



BUILDING A HEALTHY RELATIONSHIP WITH CHURCHES IN CUBA
Politics, History, Culture, and Religion

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Introduction

Cuba is a highly attractive tourist destination, known for its rich history, unique culture, and natural beauty. As the island's "slow roll" opening unfolds, visitors are arriving in record numbers. Inevitably, when closed nations open, the Western Church is not far behind, with the promise of financial and material aid and a legion of short-term mission teams.



As we move into this new era for the church in Cuba, we face abundant opportunities and daunting challenges. Cuban churches are crying out to us as the Macedonian church did to the apostle Paul, "Come here and help us!" We feel called to "speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute," to "speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy" (Proverbs 31:8-9).

While very little has been written about the history of churches in 20th century Cuba, it is widely observed that a majority of Evangelical churches have undergone sustained growth since the 1990s. New churches have been founded in various parts of the island, and traditionally established ones have experienced noteworthy growth. However, present conditions could change at any moment. There could be either improvement or deterioration of religious freedom and of church and state relations depending on complex internal and external factors.

Groups and individuals who seek to support the health and growth of the church in Cuba need to know as much as possible about the world they will be working in before embarking on a mission. This essay seeks to deepen understanding of the unique political, historical, social, and theological environment of Cuba and provide a helpful context for exploring prospects for the advancement of the church in Cuba. To prevent future misunderstandings and smooth the path to positive change, a quick-reference list of legal, political, historical, social, and theological considerations to keep in mind when working toward the founding and support of churches in Cuba is presented in the appendix at the end of the essay.

The History of the Church in Cuba

The Cuban Church has evolved through many stages influenced by both Biblical wisdom and real-world political and social circumstances. In the first years of the Cuban Revolution (1953 to 1959), Cuban clergy participated in the revolutionary process by serving as chaplains in military units and by providing food and aid to soldiers who launched an uprising in the mountains. During this time, the majority of Evangelical leaders supported agrarian reform law, literacy programs, and the regime's promises to weed out administrative corruption.



However, after the Marxist nature of the revolution became evident around 1961, tensions arose within the Evangelical church. Some accepted the emerging order; others rejected it. Various congregations were prohibited from engaging in religious activities. Some churches were closed, and their property was confiscated. Even José Felipe Carneado, head of the Office of Religious

Affairs (ORA) in Cuba, acknowledged that relations between state and church were very tense, calling it a “period of confrontations.”¹ He observed that “...there were numerous groups of Cubans and leaders who adopted attitudes that seemed to be opposed to the church;” however, “...for some parts of the government, there was never any sentiment against the church.”²

In the early days of the new regime, foreign missions fled the country, and the Cuban Church was left in the hand of locals who had few resources and little or no theological education. Still, they held fast to their vision: to nurture and sustain the church in Cuba, to help it grow and flourish. Sadly, the political and cultural environment was not at all favorable. The number of local churches declined sharply, and missions were reduced to almost zero. However, in spite of the inherent difficulties, as years went by, the Evangelical church grew step by step from a marginalized and conflicted group to a significant force within Cuban society.

In December 1975, at the First Congress of the Communist Party of Cuba, the party defined their official perspective on religion. Article 55 of the 1976 Constitution seemed to grant freedom of religion, allowing that “The State, which recognizes, respects, and guarantees freedom of conscience and religion, simultaneously recognizes, respects, and guarantees the freedom of every citizen to...profess the religious worship of their choice, with respect for the law”.

However, this objective acknowledgment of a new form of coexistence between Christian faith and Marxist doctrine did not substantially modify the classical concept of religion in the Marxist perspective, where the secular nature of society and the government is traditional, and believers are routinely isolated. In a socialist system, the precept of revolution, as determined by the hierarchy, supersedes all other fundamental precepts, including basic human rights such as freedom of assembly, freedom of speech, and freedom of religion. Even though the 1976 Constitution promised freedom of religion, it also stated that “The law regulates the State’s relations with religious institutions.” In practice, these pressures have driven severe restrictions on religious activities for the majority of churches. In the face of this harsh reality, the church persisted in its evangelistic and theological fervor to preserve itself.

