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NEW FRONTIER

First Frontier Cuba Network Position Paper



INTRODUCTION

For much of the twentieth century and still today, the allure of Cuba's intentional isolation and preserved cultural aesthetic has piqued the interest of the world, from politicians to tourists to industries and even to the global Church. Cuba remains a truly iconic and modern standard bearer as one of the last socialist countries following a Communist ideology. With its history entrenched in successive conquests followed by attempts at stability and freedom, Cuba, despite its diversity of natural beauty, culture, and history, has long been a country closely acquainted with the reality of tension, unrest, and instability. Since the rise of the socialist agenda under Castro, Cuba has experienced a turbulent past that still remains largely part of its present and could potentially impinge upon its future. This remaining socialist legacy has contributed to a country with little access to an increasingly modern and global world. Behind its closed doors is a country surviving scarcity after the fall of the Soviet Union. Over the years, Cuba has maintained a unique and sustained geo-political environment. For example, Cuba reports that it has one of the highest literacy rates in the Western Hemisphere¹ and the one of the highest percentages of physicians per capita.² This kind of success has caused the world

to keep a close eye. Only until recently, Cuba and the world have seen evidence of hope and experienced an anticipation of freedom.

In 2014, the world watched as conversations began between the United States and Cuba, signaling the beginning of new era of direct diplomacy. These early conversations initiated a path towards the easing of restrictions and continued conciliatory attempts between the two countries. Furthermore, in 2015 and 2016, relations between the United States and Cuba experienced an unprecedented wave of stronger diplomacy, economic progress, and the opening, albeit it slow, of Cuba. This ever-increasing diplomatic relationship between the United States and Cuba is setting the stage for an exhilarating and much anticipated era of freedom. Under the Obama administration, the two countries worked to mitigate restrictions on remittances and travel, which permitted U.S. citizens to travel to Cuba for religious and educational purposes and allowed Cuban Americans to send unlimited funds into Cuba. In early 2016, President Obama took another momentous step towards normalization, easing more than fifty years of bilateral tensions, when he visited Havana in what was the first trip to Cuba by a sitting U.S. president since Calvin Coolidge

¹ <http://world.bymap.org/LiteracyRates.html>

² http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/explainer/2007/02/whats_with_all_the_cuban_doctors.html

in 1928. Later in 2016, Obama further loosened U.S. travel and financial restrictions with regard to Cuba, and commercial U.S. airlines began offering service between the countries for the first time in more than fifty years.³ With these events and the anticipation of greater numbers of foreign visitors and investments, Cuba has begun to prepare for the coming wave of change and the challenges that come with it. With the United States' recent election of Donald Trump, only time will tell if these changes will continue, but the inevitable move to openness is in motion.

Inevitably, when closed countries open, the Western Church is not far behind, with the promise of financial and material aid and a legion of short-term mission teams. Much like after the opening of the Soviet Union during the late eighties and throughout much of the nineties, an unprecedented amount of ministries, churches, para-churches, and Christian organizations flooded into the country and region. The unanticipated removal of political and religious barriers in East Central Europe and the Soviet Union led to a sharp increase in the number of ministries from abroad working in the region: from 150 in 1982, to 311 in 1989, to 691 in 1993, to nearly 1000 in 1995.⁴ Specifically, the United States invaded the region with programs of all kinds, which in many cases, were developed in and for a Western context. The hope was that these programs would be effective, well received, and celebrated. During this period of time more than twenty years ago, much ministry activity took place, but what lasting change remains? Despite

the best of intentions, much of the funding, resources, and attention was short term in nature and did not aim to build and support the long-term infrastructure of the indigenous local church. A few short years after the dust had settled from this ministry invasion, it was apparent that much of what Western missions had contributed had been shortsighted, self-serving, and non-sustainable. In retrospect, many indigenous church and mission leaders wonder what could have been done with a more intentional, strategic, and coordinated response. With regard to the Cuban Church and the country's eminent opening, if not intentionally avoided, history through the Western, and more acutely the North American Church, could repeat itself.

Today, Cuba finds itself and her church in unprecedented times; a new frontier with many exciting opportunities and equally daunting challenges. In anticipation of its opening, what is needed of the global Church is to strategically align itself behind a concerted response that builds upon the foundation of the already existent Cuban Church through extending a needed structure and necessary resources. Unlike the Soviet missiological experience, which had a weak, persecuted, and in many cases, uneducated Church, The Cuban Church is rich in leadership, spiritual vibrancy and is growing numerically and influentially. When, not if, Cuba opens, ministry organizations and churches will flood into the country, which could potentially, though unintentionally, lead to harm of the Cuban Church.

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³ Claire Felter, Brianna Lee, James McBride, and Danielle Renwick, Council on Foreign Relations, February 3, 2017, accessed April 5 2017, <http://www.cfr.org/cuba/us-cuba-relations/p111113>.

⁴ Mark Elliott, Sharyl Corrado "The Protestant Missionary Presence in the Former Soviet Union," Religion, State and Society 25, no. 4 (1997): 335, accessed April 5, 2017, https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/rss/25-4_333.pdf.

