

**Closed Doors?**

## **Partnering with Cuban Believers Opens Windows of Opportunity**

Is Cuba a country closed to the gospel? That's certainly the way it looked to American Christians half a century ago.

Earlier, in the late 1800's, U.S. denominations—notably the American Baptists—established a missionary presence in Cuba. A trickle of evangelicals began in the 1920s, with a first contingent from Canada's Prairie Bible Institute launching a Bible school there. That grew into the West Indies Mission (now World Team) and planted at least 100 churches.

But then in 1959, Fidel Castro's guerilla forces ousted the corrupt Batista government and proclaimed a Communist and atheist state. The botched CIA-backed invasion by a Cuban exile force at Bay of Pigs in 1961, and the Soviet missile crisis the following year, led to Cuba nationalizing U.S. business assets, and the U.S. retaliating by imposing a trade embargo. All resident foreign missionaries were expelled; some pastors were imprisoned. Home Bible studies were prohibited, and importation of Bibles was not allowed. Attempting to marginalize the church, the government excluded most evangelicals from professional training tracks in the university. Thousand of evangelicals fled in the early '60s (and again in 1980, when the government granted a one-time exodus known as the Mariel Boat Lift). Others abandoned the faith for state-sponsored atheism.

That initial decade of outright persecution, was followed by continued discrimination in the '70s and '80s. But in 1991, the fall of the Soviet Union caused Cuba's heavily subsidized economy to collapse, leading to famine and more than a decade of hardship. The '90s also became a decade of spiritual hunger that led to dramatically higher attendance by the largely nominally Roman Catholic population at established houses of worship. Castro—while still making it nearly impossible for churches to construct new buildings or repair existing ones—responded to this surge in attendance by announcing that Christians could form *casas cultos* (“house churches”) in towns with no churches. In 1992, the ruling Communist Party changed the state constitution to refer to Cuba no longer as “atheist” but only “secularist.” And in 1998, the late Pope John Paul II was allowed to visit Cuba, and state celebrations of Protestants were also televised. The effects of this tacit permission to practice Christian faith were swiftly felt. Protestants, who had declined to 1 percent of the population by 1980, experienced revival and explosive growth. They now account for at least 5 percent of the island's population of 12 million. And evangelicals went on to win new respect, when devastating hurricanes hit in 2008, by repairing the roofs of their non-Christian neighbors before repairing their own.

But Western perceptions about Cuban Christianity seem woefully outdated, unaware that a surprisingly healthy church, no longer defined by persecution, is being led by a

new generation of young risk-taking pastors patiently maximizing the space between legality and toleration.

“Today,” CT News Editor Jeremy Weber reported in a 2009 Christianity Today cover article on Cuba, “evangelicals are . . . probing the boundaries of the fuzzy gray area the government has given them for evangelism. . . . They are allowed to evangelize in public but not to proselytize. This comes down to a matter of interpretation, seemingly based on magnitude. Thus evangelicals cannot use a stadium or TV program for an outreach event, but can pass out free evangelistic tracts or DVDs in the streets. . . . Observers suggest that discrimination against Christians stems not from antagonism toward religion but from government fear of organized groups of any kind.”

Evangelistic efforts are focused heavily on Cuba’s teens. Generally bored and disillusioned by life in an isolated, economically limited environment, they have increasingly turned to drinking, drugs, and to sex. But sports, one of the few permitted outlets for their pent-up energies, holds real promise as a means of initiating meaningful contact.

And that is how College Church’s improbable connection with Cuba began. Chicagoans know that Cuba is fanatical about baseball. After all, it was pitcher José Contreras who back in 2005 helped the White Sox win the World Series. He had defected three years earlier while pitching for the Cuban national team in Mexico (and Fidel Castro ordered his name banned from public mention in Cuba.)

Another professional baseball player in Cuba, “Orlando,” decided at the height of his professional baseball career, to resign and launch an evangelism/discipleship ministry to connect with youths through sports. Although his pastor advised him to abandon such an impractical idea, Orlando plunged ahead. In the first year of his new parachurch venture, which we’ll call Olé, there were more than 200 decisions for Christ. In the second year the number had doubled. Today Olé’s staff of six is overworked and underfunded. One staffer is employed by his church while his wife brings home a paycheck as a doctor. (The average government pay—doctors included—is \$25 a week!) But Olé is thriving.

