gifts of the Spirit. The use of our spiritual gifts measures our spiritual maturity. By consciously developing and exercising our spiritual gifts, we promote maturity within the Body of Christ. Recognition and consistent use of these gifts help us toward spiritual transformation in all areas of our lives: our families, our congregations, our communities, and even our professions. A small group series to explore your spiritual gifts, "Spiritual Gifts: Discovering God's purpose for you," is available on NDI. (Used to be referred to as Work of Ministry.)

Stepping Forward: An ongoing strategy for the NAC USA district, whose goal is the creation, development, and support of healthy congregations addressing the four primary components of culture, divine service experience, pastoral care, and structure. Healthy congregations are able to grow more into the nature of Christ and ultimately, reach the completion of our faith as the bride of Christ. Stepping Forward includes methods and techniques for enhancing the spiritual experience of church membership in all aspects of congregational life.

Stewardship: A function of discipleship that begins with the understanding that God has called us to a life of purpose as a disciple of Christ. For this purpose, He has gifted us in many ways so that we may glorify Him and serve others. However, His gifts belong to Him, and He expects us to act as good stewards on His behalf. The parable of the talents in Matthew 25 speaks to this. This parable indicates that a good steward has both a unique attitude in recognizing the source of their gifts and skill in wisely using their God-given talents according to His purpose. Some of the gifts that God has given us that we are called to care for responsibly and humbly are our time, our relationships, our money and possessions, and our spiritual gifts.

Structure (congregational): All aspects of a congregation, including its physical assets, distributed and managed in an effective and sustainable manner. This includes the time, offerings, and efforts voluntarily contributed by each ordained minister and member. Each member is a steward of Christ's church and is accountable to Him and each other. Structure is one of the four elements of congregational health.

THRIVE: An acronym that describes the expectations of a member in the NAC USA district. A person who thrives is someone who develops and grows. In the New Apostolic Church, we want to grow and develop according to the image of Jesus Christ. "Thrive" isn't just a word; it is an entire way of life. To be a thriving Christian means that you have a strong faith and connection to God, healthy relationships with those around you, and a passion to serve. Members are called and expected to THRIVE:

- **Transform** their nature, using Jesus as their example
- **Help** spread the gospel
- **Respond** to the call to serve
- **Invest** in their spiritual health
- **Value** the Church
- **Embrace** the promise of Jesus Christ's return

Further elaboration on the THRIVE acronym can be found in the THRIVE Membership Booklet, which is given to members and guests who are interested in learning more about the New Apostolic Church USA, and is available on nac-usa.org.

Work groups: A work group is formed to develop or fully explore a new concept to determine if it will be developed for use in our congregations. A work group is led by a member of the administrative team who recruits knowledgeable, experienced, and motivated individuals from across the NAC USA district. The group is charged with a specific task and a delivery date, and their findings are reviewed by the circle of apostles for introduction to the congregations.

Worship: A personal and communal act of recognizing and expressing to God who He is. Through a combination of outward actions and inward devotions, such as prayer, song, serving, offering, thankfulness, Bible reading, and reflection, we worship God for His omnipotence, power, love, and grace. Worship can be experienced in a divine service, in a worship evening, at home with family, and privately. Through worship, the value and worth of God is acknowledged and expressed.

Worship evening: An additional time and/or venue where people can gather together and worship God. Worship evenings, while coordinated with local ministers, are designed and executed by worship teams and leaders. They are often used in preparation for Church holy days. Prayer, congregational hymns, musical contributions, poetry, special shared experiences, and Bible readings are examples of elements expressed in a worship evening.

Worship leader: A worship leader facilitates the communal effort of coming to God and turning the congregation's attention to Him. This is done through a short message and leading the congregation in song, drawing them into worship.

**Stepping
Forward**
Progression

STEPPING FORWARD PROGRESSION

**Taken from District Apostle Kolb's presentation at the 2019 National Priest Conference*

The Stepping Forward strategy starts with four aspects of health: culture, divine service experience, pastoral care, and structure. In consideration of these aspects, it was logical to bring nearby congregations together in larger cities to create one congregation with additional resources for the music program, Sunday school, youth groups, and so on. Once established, these larger congregations can be a vital support and resource for the surrounding smaller ones.

In order to lead these larger congregations, **shared leadership teams** were formed, engaging various members of the congregation. To determine the capabilities and passions in the congregations, a **spiritual gifts** program was created to discover and encourage all to participate. It became apparent that training would be helpful to edify and support those who emerged to serve. So, the **NAC USA Development Institute** was created; not a college with professors, but an online resource offering a range of self-study courses for any member to increase their knowledge and broaden their ability to serve in their congregation.