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As an unprecedented opening of Cuba is near, it is vital for the North American Church to understand both the historical and present context of the Cuban Church before charging headstrong towards its new frontier. A quick glance at Cuba's history shows an active and responsive church despite significant hardships and setbacks. It is the enduring spirit of the Cuban Church that has propagated growth and stability despite being under close eye and scrutiny by the national government. In the 1950s, much of the Cuban Church stood in support of the Cuban revolution by sending clergy to serve in the military and providing basic resources of food and aid to soldiers. The church stood behind literacy and agricultural programs and supported the regime's pledge to eliminate corruption in the government. The next decade marked the beginning of harsher restrictions on religious liberties with the rise of the Castro regime. Tensions between the arising order and the Evangelical church grew heated as the regime precluded many congregations from any religious activity. Many foreign missionaries left Cuba during this time, leaving locals with limited theological literacy and a lack of resources to lead the Cuban Church. Still, their vision persisted in the midst of an unfavorable political and cultural environment, and the Church became a powerful social force within the nation.

Despite its isolation and varying levels of restrictions, the Cuban Church has not only survived, but also thrived. A revival that began in the 1980s has produced a spiritually vibrant and dynamic Church that is self-propagating, self-governing and self-theologizing. We cannot

say it is completely self-supporting as it depends on outside resourcing for its Bibles, leadership training and infrastructure support. Even if all of their resources were taken away, make no mistake; the Cuban Church would be alive and well.⁵ Nineteen ninety marked a distinct change in the growth and health of churches in Cuba. As a direct result of changing relations between church and state within the Cuban government, the Cuban Church expanded, and over the last twenty- five years, the Cuban Church has continued to grow and develop in its own unique way. However, due to consistent government and national pressures, restrictions, hardships, and controls, the denominational landscape is currently disparate and bifurcated. The church and its denominations have valued individual and denominational agendas above collaboration and synergy.

The bifurcation among denominations could pose a weakness in the light of changes indeed to come with the country's opening. In response, many Protestant and Evangelical leaders in Cuba have agreeably affirmed, "their united vision is to rebuild broken spiritual walls and bring forth a unified Christian Church. They are committed to helping communities weather the storms of the present and future political and social transition, and to promoting and embracing social justice, family values, moral principles, and an abiding faith in the Lord Jesus Christ."⁶

One growing and vastly important aspect of the Cuban Church is the House Church. Under the Cuban government, house churches are now recognized as a new style of religious

⁵Teo Babun, Rev. Carlos Miguel Gonzalez, Rob Hoskins, Dr. Marcos Antonio Ramos, Dr. Norberto Quesada Rodriguez, Stephan N. Tchividjian, "Building a Healthy Relationship with Churches in Cuba" (paper presented at the 2016 First Frontier Network Symposium, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, November 2, 2016).

⁶Teo Babun, Rev. Carlos Miguel Gonzalez, Rob Hoskins, Dr. Marcos Antonio Ramos, Dr. Norberto Quesada Rodriguez, Stephan N. Tchividjian, "Building a Healthy Relationship with Churches in Cuba" (paper presented at the 2016 First Frontier Network Symposium, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, November 2, 2016).

gathering based on the number of persons in attendance. The flourishing of house churches, even under the government's eye, has served as a strong strategy for growth and development. "As a grassroots response to the pressures of expansion and the difficulty of raising funds to build new church buildings, house churches provide a solution to the problems of space for the development of congregations. They allow for unrestrained growth and flexibility, and they substantially reduce the burden of material costs in establishing a new house of Worship."⁷

Indubitably, the current reality of the Church in Cuba is one that is thriving; yet challenged by denominational barriers and limited use of information and communications. Church leaders have expressed that there is a present lack of theological training and a need

for capacity building. Additionally, Santeria, an Afro-Caribbean religion, threatens the church, which is widespread and deeply embedded into the culture, lives, and mindsets of vast numbers of Cuban citizens. According to a 2012 census, approximately 10% of Cubans identify themselves with African ancestry.⁸ In addition, the government has not established clear and defined boundaries outlining permissible behavior and practices, which causes challenges for the Cuban Church's freedom to worship and persecution for religious activity. The Cuban Church also must address the deficits left by the Cuban family unit, which include migration, separation, suffering and an absence of values. On the one side of the spectrum of family, youth are eager and excited to express themselves and long to have new spaces for interaction



⁷ Teo Babun, Rev. Carlos Miguel Gonzalez, Rob Hoskins, Dr. Marcos Antonio Ramos, Dr. Norberto Quesada Rodriguez, Stephan N. Tchividjian, "Building a Healthy Relationship with Churches in Cuba" (paper presented at the 2016 First Frontier Network Symposium, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, November 2, 2016).

⁸ The Central Intelligence Agency, "Central America and Caribbean: Cuba," CIA World FactBook, accessed April 5, 2017, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/cu.html>.

and learning, while at the same time the elderly need the care and attention they deserve. The Cuban Church must be equipped to respond to all of these needs. Despite its challenges, the Cuban Church is arguably stronger and larger on a per capita basis than experiences with the Chinese House Church movement. Thoughtful and conservative estimates place the number of practicing Cuban Evangelicals between 10%-15% of the island population, with the majority being Pentecostal.⁹

Cuba is not entirely a new frontier; there is a vibrant and well established church, which deserves a best-concerted effort to support. With all of its opportunities, it does have its challenges, which require a more strategic and updated response. Once again, unlike that of the Soviet Union, the response for Cuba should be charged with collaboration, longevity and grace, and filled with the leading and the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

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