

Cuba's future

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The cathedral in Old Havana, Cuba. [Some rights reserved](#) by [Artur Staszewski](#).

Pope Francis has again used his power in a transformative way, helping to broker a deal that opens up diplomatic relations between the United States and Cuba for the first time since 1959. The agreement between President Obama and Cuba's president Raul Castro includes a swap of prisoners and an easing of some restrictions on travel and commerce between the two countries.

The move toward normalizing relations is long overdue. The trade embargo imposed by the United States when Fidel Castro took power has done nothing to undermine the Cuban government's control over its economy or alter its abuse of human rights. Ordinary Cubans suffered the most from the sanctions. One of Cuba's leading dissidents said that most Cubans haven't been able to work for political change because seeking food and shelter has taken all their time and energy.

It remains to be seen whether the thaw in relations will lead to more political and religious freedom for Cubans. But that outcome is much likelier to happen now than under the previous policy of seeking to isolate Cuba. A joint statement from the National Council of Churches and the Cuban Council of Churches called on the U.S. Congress to lift fully the travel and trade embargo and to remove Cuba from the U.S. list of countries that support terrorism.

One dissident group in Cuba is demanding, according to the *New York Times*, that Cuba release all political prisoners, adhere to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (which Cuba has formally accepted but not implemented), recognize all civil society leaders, and accept constitutional reforms leading to free, democratic elections.

Catholic and Protestant churches in the United States have long sought to develop better relations with Christians in Cuba. Despite the restrictions on travel, delegations of Americans have found ways of visiting and supporting fellow believers in Cuba. This kind of exchange will almost certainly accelerate with the changes agreed upon by the two presidents.

In a column in the *Century* last summer, church historian Philip Jenkins envisioned two possible but very different religious futures in a freer Cuba. One resembles the case of Brazil, where Pentecostals and evangelicals have experienced exponential growth in a once deeply Catholic country. The other case resembles that of East Germany, where years of rule by an atheistic state left severely eroded religious belief and practice of all kinds.

Whatever future emerges, giving Cubans the opportunity to interact through trade and travel with Americans offers them the best chance for expanding their political and religious expression.