Even though the Constitution recognizes the right of all citizens to practice their faith, true freedom of religion depends on the establishment of complementary norms and laws that support the actual exercise of these rights. There is an urgent call to enact a binding law to protect the rights of religious institutions to practice their faith without government intervention (*Ley de Cultos*). This continues to be a pending issue, as churches and individuals frequently encounter restrictions on their activities. For example, a church might be denied a permit to hold an outdoor service, or a seminary student might have his laptop confiscated. A legal measure would show tangible support of full expression of the freedom of religion and of all basic human rights.

On April 2, 1990, Fidel Castro met with prominent church leaders, marking a critical shift in church-state relations. On this propitious occasion, the revolutionary leader publicly admitted that errors were committed at some points during the revolution due to a lack of political clarity. C. René Padilla of the Latin American Theological Fellowship observes that the meeting “...sent a very clear signal that the main problem from which we have suffered for many years is (discrimination) and a milestone was set in order to begin a new relationship in which all Cubans would be united.”³

1 *Cuba, Testimony and Experience of a Revolutionary Process*. San José: D.E.I. 1990, p. 26.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 16.

3 *The Current Cuban Juncture: Center of Studies. Subsidies for Thought*. 1990. In Padilla René, *From Marginalization to Commitment*. Buenos Aires: EFPP, 1991, p. 120.

April 2, 1990 marked a key shift in the vitality and growth of churches in Cuba. Indeed, considerable changes in church and state relations have evolved over the last two and a half decades, stimulating the growth and expansion of the Cuban Church. The hand of God can be seen guiding each step forward with a purpose: for the Cuban people to know and love the Gospel and embrace it as a divinely ordained path for human fulfillment.

Unfortunately, due to years of repression, a sabotaging spirit of nationalist and independent self-absorption continues to prevail. Each denomination has attempted to promote its own independent identity, with little or no connection to the rest of the churches working in Cuba. Some clergy members worry about the future consequences of this spirit of division among Protestant denominations, a vulnerability that could be exploited in this time of rapid change.

As a result, Evangelical leaders in Cuba have affirmed their united vision to rebuild broken spiritual walls and bring forth a unified Christian Church. Taking their lead from the Book of Nehemiah chapters 1, 2, and 8, they are dedicated to support churches and church members in working together in trust, cooperation, and mutual respect under God's guidance and direction with His Word as the banner. They are committed to helping communities weather the storms of the present and future political and social transition, and to promoting and embracing social justice, family values, moral principles, and an abiding faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

House Churches: A Theological Perspective

Until fairly recently, churches in Cuba have traditionally been conceived of as buildings duly constructed strictly for religious purposes. But as congregations of worshippers grow, just like biological cells, they need to divide and generate new congregations, and if new churches cannot be built, the people will find a way. Exploring the theological concept of "church" can help worshippers determine the type of church they wish to "build." A church can gather in a building, but a church is not a building; rather, it is a group of people who join together to deepen their relationship with God.



With the awakening and growth of new congregations, more and more of the faithful in Cuba are gathering at "house churches," where small congregations arise naturally at various locations in a community. Cuban Christians prayed for the Lord to provide a revival, but they never really prepared to handle that revival in the real world. The best option turned out to be meeting in homes. It is interesting and inspiring that house meetings began with new believers; traditional believers did not open the doors of their homes as readily as new ones.

House churches have arisen because the growth of the church in Cuba has reached the point where the current ecclesiastic structure, whose leaders tend toward traditional mindsets with a custom of defining a church as a specially built building, lack the capacity to receive the multitudes in search of God, seeking to quench their spiritual thirst. The Cuban government recognized these new styles of religious gatherings as they emerged, and labeled them "house churches" based on the number of persons who joined them. The founding of a house church does not necessarily mean that it is an initiative of a mother church; a house church tends to arise from the initiative of the owner of the house. The term "house churches" can also designate meeting places where there is no presence of the Gospel.

We may never know why the Cuban government allowed this new opening, but the phenomenon of house churches serves as a promising strategy for growth. As a grassroots response to the pressures of expansion and the difficulty of raising funds to build new churches, house churches provide a solution to the problems of space for the development of congregations. They allow freer growth and flexibility, and they substantially reduce the burden of material costs in establishing a new House of Worship.

By envisioning the ministry of the church in a fresh way, the phenomenon of house churches can bring a new ministry closer to the Biblical model of fulfilling the mission of Jesus to “make disciples.” Meetings in a home allow members and the ministry to break out of their four walls, to experience worship and fellowship where it is most needed, where Jesus sent us (Matthew 10:16).

