

Revival of religion in Cuba reaches public square

Religious diversity and participation have flourished in Cuba since the country loosened restrictions. Christians are aiding their neighbors—and testing possibilities for political dissent.

by [Story Hinckley](#) in the [July 3, 2019](#) issue



In Enol Gutierrez's office at the Methodist seminary in Havana is a painting in which John Wesley sits atop his horse, reins in one hand and Bible in the other, in the Cuban countryside. Story Hinckley/*The Christian Science Monitor*

[*\(The Christian Science Monitor\)*](#) John Wesley rides his horse through the Cuban countryside, beneath tall palm trees and mountains so green they look purple. He holds his reins in one hand and his Bible in the other.

The painting in Enoel Gutierrez's office at the Methodist seminary in central Havana depicts a scene that never happened. There is no record that Wesley, the 18th-century Methodist leader, ever traveled anywhere in the Caribbean. Yet Gutierrez is determined to bring Wesley to Cuba.

Roman Catholicism has dominated religious life here for centuries, but religious diversity and participation have flourished in Cuba since the country loosened restrictions over the past three decades. And while a 2015 survey by Univision and Fusion found that only 7 percent of the country identified as evangelical or Protestant, totaling about 800,000 people, the pace of growth is notable. Gutierrez pointed out that about 20 new Methodist churches open annually. He hopes soon to have at least one in every Cuban city. Established congregations are growing, too.

In communities with tight media controls and limited Internet access, religious leaders are uniquely positioned to shape opposition in ways the government has not seen in decades, analysts say.

"All the people in Cuba had received an education not to believe," Gutierrez said. "But the people need hope; they need to see a different future for their life. They see a different way to be saved."

Marianao Methodist Church in southwest Havana has grown by several hundred to about 3,000 during the four years Leidy Guerra has been pastor. Many of the new members have been women and about 40 percent are younger than 30. They are exhausted, she said, from daily struggles such as feeding their families.

"Cuba is not the same as it was 20 years ago," Guerra said. "People are now more thirsty. They need a solution."

Danielle Byerly, a visiting missionary from Asheboro, North Carolina, who worked with the Marianao Church in 2017 and 2018, sees the situation as fostering religious passion.

"In the US, if you want something, you can go work for it," Byerly said. "You can't do that here, so here you need that hope in God."

Congregations have spread their reach into communities through programs that are common elsewhere—such as cooking meals for older people or tutoring the young—but less so among Cubans.

“Now [the church] is not just a place for praying,” said Arturo Lopez-Levy, a political scientist at New York University. “It’s a place for community.”

When a deadly tornado ripped through Cuba in January, for example, churches responded immediately. Alain Gonzalez, 18, who joined University Methodist Church in Havana’s Vedado neighborhood a few years ago, said congregants stayed after services to fill trash bags with clothes and food for tornado victims.

Gonzalez, standing on the steps of his church before an evening service, shows a photo with a mound of donations that looks taller than he is, saying, “That’s only from the collection at one service.”

This kind of public activity was long forbidden to Cuba’s churches. Shortly after seizing power in 1959, Fidel Castro declared Cuba an atheist state. But after the fall of the Soviet Union set off an economic crisis, Castro softened his ban on religion and permitted believers to join the Communist Party.

When Raúl Castro took over the presidency from his brother in 2008, pews began to fill up. Pope Francis played a mediator role in talks between Cuba and the Obama administration.

The revival has had noticeable breadth. Santería, a tradition that first developed among African slaves brought to Cuba, is now practiced more openly. The Jewish community, which almost entirely emigrated during the Castro years, is gaining strength. The island’s Muslim community has increased from 500 members to 7,000.

Religious practice is still tightly controlled, however, with government signoff required for new sanctuaries and public gatherings.

Some religious leaders are testing how much space there is for public dissent. Their influence was on display ahead of a referendum on Cuba’s new constitution, as they targeted an article legalizing same-sex marriage. In September, for example, dozens of evangelical leaders published a letter of opposition. One week before the vote, more than 100 heterosexual couples wearing their wedding clothes gathered in protest on the Malecón, a central roadway along the Havana coast.

The referendum passed by a wide margin on February 24, ushering in changes such as expanded private property rights and presidential term limits while maintaining the one-party system and centrally planned economy. But the article describing marriage as a union “between two people” was nixed before the vote. The new constitution does, however, ban discrimination based on gender, sexual orientation, or gender identity.

Evangelicals managed to tap into a larger sentiment against same-sex marriage that pervades much of Latin America, observers said.

“Patriarchal culture has always favored heterosexuality as the positive norm,” said Teresa de Jesús, coordinator at the National Center for Sexual Education. “Before English and Spanish colonialism in the Americas, native peoples recognized that a person could have ‘two spirits,’ meaning that they possessed masculine and feminine attributes, and that was not a problem.”

Weeks after the vote, churches across Havana still kept posters taped to their doors of four stick figures holding hands (a man and a woman with their two children) and the phrase “I am in favor of the original design.”

“John Wesley said without social holiness, we have no personal holiness,” Gutierrez said.

In 2018, Miguel Díaz-Canel became the country’s first president who was not a Castro in more than 40 years. Three months later, the government approved a new constitution to replace the 1976 version. And then it convened “popular consultations” across the country to allow citizen input, which produced tens of thousands of suggestions.

During that period, the marriage section was the most discussed issue, the National Assembly announced in December, with most comments against amending the section. In the end, neither the 1976 definition of “between one man and one woman” was included nor the proposed definition of a union “between two people.”

The government has announced plans to explicitly define marriage in the next two years. It aims to revise a national law covering marriage, divorce, and child care via another referendum.

“They kicked the can down the road to not put the referendum at risk,” said William LeoGrande, a professor of government at American University in Washington.

“Maybe they can come up with some language to make everyone happy, but I don’t think so. . . . It will be a really interesting test of how far this new tolerance is going to reach.”

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