

Smuggling Christ Into Cuba

Inside the communist nation, Christians are quietly sharing their faith.

In a remote Cuban town, believers in a small house church gathered around a desperately ill 10-year-old boy. Canadian missionary Gary Clow gently laid hands on the child, whose skin had turned a deathly yellow, and asked God to heal him.

“As we prayed, I raised a hand heavenward and experienced what felt like a surge of electricity pass through my body,” Clow recalls.

The next day, the boy’s father asked Clow if he felt anything unusual while praying over his son. He explained that his son—who had a liver disease—felt power coursing through him “as if his entire body was being cleansed.”

Today, the boy is completely healed.

God’s power is being unleashed in Cuba—the island nation off the coast of Florida that since 1959 has stood as a communist outpost, ruled by its notorious president, Fidel Castro. Since the communist revolution, Castro’s atheistic regime has tried to stifle Christianity. For many years, government suppression seemed to be working. To the outside world, at least, Christianity in Cuba appeared to be dead.

But today, as Castro faces health battles, the church in Cuba is thriving—full of faith, evangelistic zeal and the Holy Spirit’s power. In one of the most dramatic turnarounds in church history, missionaries report astonishing church growth accompanied by miraculous signs and healings.

Clow, a missionary with World Team, travels to Cuba—a nation of 11 million people—several times a year to encourage and strengthen house churches. He encounters believers who trek miles on foot to share the gospel and look forward to the day they are free to go as missionaries to other lands.

The church has grown so rapidly in the last 15 years that the island's communist officials have been caught off guard. It's difficult to find a village without an evangelical church. Periodically, pastors are intimidated, interrogated and imprisoned. Christians are routinely discriminated against in employment and schools. But persecution has simply strengthened the church.

Oklahoma-based The Voice of the Martyrs tells the story of Pedro (not his real name), a Cuban Christian jailed for preaching the gospel in public. Behind bars, Pedro exasperated his jailers by continuing to preach. "He's a greater menace in jail than outside," they complained.

When the police released him with a stern warning not to talk about Jesus, the stubborn evangelist walked directly to the next town to carry on where he left off.

Building Casas Culto

Pedro personifies the resolve and passion of Cuban believers—men, women and children of courage who are spearheading one of the most remarkable revivals of our era.

Prayer is the key to Cuba's Christian awakening, says Hector Hunter, general superintendent of the Assemblies of God (AG) of Cuba. "I believe from the depths of my heart that there is revival in Cuba today because of the prayers of believers around the world," he says.

The AG is the largest evangelical presence on the island, with several hundred established churches and thousands of house churches or cell groups, known as casas culto. With an estimated 10,000 to 15,000 casas culto meeting in private homes throughout the island, many Cubans are introduced to Christianity through the house-church movement.

Because of the sensitive political climate in Cuba, missionaries tread carefully when talking about their work.

Almost all of those Charisma interviewed for this story wished to remain anonymous, fearful of a backlash. “We walk with a lot of caution because they pay the price for our indiscretions,” one Pentecostal leader says.

The price can be high. In recent months, evangelical and Pentecostal churches have been closed or their meeting venues destroyed. Persecution and material hardship feed the spiritual hunger of Cuba’s people, according to New York-based Pastor Jay (full name withheld for security reasons), a missionary to the island.

“Their poverty leaves them no choice but to trust God completely for food and other necessities,” he says. “If Cuban believers do not cling to God, they die.”

For several years, Pastor Jay has led teams to Cuba to train the native leadership of a burgeoning charismatic movement. “The local church leaders travel for hours by foot, by mule, or standing on cattle trucks to get to our training,” he reports.

Like Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego—the men who risked everything amid tyranny, as recorded in Daniel 3—Cuban believers place their trust fully in God. “This is their time in history,” Pastor Jay continues. “They believe they’ve been equipped by God through suffering to take the gospel to the hardest places of the world.”

Without steady employment, many Cuban Christians live hand-to-mouth. Yet one local missionary says they exude joy that many believers in the free world don’t possess.

“We’d say they have absolutely nothing to be happy about, but they have the joy that surpasses all understanding,” he says.

Persecution of the church is intensifying, he says, citing recent laws that require all house churches to register with the government. In his twilight years, Castro is reasserting

control, Cuba watchers say, reversing the relaxed religious policies of the 1990s and steering the country back to an orthodox communist model.

Directive 43 and Resolution 46—introduced last year—require house churches to submit detailed information about the pastor and everybody living in the house. The rules prohibit worship in a home not registered for religious activity, and authorities have the power to supervise all “legal” worship.

Under the regulations, house churches cannot meet more than three times a week. That’s a major hang-up in Cuba, where Christians meet every day, sometimes twice a day, to pray.

Furthermore, Resolution 46 prohibits foreign missionaries from having any involvement with house churches without government approval. “It’s as if the government is afraid of the church because it’s so well-organized,” another missionary told Charisma.

