

A clear picture of the church in Cuba-- Possible or not?

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

Getting an accurate picture of the church in Cuba today is difficult, in part because of the strong emotional reaction that many Americans have to that country and its leader, Fidel Castro.

Many exiles claim hard repression of the church there, though they will acknowledge that following the visit of Pope John Paul II to the island in 1998, there has been some relaxation of restrictions and opposition.

Others who work in the country or visit there frequently paint a mixed picture of a growing church, but one that must watch over its shoulder to make sure that it do not run afoul of government policies.

Recently, Denton Lotz, the General Secretary of the Baptist World Alliance, reported that Baptist Christians in Cuba have increased from 80,000 in 1995 to over 200,000 today.

In a BWA press release, Lotz said that over 2,500 Baptist house churches have been started in the past eight years. And, he suggested that because the Cuban government has few restrictions regarding house churches, it “has unwittingly been an instrument in allowing Christians in Cuba to practice one of the most successful church planting methods in the world.”

LAM missionary Kevin Abegg, who works with Echo Cuba, agrees that the government has helped to evangelize the island. “Churches have more freedom now as opposed to eight to ten years ago,” he said. “Over the past decade the government has placed restrictions on meetings within the church, yet has allowed many of the weekly meetings to go on in individual homes.”

Growth isn't limited just to the Baptist churches. Tom Willey, who was raised in Cuba while his parents served as Free Methodist missionaries there, reported that “all of the ‘lively’ churches, whether charismatic or not, have been growing steadily , as have the Roman Catholics, the (Santeria groups) and the cults such as Jehovah’s Witness.”

Willey said that the more liberal churches are not growing, though he explained that those traditional denominations that have become charismatic, such as the Methodists, are experiencing expansion.

“There is a spiritual hunger in Cuba and people are seeking,” Willey explained.

While numerical growth may not be as explosive as in other Latin American countries such as Colombia or Argentina, spiritual increase has been a hallmark of the church.

“For many decades, the churches were limited as to the number of Bibles they were able to acquire,” Abegg said. “Commentaries were extremely rare, so pastors, teachers and

students relied on scripture alone. One thing that has blessed me most about the church in Cuba is the depth of understanding they have into the Word of God.”

While rejoicing in new believers, long-time workers and observers of the church in Cuba are quick to point out obstacles and difficulties faced by the church there.

The Cuban worldview is one difficulty suggested by Christian workers. “Communitistic culture--legalistic, totalitarian, secretive, deceptive and materialistic--has deeply penetrated the church,” said a long term missionary, “Tom”, who grew up in Cuba and travels there frequently. “Tom” asked that his identity be protected because of his extensive work in Cuba.

“Cars are not available to the ordinary citizen in Cuba,” Tom said. “Yet, many pastors have them. They get them through their denominational organization as incentives to church leaders to cooperate.”

Tom added that while ordinary Cubans cannot leave the country, dozens of pastors travel to the United States and buy goods here. “Again, these favors are granted to the denomination by the government in order to maintain control,” he said.

“Most church leaders seem to run the church and its affairs much like Castro runs the government,” he explained. “Then there is the price leaders of these movements must pay to be allowed to function. Almost all of them I know are somehow compromised. They have to make secret concessions to the government to be allowed to function as they do.”

Tom said that “every church is infiltrated with spies, so fear is a factor all Christians live with.”

“Communism uses the informant system to control the population,” Tom reported. “This is also prevalent in the church. I have tried over and over again to have small sharing groups in Cuba. The Cubans will not share their personal lives with one another for fear that an informant be in their midst.”

Charging that “the government has torn the family to threads,” Barbara Yandell who has worked with Cuban pastors through the Christian Reformed Church, said that “The church faces huge obstacles as leaders and discipleship training must correct these problems.”

Yandell said that the church needs male leadership, however the government dictates where young people can study and what their occupation will be.

Christian workers say that evangelism is allowed within the churches, but not in open air rallies, on the street, via radio or other public means.

Abegg said that some foreign evangelists have preached openly on the streets, but have often been deported for such activities.

”It’s the churches they were visiting or ministering at which then deal with the legal repercussions. Thus, due to ignorance or pride, teams can do harm rather than bless the very churches they hope to help.”

“Evangelism is generally limited to personal, one on one evangelism,” Abegg said. “Pastors can evangelize from the pulpit as long as they stick to scripture and spiritual themes.”

Even that is a blessing, Abegg asserts. Laws prohibit pastors from addressing social and political issues, so, he said, “that helps in maintaining the purity of the preached Gospel as opposed as to diverging into other themes that can water down the message.”

The Cuban government has also allowed Christian groups to be involved in social ministries. “Echo Cuba is providing powdered milk to 4,000 malnourished children in Eastern Cuba,” Abegg said. “One of the benefits is in teaching the churches how to do social ministries outside of government channels.”

Yes, others say, they have run across restrictions. “I was bringing the AA program of alcoholics because this is a huge problem in Cuba,” Tom said. “The government shut it down.”

“The government understands that the social aspects of life are its providence and no one else’s. So the church keeps to spiritual issues alone,” he said.

“If it were to move into something as significant as helping the poor, rehabilitating alcoholics or working with prostitutes, then it would be interfering with the ‘revolution.’”

Wiley said that a Christian Medical Association has been formed by Christian doctors who distribute medicine through the churches.

Abegg said that the churches of Cuba are facing a crossroads where they will have to make decisions that will either be a blessing or a curse. “The government has allowed churches to be receptors and distributors of benevolence from other countries,” he said.” This has helped to meet some of the needs within the country, but has also created an unfortunate type of competition between some churches.”

In an economy where a month’s salary runs from \$12 to \$15 dollars, Abegg said that a monthly gift of \$200 can be a huge blessing, or “it can destabilize the ministries of churches in the surrounding areas.”

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