

# Despite Oppressive Regime, Cuba Church-Planting Movement Remains Strong

The recent storm took everyone by surprise. It turned streets in Havana, Cuba, into rivers, lifting manhole covers on water bubbling from drainage pipes unable to contain the surge racing to the sea. In Vueltas, 180 miles to the east, rural roads turned to mush, making it impossible to travel from surrounding villages into the city for the constitution of nine new churches.

“But the Cuban church is resilient,” said International Mission Board President Tom Elliff on his first visit to the island nation this December. “It is like the Royal Palm [a symbol of the island], which jettisons its fronds when a major storm rakes the land and can bend horizontal to the ground and still survive.”

The new churches are a reality, whether Elliff, IMB representatives and Cuban Baptist leaders could participate in their constitution or not.

## Persevering Faith

Revolution in 1959 moved Cuba from a dictatorship to socialism. Its economy faltered during the transition. There were hard times. People struggled. Churches were closed and pastors imprisoned.

There was a time “it looked like everything was over,” says Hermes Soto, rector of the Baptist Seminary in Havana. In 1965, the majority of the pastors were imprisoned and a large number of seminary students and young church leaders put in re-education camps. Soto, too, spent five years in a labor camp. Despite the crisis, the churches remained open under lay

leadership.

Yet even in these hard times, the Cuban Baptist commitment to international missions remained strong, and they continued to participate in the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering for International Missions.

In 1991, the Cuban Constitution was changed, making discrimination based on religious belief unlawful. The government was still reticent to allow construction of new church buildings. Officials said, "Open your homes."

"But then the churches woke up," Soto says. "We had to discover how to react in response to this miracle."

From 1960 to 1990, Cuban Baptists started 28 churches. From 1990 to 1993, they started 28 more. After 1993, the number exploded in a church-planting movement seen in few other parts in the world. Today, an estimated 900 churches and 6,500-plus missions and house churches can be found across the island. And Cuban Baptists are sending missionaries to other parts of the world.

"I found it surprising, almost shocking," Elliff says, "to find some of the greatest expressions of faith within 100 miles of the United States."

Elliff proposes an expanded relationship between Cuban and Southern Baptists.

"The thing that astonished me is how much they have to teach us," he says, "not how much we have to teach them."

"We can benefit from the example of their undying faith ... the strength of their faith," Elliff continues. "They can benefit from our resources ... our years of history in missions. Together, we could be a powerful influence for Christ throughout the entire world."

Sitting with men God rescued from the most difficult of

situations and seeing how they have moved on from there has had a profound effect on Elliff.

“It has changed my life,” he says. “I will not view the Christian faith the same ... ever again.”