

Report: Cuban Government Still Persecuting Christians

Much has been written and said about the new season of openness for Christians in Cuba. But those who are able to speak freely say that the **persecution** is still there, though it is now better concealed.

Since the government redefined Cuba as a “secularist” nation from an “atheist” nation in 1992, evangelicals have experienced an era of tolerance, where they meet without permission, but are largely ignored by the government. As an example of this tolerance, one church of around 1,000 members has given birth to 18 independent **house churches**. These new congregations range in size from 300 to 700 people.

But while few Christians have gone to prison for their faith in recent years, the Cuban government still mistreats, marginalizes and openly opposes Christians, especially those who live according to their biblical convictions.

“The persecution now is a closed persecution; it’s hidden,” said a Voice of the Martyrs’ (VOM) field worker. Another Christian worker on the island characterized it as “discreet.”

“The pastors tell us they have an enemy without a face. They aren’t confronted directly. Sometimes they don’t know who has infiltrated the church [to inform on them].”

One Cuban pastor, “David,” shared his experience with VOM this week. “Don’t be fooled by appearances,” he said. “Many brothers won’t speak about this because of fear. If they speak out in Cuba, there will be consequences. They’ll be expelled from the country or falsely accused of being counterrevolutionaries.”

David became a believer when he was 15 years old. His family

kicked him out of the house, and he was forced to work as a field hand to sustain himself. He didn't give up his faith though, and at 22 he became a pastor. At 57, he's lived through the decades in which many Cuban Christians left the island and the church was whittled down to a faithful few. He also led his church during times of **revival**. But "if you want to pastor in Cuba, you cannot say anything against the government," he said.

He has been interrogated more than 20 times, and humiliated, beaten and threatened. His interrogators blamed him for the growth of his church, accusing him of using "secret indoctrination methods" from the United States. For these offences, he was forced to spend six months cleaning public outhouses every day. He was also prohibited from leaving the island for more than four years. The officials in charge never told him why his exit permits were never granted. There was always an excuse: "We lost the paper work!" or "We never got your application."

When David was finally able to obtain a telephone connection for his house, the first phone call he received was from the state security office, warning him that they knew his phone number and they knew all about him. They even described the color of the books in his office, and told him, "We can make something happen to you if we want."

Another way the **persecution** appears is through the lack of Bibles on the island. There has not been a Christian bookstore on the island for 53 years, and Bibles are only imported through churches that are members of the Ecumenical Council (an association of churches that collaborates with the government and includes only 10 percent of all churches). David's church is not part of the Ecumenical Council. David could never join this group that directs their members to praise the socialist revolution and the Cuban state. And so, his church members never have enough Bibles.

Recently, three officials appeared at a Sunday service at David's church. They warned him that an application he'd filed to build a parking lot for the church would never be approved. In fact, they told him that they were going to appropriate his property and use it for a store. "I got firm with them," David said. "I told them they couldn't do that because we were under the protection of the **Holy Spirit**. And they backed off."

But there is also opposition on other fronts, too. A neighbor of the church property, which is also where David lives, has been threatening them. "This guy is into **witchcraft** and he's against us. He complains about the noise from our services, and when pastors come and park in front of my house, he comes and lets the air out of their tires," said David. The man is running a signature campaign to get the church kicked out of the neighborhood. "I don't know what will happen with that," said David.

In addition, the front of the church is where the authorities have chosen to place a large dumpster that serves the garbage needs of the entire neighborhood. "It's been there for about 10 years," said David. The dumpster is often the receptacle for the carcasses of cats and other animals. The city also refuses to provide natural gas service for cooking, though all the other neighbors have service. Denying Christians access to utilities is yet another way the government simply makes life difficult for Christians.

They are denied rights and opportunities. Christians are often let go from jobs, or not allowed to apply for a certain status of jobs. The best jobs are awarded to Communist Party members. Children are required to renounce Christ and embrace communism in school. Christian young people are often not allowed to graduate from high school or enter university.

After 35 years of serving in this environment, David has several stress-related health problems. His doctors have advised him to quit pastoring. Other pastors he knows are

suffering from depression. Following the Lord has been far from easy, but the stories from the book of Acts have sustained him throughout the years, along with the ways he has seen God working through miracles and healings. Would he like to leave Cuba? "I desire it with all my heart," he said. "But I'm waiting for God's direction. When he says I can go, I'll go. But for now I'm working for the Lord with all my heart."

Is there persecution in Cuba? Certainly, it is less than before. But David and many of God's servants on the island experience daily the truth about persecution in Cuba. The enemy of the gospel may be better hidden, but he is still there. God's grace sustains them hourly as they confront the faceless enemy.