

Cubans Find Jesus in Great American Pastime

Baseball was the ideal evangelistic tool during a recent outreach in Havana

Baseball is more than a game in Cuba—it's a national obsession. A common sight in Havana is to see 8- to-12-year-old boys playing pickup games on vacant lots converted to sandlot ball fields.

Fidel Castro, a former baseball player himself, has used the sport to boost patriotism and allegiance to communist principles during his 43-year reign. On a trip to the island nation after Christmas, a team from the Global Youth Baseball Federation (GYBF) used the game for a radically different purpose: to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ.

More than 120 Cubans became Christians during the team's 10-day visit, according to GYBF founder Jeff Siegel, 47, a resident of Lawrenceville, Ga., near Atlanta. A Messianic Jew, Siegel played college ball at the University of Illinois and now organizes teams of current and former college players along with ex-pros to play games and conduct clinics in such countries as Israel, Germany and now Cuba.

After establishing good will through a common love for the game, team members engage in "friendship evangelism." In Cuba, team members handed out baseball cards with their pictures and baseball information on the front, and the plan of salvation, in Spanish, on the back. In addition to using baseball as a tool for evangelism, Siegel hopes his ministry helps "strengthen Jewish roots" in the churches he partners with.

One key objective for his ministry is to always work with local pastors and missionaries.

“Our part is to point people to Jesus but also to point them to their own pastor,” Siegel said. “We’ll be their friends while we’re there, but the pastor is the guy who’s there with them every day.”

According to Open Doors International, about 5 percent of Cubans are practicing Roman Catholics, and an estimated 10 percent are evangelical or Pentecostal. Atheism abounds, but Cubans are increasingly open to the gospel. Siegel said he was impressed by the team’s evangelistic efforts despite their need to avoid government suspicion.

“When you know that God’s gone before you, you have it in your mind what you think will happen, but then God does exceedingly abundantly above what you could ask or think,” he told Charisma.

Among those who became Christians was an 18-year-old outfielder who likely will be a pro player in the United States; a 64-year-old man, well-known as a coach in Cuba, who coaches the junior National team; an umpire who said he was divorced and an atheist; and a coach of one of the teams GYBF played—the Havana Alamar team—and his wife.

The older coach, Emilio Narrajo, played minor league ball in the United States years ago and speaks fluent English. After receiving Christ, he was so excited he continually asked questions to learn more about the Bible and enthusiastically volunteered to translate so GYBF team members could share the gospel with other Cubans.

Narrajo, who told Charisma he worked with New York Yankee's pitcher Orlando "El Duque" Hernández when he was a Cuban youth player, said he will now teach Jesus along with baseball as he works with other Cuban youth.

The GYBF team included former major league pitcher Marty Clary, former minor league pitcher Bob Harold, and current and former players from Lee University in Cleveland, Tenn.

Clary, who pitched for the Atlanta Braves in 1987, 1989 and 1990, said he'd made many baseball missions trips in the United States, Venezuela and elsewhere during his entire career, but the GYBF trip to Cuba was distinct because of the follow-up with new believers.

"Global, I think, takes it to the next level," Clary said. "If you're ever going to have some long-term effect, you need to have a local church discipling and growing churches."

Clary was surprised by the warmth of the Cuban people and the freedom the team had to share the gospel. "God just seemed to open this place up and make just about every place we were an opportunity to share Christ."

While the team played games, Rob White of Rob White Ministries led a seminar for pastors in the Havana area.

"They're hungry for the truth," White said. "The real need in Cuba is for leaders. While we'll win people to the Lord, the exciting thing to me is that we are going to be able to hand them off to someone who can disciple them in the truth," he said.

Richard Daigle