Cuba’s spirited Protestants: Church-growth challenges

by Paul Jeffrey in the December 8, 1999 issue

The taxi's motor died three times as the driver wound his way around the fallen trees and through the flooded streets of Havana. He was trying to get me back to my hotel before the worst of October's Hurricane Irene hit Cuba's capital. Each time the decrepit Lada—a Soviet version of a small Fiat—stalled, I climbed out to push it out of the deep water. And each time help appeared. Anonymous volunteers waded into the choppy waters, heads bowed against the gale, to help push the Lada to dry land. Once the mission was accomplished, they smiled and disappeared into the wet wind and flying branches.

Having lived through Hurricane Mitch in Central America, I was fascinated by the Cuban response to Irene. Although damage to crops and property—especially the rickety colonial buildings of Old Havana—was significant, loss of life was minimal. That only four died was a tribute to the organizational abilities of the Cuban people, who respond to hurricanes with the same discipline with which they have long prepared for a military invasion from across the Florida Straits. They showed the spirit of interpersonal solidarity that has also led them to send soldiers to Africa or doctors to Honduras. In a crisis, it all pays off.

A similar spirit characterizes Cuba's Protestants, whose numbers have grown dramatically in recent years. The island's Methodists, for example, have gone from 4,000 members five years ago to some 10,000 today, and another 4,000 people are enrolled in membership classes, according to Bishop Ricardo Pereira. Twenty years ago, the denomination's membership had dropped to only 1,600. Now, at the regional Presbyterian gathering I attended in Guines, a small town outside Havana, members showed up from new congregations that denominational officials hadn't even know existed. According to the government, the number of Protestant church buildings has doubled during the past eight years. In addition, more than 600 registered house churches are functioning, and hundreds of unregistered ones are officially tolerated. Historical Protestant as well as Pentecostal churches are growing.

Last June well over 100,000 Protestants of all types gathered in Havana's Revolution Square to celebrate this growth. During the preceding weeks, Protestants had gone door to door throughout the island, offering personal testimony to the power of their faith. They held big rallies in towns and cities all through Cuba, and then gathered in Havana to show that the pope's January 1998 mass wasn't the only way to publicly celebrate Christian faith on the island. President Fidel Castro attended, the government provided transportation for the celebrants, and the ceremony—as well as three regional rallies—was broadcast on state-run television. These church-sponsored celebrations were joyful gatherings that seldom lasted more than two hours. One government minister reportedly admitted that the government had a lot to learn from the church. State-sponsored mass rallies are often interminable affairs where people "are tortured for hours with long speeches."

While the state lent a hand, it was well-organized churchpeople who made the celebration happen. This is important to emphasize because it has become fashionable for outsiders to attribute the meteoric growth of Cuba's churches primarily to contextual factors. In the past decade, the Cuban state changed its status from official atheism to secularism, the Communist Party dropped the prohibition on religious belief for its members, and—at least officially—any work-place discrimination against believers has been halted by decree. One of the last socialist republics, Cuba has become a seller's market for those who offer meaning. The few Russians remaining in the country are rumored to be looking for tenants who can pay in dollars to rent space in Russia's towering, cathedral-like embassy in the Havana suburb of Miramar. Yesterday's ideological paradigm is morally bankrupt, and the church has been quick to step into the gap.

Furthermore, in marked contrast to the Communist Party officials of the first three decades of the Cuban Revolution, those of today see themselves as politicians rather than police in their relationship to religious communities. It's not an easy task for even the most skilled politicians; Catholic leaders in Cuba continue to push hard for recovering private schools and other institutional trappings of legitimacy, while groups like the Mormons and Moonies press for permission to enter the country. Even with their tolerance under fire, today's party officials are much more nuanced in response to religious groups, and frequently cooperate with them.

Yet while these factors have had an important effect on the Cuban religious scene, claiming a simple cause and effect between them and packed sanctuaries is misleading. Churches have grown not because of what the government has done,

but because of the hard work of faithful Christians trying to live out the gospel. When Mayra Gutiérrez, a high-ranking official in the Office for Religious Affairs of the Communist Party's Central Committee, was asked why churches are growing, she replied, "The churches are doing their work and doing it well." While Gutiérrez went on to acknowledge the role her office has played, she made clear that the Protestant churches are responsible for their own growth.

