

Cuba: From Revolution to Revival

"You look green," Daniel González's friend teased as their train rumbled through the Cuban countryside. But the seminary student wasn't going to let the stomach flu keep him from his ministry assignment.

González was headed for the port city of Batabano to catch a ferry to Cuba's Isle of Youth, 90 miles south of Havana. Little did he know it would be both the worst and most spiritually fruitful trip of his life.

By the time the train arrived in Batabano, González was so sick he could barely walk. His friend helped him as far as the pier then left for his own ministry assignment elsewhere on the mainland. The ferry wouldn't leave for hours. But he continued to feel worse. Exhausted, he fell asleep on the ground.

Eventually, a young man woke him up and asked if he needed help. González explained he was traveling to the island but was so sick he hadn't yet purchased passage on the ferry.

"Give me your ID, I'm going to buy you a ticket," the man named Karell offered. González was desperate to reach his destination, so he handed the stranger his ID and money and went back to sleep. Karell woke him when it was time to go and practically carried him onboard.

The four-hour trip across the Gulf of Batabano was pure misery for González. His stomach was already churning from the virus. Combined with rolling seas, heat and the smell of several hundred sweaty bodies packed like sardines, "it was a horrible, horrible journey," Gonzalez says. He eventually fell asleep on the deck.

At about 1:30 a.m., González was awakened by the drunken laughter of a group of Cuban students. Karell was among them, headed to the Isle of Youth on vacation to visit family. González somehow summoned the strength to try to share the gospel with the students, but they weren't listening.

"I was so sick that preaching the gospel in that state wasn't very appealing," González says.

The ferry arrived at Nueva Gerona, the main city on the Isle of Youth, early in the morning. González was still quite ill and was beginning to wonder if he'd made a mistake by coming. He found his way to the park bench where he usually spent the night during his trips there.

"I still didn't have a permanent place to sleep on the island," González explains. There was nothing left to do but pray. "Lord, heal me. I need to feel good. I've come all the way here," he pleaded. God answered.

"I think it was the only time in my life that the Lord has healed me instantly," he says. "I suddenly felt strong. I felt good. I bought some food and went for a walk, as usual."

González had been working there for many months and was getting discouraged. He typically began the visits there by climbing a large hill that overlooked the city.

"From up there, Nueva Gerona could fit in my hands. I would pray for each neighborhood," González says. "That's how my work began on the island: by evangelizing door to door."

But that day González didn't have the strength for the climb. The voice of one of his mentors, an older Cuban pastor named Antonio Pérez, echoed in his head. "How many shoes have you worn out?" Pérez used to ask young seminary students. "A pastor has to walk."

So González started walking. He didn't know exactly where he

was going, but he was trusting the Holy Spirit to lead him. González ended up in a neighborhood he'd never visited. He picked a building at random, went to the third floor, knocked on a door and got the surprise of his life. It was Karell—the student who had helped him board the ferry.

“What are you doing here?” Karell asked, incredulous. Without missing a beat, González explained he'd come to finish the gospel presentation he'd started on the boat. And there, in the stairwell outside his parents' apartment, Karell made Jesus his Lord and Savior.

González and Karell started sharing the gospel together on the Isle of Youth. House churches began to form in Nueva Gerona. In 2012, Karell became pastor of First Baptist Church of Nueva Gerona, a congregation of more than 400 members. Today, it is part of a network of traditional and house churches spread across the Isle of Youth.

“I never underestimate divine appointments, those moments that God gives you providentially to meet people of peace,” González says.

González spent 10 years as a missionary on the Isle of Youth. He currently is pastor of Santo Suarez Baptist Church in Havana, which has started 60 house churches.