

Could Cuba's Leadership Change Open Door to Gospel?

A rumor began circulating late last month that the U.S. State Department was considering removing Cuba from the U.S. list of countries that support terrorism.

The story drew instant denials from a government spokeswoman who affirmed that annual reviews of the state sponsor of terrorism list were the norm, but she noted again that a policy change for Cuba was not in the offing.

Being on that list, countries like Cuba, Iran, Syria and Sudan are subject to the harshest sanctions the U.S. can impose, including travel bans, financial transactions and trade.

The whirlwind of this speculation came days before an unexpected announcement from Cuba's presidential palace: Raúl Castro announced plans to retire in 2018. Castro's decision not to run again means ending almost 60 years of Castro rule in the country.

Bright Hope International President/CEO C.H. Dyer says most people seem to be biding their time instead of reacting to the announcement.

"2018 is a long ways away. I think the predominant thought among believers—and even the secular media—is, 'Well, it could happen, [or] it could not.'"

Castro's retirement doesn't mean a Castro-styled influence will disappear. During his address, Castro indicated his hand-picked successor: current vice president, 52-year-old Miguel Diaz-Canel.

Dyer says it's kind of a foreshadowing, [meaning:] "'We're planning for our ideology to continue beyond the Castros.'"

However, it was under the pressure from the Castro regime that the church blossomed, Dyer notes. "The church has grown under the Castros, under persecution, under trying not to help the church grow. God has been providential over what has happened."

Still, some analysts wonder if retirement is just another of the reforms Raúl Castro began implementing to catapult the country into the 21st century. Despite assurances that Cuba would not abandon socialism, Castro indicated plans for two-term limits and age caps for political offices, most of which will have to go through a referendum.

It all boils down to more change ... apparently. Still, the 632 church planters Bright Hope supports don't have time to get bogged down in the "what ifs." They've got more pressing matters for today, says Dyer.

"Believers down there aren't really paying much attention to this. They're just saying, 'We believe in God. We're going forward. We're faithful. We are going to live out our faith regardless of who's in power or what they do or don't do to us.'"

However, adds Dyer, "We cannot bring all of Bright Hope to Cuba yet. We can't do relief work (except for the disasters like Hurricane Sandy), and economic development certainly can't be done."

In spite of the limitations, Bright Hope has helped to rebuild churches, provide hundreds of bicycles for pastors, and support pastor-training workshops and evangelistic Christmas dinners that fed thousands. These holistic programs have created a solid base from which the church is set to explode when Cuba is opened, he excitedly notes.

Dyer says pastors "are in house churches that are in villages and tiny towns across Cuba and are witnessing, sharing their faith, fully devoted to preaching the whole Gospel and winning

people to the Lord.”

Cuban church leaders are predicting that in the nine- to 18-month period after Cuba’s political sanctions are lifted, thousands of people will be exposed to the gospel for the first time. In fact, last July Bright Hope’s church partners in Cuba held their first outdoor evangelistic meeting in recent history with 10,000 people reported in attendance. It’s never happened before that way, and it’s a good indicator of what to expect.

Along with your prayers, the huge need for the pastors and missionaries are bicycles. Bright Hope wants to supply 600 bicycles to Christian workers. Change is coming to Cuba—just maybe not from the political realm. In Cuba, a bicycle equals souls, which means life change.