The opening of new homes as house churches allows the creation of congregations of Christians in different neighborhoods, and it allows more personal guidance through the process of learning to be a church (a group of Christians). House churches strengthen the sense of the church as an extended family. Just as the family plays an important role in satisfying the human need for companionship, affection, and security, so too does the broader circle of the church. Families reached by the Gospel influence an entire network of relations, expanding the community of believers. When people are free to naturally and spontaneously engage in their ministry in their own neighborhoods, they come closer to bringing forth the kingdom of Jesus, where every Christian spreads the Gospel.

Factors for Growth

The fervent devotion of church members is a key factor that attracts non-believers. When 1000 non-believers were polled in a survey on the impact of the church on the community, 74% said that the joy-filled faith and good works of Christians drew their attention. It follows that praising God with good cheer and seeking Him with the greatest delight, as opposed to exhibiting a stuffy, vain religiosity, has helped the Cuban Church grow into a major positive force for Cubans, their families, and their communities.



The Pentecostal tradition and the charismatic movement are known for joyful worship. Many denominations in Cuba such as the Assembly of God (known in Cuba as the Pentecostal Evangelical Church), the Methodist Church and a large number of house churches have adopted this worshiping style. The impressive growth and development of these churches which are heavily influenced by the Pentecostal tradition and/or the charismatic movement is testimony of the attractiveness of this style of worship throughout the country. We should dedicate special attention to fostering the growth of these churches in Cuba to revitalize the beleaguered spirits of the people who have endured decades of oppression.

The growth of the Evangelical movement in Cuba is fundamentally related to the increase in house churches, which have enabled church leaders to reach out to thousands of Cubans who wouldn't normally attend formal or traditional churches. Supporting evangelization in Cuba during this important time can help churches avoid or mitigate the problems that come with rapid growth regarding leadership, organization, and vision. For example, pastors and laity urgently need higher levels of training. In addition, the fragmentation of congregations in Cuba fostered a lack of a coherent vision for the future, so today many churches and denominations do not have a specific guiding vision in written form.

The benefits of house churches are many--and the drawbacks are also a cause for concern. A significant number of house churches have little or no real relationship with organized congregations. Some have already become or may present a future problem for dividing churches. The dearth of properly trained leadership could lead to the growth of movements that lack theological grounding and uniformity. This could cause small sects to spin off from the remote Evangelical community and confuse new worshippers who might mistake them as part of the Protestant or Evangelical movement.

We need to gain a clearer understanding of the house church movement and determine, at least in general features, the theology of each and its relation or lack of relation to Evangelical movements with a certain level of institutionality and organization. We must deeply study, define, and consider the diverse styles and methods of worship currently practiced in Cuba today. For example, some mini-congregations have the legal right to practice liturgy; others only have the legal right to conduct prayer meetings. Quite often these differences are ignored in practice, complicating matters.

It is important to discern which efforts are legitimate and dedicated to a higher purpose, and which lack a sincere commitment to meeting worshippers' temporal and spiritual needs. Two opposite trajectories are possible within the house church movement: the creation of a new and hopeful ministry body, or the creation of a troubling platform for religious leaders who lack credibility and pursue personal agendas. Missionaries seeking to support the church should broaden the scope of their understanding of the Cuban environment to include not just political but also psychological, social, cultural, and spiritual issues.

The Church and Its Mission: Prospects for the Future

The Lord Jesus Christ offers the perfect model of service, calling forth His church to serve. He is not sending us into an ideal world, but a real one, with its own culture, history, and the most terrible conditions of sin. It is here that we need to serve the Mission-Dei, to accomplish the holistic mission of the church, to identify ourselves with the people without losing our own identity. We need to seek knowledge, practice sharing, and nurture a community of believers.



Theologian John Mackay makes a distinction between theology “from the balcony” and theology “from the road.” Theology from the balcony is academic, abstract, distant. Theology from the road, on the other hand, begins among the people, engaging in their particular circumstances, down where humanity's real struggles take place. When we study the New Testament, we realize that Jesus' main focus was on the human condition, on bringing the Good News to individuals and groups. Only a church that envisions redemption can encourage hope among those who are lost.