Although baseball remains Cuba’s foremost sport, soccer has recently gained in popularity. Some predict that in the next five to ten years it will even surpass baseball’s popularity. Several years ago, “Marco,” a high-profile soccer player also shifted to ministry mode and joined Orlando’s staff. Last year some 400 youths participated in the tournaments he organized. The coaches reported some 30 decisions to follow Jesus among their team players.

Marco realized he needed help to make the soccer ministry more effective, so last year he had his staff launch an internet search. Guess who he discovered. Tada!—Missionary Athletes International (MAI), via its Los Angeles office, staffed by two who are fluent in Spanish. (One grew up as an MK in Argentina; the other has served in Peru.) Both parties checked each other out at a distance. Then last October, two MAI

leaders made a preliminary trip to Cuba, via the Bahamas, to confirm the positive indicators they'd fielded.

Last February it all came together: a four-day seminar for Olé staffers and volunteers on Soccer-based ministry outreach to youths, held in Havana and conducted in Spanish. College Church missionary Rick McKinley, who directs the MAI ministry from its Midwest office here in Carol Stream, joined with the staff members from L.A., plus a student leader (trained in the Leadership Training Program administered here in the Chicago area by Rick and Jeff Dusek), who'd also studied in Spain as a Spanish major. Each led several sessions, working from MAI's soccer ministry manual, already translated into Spanish. (Rick styles himself the team's gringo, although he understands conversational Spanish adequately, having lived for three years in Puerto Rico.) Some 25 participated in the seminar—mostly soccer coaches, but coaches of basketball, volleyball, and judo as well.

Rick spent time with Marco and his five key soccer ministry leaders. Not long ago one was without hope and addicted to drugs. Now he is coaching and discipling two teams. Rick observed their obvious level of commitment despite what it might cost them.

Although more concerned about advancing God's kingdom than accommodating secular authority, Rick could tell that these men are tuned to the vague restrictions to their freedom. As the men clustered to discuss ministry techniques on the soccer field, Marco noticed an unfamiliar man—possibly an informant—watching them from the sidelines. He deftly broke off the dialogue and got a practice match underway.

Rick was also a guest at a baseball game coached by a man in his mid-twenties. Rick assumed that he was another seasoned player but, no, it was his passion to connect with young men that nudged him to take up baseball just five years ago.

The Olé leaders and the MAI contingent immediately sensed a kindred spirit. Given the imperial leanings of America's early dealings with Cuba (such as its permanent retention of the Guantánamo Bay naval base), Cubans are understandably leery of American paternalism. The trick, Rick says, is figuring out how to assist in ways that empower without creating dependency.

Their enthusiasm led to a plea for MAI to return and conduct another seminar for hundreds of Olé's volunteer leaders in the island's interior. (Although Cuba is narrower than California, it is virtually as long, making it too expensive for most to travel to Havana.) This month MAI staff will conduct that seminar. A member of MAI's Los Angeles staff is standing in for Rick. And February's student leader will return, but now as a member of MAI's Charlotte, North Carolina staff!

Next month Rick will be meeting in Florida with Marco at an annual gathering of sports ministries from around the world. This umbrella group helps fund travel for workers like Marco. Marco and many coworkers faced the possibility of arrest and have had

opportunities to leave Cuba, but insist that God has called them to stay and serve their native country. Rick and Marco will be comparing notes as true and equal partners.

**What to pray for:**

*For leadership by Raúl Castro and the “old guard” Communist Party that is in the best interests of Cuba’s people, as they experiment with a market economy at the retail level.*

*That the majority who nominally adhere to Catholicism (usually blended with Afro-Cuban Spiritism, known as Santería) will discover a living faith.*

*For courage and perseverance for evangelicals still locally suffering harassment, discrimination, and occasional imprisonment.*

*That new economic possibilities and other forms of invading external culture will not divert Jesus followers from single-minded discipleship.*

*That church leaders will be enabled to cope with growth and change and experience cross-denominational unity.*

*For the dozen Bible schools and seminaries whose student numbers are limited by government interference and a lack of material and human resources.*

*That wise input from abroad will serve Cuba in an effective way, and that MAI staff will be more sensitive to “Olé’s” true needs than to their own agenda.*

*That MAI will know how best to utilize the current window of relative freedom and inexpensive involvement.*

*For wisdom for MAI to know whether to send a larger group or continue “flying under the radar.”*