Certainly, the communist regime has seen the power of the church at work. Scores of government officials have come to faith in Christ, giving up the security of their positions to join the ranks of impoverished believers.

Many missionaries view the latest crackdown as a desperate attempt to isolate the church and halt its growth. But it appears to be having the opposite effect.

“The Cuban church has gone through a long history of persecution, and [persecution] has contributed to its health,” notes a missionary who has ministered in Cuba since 1999. “Historically, when the church is persecuted there is a true refining process. Cuba is desperately in need of salt and light—and the Cuban church is truly salt and light.”

Other missionaries agree. “There’s a purity about the Cuban church,” remarks one denominational leader. “It’s a church that really ‘gets it.’”

Experiencing the Miraculous

The tremendous faith of Cuban believers is evident from miracles that occur across the evangelical spectrum. For instance, a Baptist missionary prayed for an elderly woman who explained she had bad knees. "She stood, walked around a bit, and told us her knees felt better but not perfect," he told Charisma.

"We prayed again, believing that if God had begun something He would finish it. Then I did something which in hindsight seems a little dramatic. I said to her in Spanish: 'Rise up and walk!'"

The woman jumped from her chair and ran around the room. Only then did her son reveal she had been lame for 10 years. "I don't know if I'd have had the faith to pray for healing if I'd known that beforehand," the missionary admits.

One rural congregation had no money for a building. Trusting that God would provide, the members began digging the foundation. Breaking ground, they struck something hard. As they unearthed the object, they discovered it was a box filled with gold coins—enough to fund their new church building.

Although the Cuban government does issue visas to American missionaries, Christians from the U.S. are viewed with suspicion. Russ, an independent missionary from Florida, was interrogated by the secret police.

Supported by his charismatic church, Russ (full name withheld for security reasons) has made 40 trips to Cuba in the last 12 years, working with native church leaders and mission groups. "I live and breathe Cuba," the 41-year-old father of three says. "I've traveled all over Latin America, and I've seen nothing to compare with the move of the Spirit in Cuba."

Like other missionaries to Cuba, Russ distinctly heard God call him to minister there. "The Lord laid Cuba on my heart,"

he explains. "I was flying over Cuba and looked out at the island when I heard the Lord say, 'One day, you will be preaching there.'"

In the midst of the island's sustained revival, the commitment and fire of local believers is inspirational. "They've done such an incredible job of evangelizing their own country that they've run out of space," Russ says.

Mainline churches, such as the Methodists, also are being filled with the Spirit and experiencing revival. Christian youth of all denominations—including young people who used to spread communist ideologies—now have a passion to go overseas with the gospel.

Even Castro's family has been influenced by the island's Christian awakening. One of Castro's nephews reportedly attends one of the most dynamic churches on the island—and has, according to one missionary, actually invited the president along to church.

But Satan isn't giving up without a fight. Realizing the emptiness of atheism, Castro's regime has erected idols and images relating to traditional Cuban witchcraft—called Santería—at the entrances to many towns.

Santería, similar to Haitian voodoo, is a variation of West African spiritism, intermingled with aspects of Roman Catholicism. The Cuban government supports Santería under the guise of "national culture."

Cubans steeped in witchcraft for generations are being set free as they turn to Christ. Yet as the church grows, spiritual warfare intensifies. One charismatic missionary put it like this: "The devil is just plain angry."

The missionary, who has a sports evangelism ministry in Cuba, tells of a U.S. major league baseball star who had a brush with evil spiritual forces on the island. The player, from a

Presbyterian background, came into contact with a Santería practitioner.

That night, he awoke in a sweat, convinced he had been visited by a demon. The unnerving experience opened his eyes to the reality of spiritual forces at work in the invisible realm, including those bent on harming the church.

In the midst of such dark oppression, though, there is no stopping the Cuban church. One pastor reflects: "We will just have to be on our knees more, shed a few more tears perhaps, but we will never turn back."

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In the Shadow of Fidel

The Cuban government has clamped down on churches in recent years.

Cuban authorities are clamping down on house churches—a fast-growing movement that President Fidel Castro's regime considers to be out of control.

Earlier this year, the pastor of one of the largest evangelical churches on the island was forced to leave the country after authorities threatened to imprison him. According to an American missionary, the pastor's family was granted refugee status in the U.S.

Across the island, the Cuban government makes it difficult for churches to meet. Those awaiting approval to put up a building have erected crude shelters, but officials order congregations to tear them down. Undeterred, believers meet in the open, even in the hot sun or driving rain.

One church of 300 members was told it could no longer meet in a yard—even though congregants had gathered there for five years. Now the church's only option is to cram as many as possible into the tiny living room of a nearby house.

A missionary highlighted the situation facing a native Cuban evangelist. "Officials have threatened him and been very vulgar," the missionary says. "He was called in by the Communist Party, which can be a very worrying experience."

Oklahoma-based The Voice of the Martyrs reported Cuba's secret police interrogated a Pentecostal pastor and confiscated a small printing press they described as "dangerous."