Many theologians see the mission as integral to the essence of the church, indeed as the church's very reason for existing. González points out that “the history of the church is the history of its mission.”⁴ René Padilla observes that “a universal Gospel requires a universal church in which all Christians participate effectively in the worldwide mission.”⁵ For missiologist Samuel Escobar, the mission of the church is constantly developing and moving. He quotes Orlando Costas to drive home his point:

4 González, Justo. *History of Missions*. Argentina: Aurora, 1970, p. 23.

5 Padilla, René. *The Integral Mission. Essays on the Kingdom and the Church*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Nueva Creación, 1986, p. 129.

“If we do not want contemporary Christianity to be reduced to a museum piece, to a religion without meaning for history, a matter of the past, a cadaver, or an ambiguous religious club, it must recover the urgency to proclaim three things: the name of Jesus, the radical nature of the Kingdom of God, and the call for penance and faith.”⁶

The mission must be understood in terms of being sent. The main purpose of the mission of God is to be a channel for blessings. God sends his people to be messengers and witnesses, proclaiming the teachings of the Bible (Acts 1:8). At the July 1974, first International Congress on World Evangelization in Lausanne, Switzerland, participants arrived at the consensus that God “has been calling a people for itself, and sending it to the world to be his witness and his servant, to extend his Kingdom, to edify the body of Christ, for the glory of his name.”⁷ A mission requires a coherent vision: the church must affirm a vision that extends beyond the borders we can see to serve the mission of God in places and times that the transforming message of Jesus Christ has yet to reach.

Further, the development of missionary capacity provides necessary tools and reveals the natural gifts and skills of those who are called for subsequent work that will be carried out in the area of the mission. The Lord has granted the church specific gifts that can be developed within the work of the ministry. Paul serves as a model of a Christian leader who exemplifies the value of good preparation. A biblically prepared Christian leader is a person of spiritual authority, capable of building and taking care of the church of the Lord. For Orlando E. Costas, the mission “has as its ultimate purpose to teach faith in a given context in order to train and inform witnesses of the Kingdom and make them instruments of its transforming power.”⁸ This interpretation provides a sound foundation for the development sought among the churches in Cuba.

One of the main goals that Jesus fulfilled during his time among us was to train disciples who would take his work further. He called on twelve men with a specific mission: to be with Him, and to be sent out to preach; He chose them to make them useful. They should be with Him so he could train and prepare them. It was not enough to have a calling and a ministry to fulfill; it was also necessary to be with Him in order to learn as much as possible through witnessing His life, His works, and His teaching. This was the training period, the preparatory discipline for the ministry to which they were appointed. Training people to continue the work of others is fundamental to the development and fulfillment of a mission.

The current strength of the Cuban Church is in large part based on ministries birthed out of necessity and praxis as opposed to theory. As the church of Cuba develops, it is vital that this principal not be eroded. As Charles Von Engen writes in *Mission on the Way: Issues in Mission Theology*,

“...this perspective affirms the corporate nature of ministry formation, but locates it in the congregation rather than the monastery. The stress therefore is on ministry formation as a process, not a product. Programs of formation do not prepare people for ministry; rather, ministry can be enhanced by programs of formation. Thus ministry formation must take place among the people of God, not in the classroom”.

6 Costas, Orlando. *The Integrity of Mission. The Inner Life and Outreach of the Church*. San Francisco, California: Harper and Row, 1979, p. 12. Quoted in Escobar, Samuel, “Let's Advance in the Plenitude of Our Mission: a Latin American Commentary on the Mission of Saint Paul (Romans 15:14-33)” in *Mission on the Path. Essays in Honor of Orlando Costas*. Quito: F.T.L. 1992, p. 116.

7 The Pact of Lausanne, paragraph 2.

8 Costas, Orlando E., “Theological Education and Mission” in Padilla, René, *New Theological Alternatives to Education*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Nueva Creación, 1986, p. 19.

Final Recommendations

The current reality in Cuba calls for believers who feel the missionary call to spread the Word. As Jesus Christ reminded us, the preaching of the Gospel precedes all other works: “And this Gospel of the Kingdom will be preached in the entire world, for witness to all nations; and then the end will come” (Matthew 24:14).

Now, more than ever, a multitude of needs are rising from a world of misery and desperation that needs people of God who are well equipped to build the Church. The growing Cuban Church requires men and women who embrace spiritual healing and have access to sufficient training to remain strong in their faith to nurture and sustain God's work in the face of daunting challenges.

