



Christian Hotels Flourish In Switzerland

There are some 50 hotels in Switzerland with explicitly Christian affiliations, thriving in tough economic (and spiritual) times.

By Michael Meier

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The Ländli Center in Oberägeri, Switzerland is a large, well-furnished complex in an ideal location. It boasts a spa, conference center, holiday resort, and spacious wellness center. From the hotel restaurant's dining room, you can gaze out toward the snow-covered banks of the adjacent Äger Sea.

The first sign of something special about the complex is at lunch, where the mostly older guests say grace before lunch, guided by a woman in a nurse's uniform. The hotel, which was founded by Deaconesses a century ago, is today at the center of a mini boom in Switzerland of Christian-run guest accommodations.

A pair of sisters, together with two laywomen and a pastor, manage the so-called "guest support program," offering their pastoral services to those hotel clients seeking spiritual guidance or perhaps just companionship. Of course, many guests in the 200-bed hotel make no use of these services. "Everything is voluntary here," says Ländli's director Hans-Beat Buol.

For all tastes and budgets, from one to four stars

Buol is honorary President of the Association of Christian Hotels (VCH), which now counts 53 Swiss hotels and guest farms as members. Ten years ago, the association didn't have an office. Today, a full-time CEO Falk Pfeleiderer, a former banker and lawyer, manages the group from within from the Ländli Center.

Members of the VCH are diverse - they range from one to four star hotels, including chic urban hotels, group homes, pensions, and holiday resorts. One of the association's oldest members is the Hotel Vadian, which is located next to the Abbey Library in St. Gallen. The Hotel Bristol, on the Stampfenbachstrasse in Zurich, is privately funded by a Christian group, and the Glockenhof in downtown Zurich is managed by Cevi, the Swiss branch of the YMCA, celebrating its 100th anniversary this year. Also in the association is the Männedorf Bible Home, which is operated by Methodists, and the Sonnenhof Backpackers Villa in Interlaken.

Not so "Christian" prices

"As a non-profit organization, the VCH binds Christian hotels in their fulfillment of the spiritual order," states the association's brochure. What does that mean? "We want to serve people and treat our guests with respect and appreciation," says Pfeleiderer. The mission statement is ambitious: "We aim to help our guests find God, find others, and find themselves."

According to Buol, every guest structure should show some sign that it is a Christian hotel. Some properties offer prayer or pastoral conversations, others put out Christian literature or conduct seminars on spiritual topics. In Ländli, the Deaconesses offer a day of silence once a month. The grace, as it is performed here, is different than in other Christian homes. Pfeleiderer explains: "We like to give our members the greatest possible freedom. We're not a chain of hotels, but a collaboration. We don't talk about operational issues."

Offering "Christian prices" is a non-issue for the director. "Our hotels are managed according to normal commercial criteria." The price to service ratio must remain attractive to guests. However, while the Swiss hotel industry lost 4.7-12% in sales during the financial crisis, the country's Christian hotels actually grew. In the last two years, sales have been up 2%, says Pfeleiderer, adding "in 2010, we had a record turnover of 93 million Swiss Francs."

The C is worth more than the spa package

Pfeleiderer attributes this revenue increase not only to the high quality of service at VCH hotels, but also to the big 'C', a marker associated with Christian hotels. "The label is clear," says Pfeleiderer, "Where it says C, Christ is there." Of course, some customers visit the Ländli to rejuvenate, use the conference rooms, or relax at the spa. But there are also people who come because of the C.

The VCH was founded in 1895 as a "Swiss Association of Christian hotels" by Reformed Church hoteliers near Bern. The association was originally founded for social, rather than religious reasons: they wanted to be able to offer journeymen and women an affordable roof over their heads.

Today, the C in the VCH represents above all Protestant churches. Most hotels are supported by Evangelical and Free church clubs. President Buol attends services at the Chrischona Free Church, while Pfeleiderer belongs to the Free Evangelical Church. The association has only one Catholic member: the Kurhaus Sant'Agnes in Locarno-Murano.

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