A culture of learning is vital to spiritual development. The **Minister Companion** and **Music Companion** websites were created to accumulate and organize the materials offered by the church for our ministers, as well as for our musicians and those involved with worship.

After careful evaluation of our Sunday school, and various concerns regarding confirmation and youth work, the **FaithArc** initiative was inspired in order to provide our children with a clear, contiguous path in becoming a disciple of Christ, and to encourage more connection with their congregation along their journey. As part of FaithArc, we offer support to parents and the enhanced THRIVE curriculum to youth to more intensively prepare them to make their vow before God.

In order to give support to congregations both large and small, a special program was developed, named **You're home**, to provide fresh, informative materials for our guests, a clear and understandable teaching about our faith for those interested in becoming members, and an advanced package to prepare souls for adoption and the sacraments.

Our **internal governance** was also reviewed, and after a historical gathering of all the USA rectors with Chief Apostle Leber in 2010, a new constitution and by-laws were instituted, creating an annual National Synod of delegates representing the various districts in our country.

A deeper teaching of Christian giving, to provide a more profound understanding of what God expects of His people, was developed, titled *Reflections on Giving*, and elements of this resource were shared in the Vision Newsletter, on Minister Companion, and directly with our congregations under the heading, **Giving is**.

Because charitable work is part of our gospel mission, **re Charitable Ministry** was established, which engages members and friends in serving the needs of others, both here and abroad.

After considerable discussion and prayer over a few years, the concept of the **midweek experience** was put before Chief Apostles Leber and Schneider. With their approval, we moved from our midweek service to a focus on **small group discussions**, in order to allow our members and ministers to experience the power of the Holy Spirit in a different way – in spiritual interactions with one another. Weekly videos and guides based on Scripture are developed, and include current teachings of our Chief Apostle, as well as aspects of our doctrine.

The chart on the next page displays how all the various pieces of Stepping Forward have evolved over time, and how each one is connected to and supportive of each other. No one person or group imagined how all these pieces would fit together, nor is any one person responsible for its creation. It is apparent that only the Holy Spirit could inspire, step by step, these components, and only later on did it become obvious that they were linked together, helping us to further reach our vision for the future.

STEPPING FORWARD ● ● ● ● ● H

		2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	
GLOBAL CHURCH	CHIEF APOSTLE YEARLY THEMES					What's your story?	Labor in love	
	Mission & Vision Statements (2007)							
	Updated Liturgy							
	NAC Catechism published							
CULTURE	CULTURE	Culture of Continued Learning						Midweek Experience
								Self-Responsibility
		Shared Leadership						
								Work of Ministry
		Shared Leadership						
								re Charitable Ministry
DIVINE SERVICE EXPERIENCE	DIVINE SERVICE EXPERIENCE	Creation of Music Companion (2007)		Integrating message & music	Enriching our worship			
		Minister Development	Creation of Minister Companion		Enhancing HC	Praying more effectively	Effective Preach	
		Prepare & Enrich (2007)						
		Understanding Grief						
PASTORAL CARE	PASTORAL CARE	Peacemaking (2006)						
		Children						
		Youth			iServe Christ			
		Pillars						
		Administrative Support and Finances						
STRUCTURE	STRUCTURE	Operations & Property Management						
		Communications - VISION newsletter / National websites / NAC USA App / Social Media						
		SWOT & Congregational Strategic Plans						
		Flagship Congregations						
		2010 Rector Conference - change in governance			Annual Synods			

NEW APOSTOLIC CHURCH - USA DISTRICT

HEALTH › GROWTH › COMPLETION

2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Joy in Christ	Victory through Christ	Glory to God our Father	Faithful to Christ	Rich in Christ	
NAC Catechism Question & Answer published					
				Concept of Ministry	
		Small Groups			
	Creation of NDI				
	Reflections on Giving				
				Reflections on Prayer (coming)	
				Discipleship resource (coming)	
	THRIVE (Membership expectations)	You're home (Membership resources: Level 1-3)			
	Spiritual Gifts (resource update)				
		Community Engagement resources - Helping without Hurting			
				Leadership Development (coming)	
			You're home (Guest & Greeter resources)		
Blended worship					
		Pastoral Care: End of Life			
				Resolving Everyday Conflict (coming)	
	FaithArc Congregation	Children - Enhanced teaching materials & training resources			
		Parents - Partnering with Parents resources			
		Youth - Youth THRIVE curriculum / Enhanced teaching materials & training resources			
		Young Adults			
Congregational Financial Model					
				Flagship Admin Support	
				2019 Priest Conference	

HEALTH WHICH LEADS TO GROWTH