As the mission of the church obeys the urgency of people's needs, the Cuban Church has taken on the mandate to expand knowledge of the truth and provide an opportunity for salvation to all Cubans through fulfilling the mission across the island. The dedication of pioneers who opened the victorious path of the Gospel of peace along the roads of Cuba inspires a magnificent challenge for established, new, and future missionaries.

Foreign visitors often either over-romanticize or over-criticize their experiences in Cuba. A more accurate reality is that both substance and shallowness coexist in a strange dance developed by years of isolation, pernicious ideology, and scarcity. This unique condition calls for deep listening, careful reflection, and a solid understanding of the political, historical, and social background of Cuba well in advance of developing and implementing plans, programs, and projects.

In the midst of decades of hardship—or maybe because of it—the Church not only survived, but thrived. The revival that bloomed in the 1980s has grown into a spiritually vibrant and dynamic church that is self-propagating, self-governing, and self-theologizing. However, it is not completely self-supporting, as it depends in part on outside resources for bibles, leadership training, and infrastructure support. But even in the absence of support, make no mistake, the church in Cuba is alive and well. Thoughtful and conservative estimates place the number of practicing Cuban Evangelicals between 10%-15% of the island population, arguably stronger and larger on a per capita basis than that of the Chinese House Church movement.

The recent influx of politicians and pop culture is more than symbolic for Cuban citizens. It is confirmation that the nation will finally and inevitably open. Along with anticipation and hope, these changes raise questions that no one seems to have clear answers to. When and how will Cuba open? But, Cubans hold fast to a persistent and consistent desire to preserve the best of who they are and not bend to philosophical and cultural fads.

What will unfold as Cuba encounters and clashes with the realities of the 21st century? Cuban Church leaders are well aware of what is coming. They have immediate and grave concerns. They are not as worried about when Cuba will open, but about how that opening will affect individuals, society, and the church.

Some U.S. churches have already encouraging Cuban congregations to enter into a “relationship” with them. Many church leaders have witnessed fragmentation and discord as some of their more vulnerable leaders have fallen in step with dazzling American personalities with strong theological and methodological agendas.

At this critical moment in Cuban Church history, we must be very careful in our mission's response. It should be informed by what Charles Van Engen rightfully describes as a “narrative theology that

draws most richly from both the warp of the contextual particularity of God’s revelation at specific times and places, and the woof of the temporal universality of the mission of God, the ‘I am’ who was and is and is to come.”

In other words, we need to humbly enter God’s divine narrative for His Church in Cuba and avoid projecting and prescribing personal plans and agendas. We need to prayerfully discern how the Holy Spirit is moving and carefully listen to the Cuban Church and its leadership about how, if at all, we can or should be involved.

The perspective of insightful church leaders on the current reality is much richer, more nuanced, and more complex than any of us could ever imagine. They are caught in the midst of a conflicting and combative discourse on the future direction of the Cuban Church. We must continue to follow their lead in a respectful collaborative relationship, cultivating thoughtful understanding of and reflection on the present context as we strive to develop an informed and truly helpful response.

Paul Hiebert, a renowned missiological anthropologist, reminded us of the true nature of mission work:

“Mission outreach has always disturbed the peace of the church. Mission to the outside world challenges this comfortable order. It raises profound questions of cultural and historical differences. Who are these strangers we now encounter? What is the nature of these others and their religious beliefs? How can we communicate the Gospel to them faithfully and accurately without imposing our own cultural beliefs? What is the Gospel in their context? And what, in retrospect, is the Gospel in our context? These are critical questions that we are forced to ask when we enter into mission”.

No one knows when or how Cuba will continue to open, but it is certain that the North American Church plays an important role in its future. The preeminent question for all of us is whether we, as agencies, churches, and individuals, will be a source of positive change, or whether we will contribute to the confusion, fragmentation, and temptation that inevitably come with the human experience of globalization and all its accompanying challenges.

It is time to be very circumspect and diligent, not only to effectively serve God’s mission on the island itself, but also to gain insights into broader implications and questions Cuba raises for the church globally. We need to identify specific mission-related strategies in light of the inevitable political, social, and cultural changes that will arise as the possibilities of freer travel, commerce, and communication increase. We need to build healthy channels of communication between church leaders in Cuba, the United States, and around the world.

But most of all, we need to ask: How can we best serve the church in Cuba?



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