Signs of this can be seen all over the island. In Matanzas, for example, the Evangelical Theological Seminary is packed with new students who are rethinking the role of the Cuban church, developing pastoral styles and theological understandings that respond more adequately to their context than traditional models do. They're designing new liturgies and working with local neighborhood groups to develop an educational program encouraging environmental hygiene. Students and faculty are seeking to embrace what it is authentically to be both Cuban and Christian in the new context. "We're weaving our Cuban culture into how we do liturgy, into the hymns we sing and write, into who we are as a church," says Ofelia Ortega, the school's rector. "We're working with the community and with civil society in ways we've never seen before. We're learning how to be a church that comes out from behind its walls and becomes a fully involved, fully Cuban church."

There are dangers along the road to church growth, however. Some church leaders warn against "numberism," a triumphalistic focus on how many are coming to churches without any accompanying critical analysis of what the church is teaching its new adherents. "While it's true that the Christian churches all over the island are full, there's a sense of triumphalism that could lead us to be overly optimistic, to misinterpret what's happening around us," says Francisco Rodes, a Baptist pastor and professor of Latin American church history at the Matanzas seminary. "We need to wonder, are people going to remain in the church? While it's true that people are coming to church, it's also true that people are leaving the church. Many who joined the churches in this decade have quit after two or three years." Joel Suárez, the director of the church-sponsored Martin Luther King Center in Havana, says he worries that the church's rapid growth during the economically difficult '90s produced a generation of "soap Christians," people who came to the church because it offered material resources "from soap to medicines" often not readily available in the marketplace. Such dependency, warns Suárez, will weaken the church's ability to proclaim authentic hope during uncertain times. "Are we offering cheap grace, a gospel of Tylenol, or is the church offering an encounter with Jesus that complicates

people's lives and calls for greater commitment to being the salt and light in our neighborhoods?" Suárez asks.

The material assistance provided by the Cuban churches may become less important as the Cuban economy continues to recover. Gone are the worst times of the infamous "Special Period" when food became scarce. Several years of economic growth, a loosened economy and hundreds of millions of dollars per year in family remittances pouring into the island have left Cubans better off now than they were in the early '90s. Where the economy is going is still anyone's guess. World prices for sugar, tobacco and nickel, Cuba's big export items, are depressed. But foreign tourism continues to grow; the government hopes to welcome 2 million sunseekers from abroad next year, and the resentment against what some have called "apartheid tourism" has abated.

As the economic crisis of the decade continues to wane, the church will have to take the warnings of people like Rodes and Suárez seriously if it wants to be as relevant in the next millennium—and whatever political context succeeds Fidel Castro—as it has become today. People may grow disillusioned with religious life, as they did with Soviet socialism.

The seminary at Matanzas seems a hopeful sign that the church can continue to grow to meet the challenges it faces. In addition, a renewed interest in Christian education—in serious, long-term discipling—will also help form solid believers ready to deal with a changing country. The growing involvement of churches in responding to social problems, from AIDS to alcoholism to prostitution, bodes well for a faith community that seeks to incarnate hope in the real world. And a determination to rethink ecumenism to include Pentecostals and other long-excluded Christians is another sign that Cuban Protestants are trying to build a church that responds to their unique environment.

For U.S. Christians, the first step in trying to understand the situation of our Protestant sisters and brothers in Cuba must be confession of our complicity with the U.S. blockade, which has brought such suffering to the island's people. We must demand that what is at best an anachronism of U.S. policy be dismantled.

While we demand an end to the blockade, however, we must realize that the renewal of direct economic and cultural ties between the two nations will not give us permission to impose our own understandings of the church on the people of Cuba. One ironic benefit of the blockade is that the Cuban churches have developed their

own identity, apart from the heavy-handed influence of U.S. mission boards and volunteer-in-mission groups. Trying to reinstate the hegemony of the "mother church" would be a tragedy; learning from our Cuban sisters and brothers would be a blessing.