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**ABOUT ECHO-CUBA**

ECHO-Cuba is a non-profit effort designed to help build human service capacity and enhance social service welfare for evangelical/protestant conventions that conduct independent social services in Cuba.

Our organization has provided humanitarian aid, started a diverse number of projects in adult education, health & human services. We have implemented assistance programs to 6 protestant conventions, 8-Theological seminaries, and 10 hospitals throughout the island. Last Saturday we donated (committed) our 20<sup>th</sup> laptop computer to the island.

**BRIEF HISTORY**

The first 20-years after the revolution individual clergy were persecuted, religious services were observed or disrupted, church property was vandalized, educational and occupational access for believers was restricted, and, for a brief period in the 60's, "reeducation camps" grouped priests with prostitutes and criminals. By 1975, the government stated strategy remained "the progressive elimination of religious beliefs through scientific materialistic propaganda".

In 1984 Castro attended a nationally televised church service during a visit by U.S. Political Activist Rev. Jessie Jackson. The following year several U.S. Catholic bishops were allowed to visit the island, and Castro met separately with the bishops of the Catholic Church and the leaders of the protestant churches to discuss the religious situation. Today, the church's role is that of an "agent for change" and for strengthening civil society.

**MAKE-UP OF PROTESTANT DENOMINATIONS**

There are 44 denominations or other registered protestant groups represented by about 1,000 churches and chapels. The largest denomination is the Assemblies of God with about 80,000 members.

The Cuban Council of Churches is a government umbrella organization representing 15 smaller denominations. It also has 10 observer churches. Its largest member by far is the Methodist Church, which gives the Council its greatest credibility.

And although the Council has broad assigned powers, (such as approval of all religious literature), the largest conventions in the country:

- Assemblies of God,
- the Baptist Convention of eastern Cuba (affiliated with American Baptists), and
- the Baptist Convention of western Cuba (which is associated with the Southern Baptists),

are not members. Choosing instead to operate independently.

## **ALLOWED SOCIAL SERVICES AND RELIGIOUS ACTIVITIES**

### **a) Religious Activities**

The following are religious activities that are generally allowed.

- Construction and renovation of churches
- Renovation of Pastors Homes
- Construction of facilities to take care of the aging
- Renovation of pre-existing property for youth camps and retreats
- New construction work on seminaries
- Regular Church services at churches, chapels and Casas Culto.
- Youth Religious Development
- Some college student outreach is also allowed, as long as the government sees it as part of a recruitment program for full-time religious service, and not as evangelization (there are 130,000 university students in 47 centers of higher education), and
- The teaching family and home values. Which in the late 80's, the government announced to the church leaders that it should be a priority (this as opposed to "moral values").

### **b) Social Services**

The following are social services that are being conducted by protestant denominations:

- Elderly Care (- Day Care, -Dinning Halls, -Other Food & Nutrition Programs, -New Dormitories).
- Crisis Intervention (Telephone support- "Telephone Amigos").
- Handicapped & Special Children Programs (but there is very little of this-no expertise).

THE CONDITION TO CONDUCT ANY SOCIAL SERVICE IS THST IT MUST BE OFFERED TO ANYONE-REGARDLESS OF THEIR BELIEF, RELIGION, OR MEMBERSHIP IN A CHURCH.

## **ISSUES THE CHURCH IS FACING**

There are two fundamental issues, which keeps the church in Cuba quite busy. They are:

- Funding: Very little of their work is self-funded (depends on: Sister Churches, US denominational support, U.S. and Canadian para-church organizations, Individual pastors "Money Raising" programs when they come to the U.S.).
- Government Control: Although government personnel seems more visible in eastern Cuba, religious & social service programs seem to be less restricted in that part of the country.

## **WHERE IS THIS GOING? POSSIBILITIES & DANGER**

First Rule of International Aide (as stated by organizations like World Relief & World Vision) is to "DO NO HARM"-Don't screw-up anything that's working!

Consequently, for this work to be effective it must be discretely and tastefully done. With much wisdom. It can not be boastful or political, or it will embarrass the government, and possibly compromise the host.

For example, in my personal opinion, the recent speech by the chairman of CANF at the Interamerican Dialogue concerning pro-active humanitarian aid and computers to Cuban NGOs as a new political initiative, is the type of thing that in retaliation, the government could use to shut down the religious and social work progress that have taken place.

#### SOME OTHER ISSUES THAT NEED TO BE ANALYSED ALSO INCLUDE:

-The hardship in eastern Cuba is so acute, that the government bends the rules to help alleviate the problems. (i.e.), I observed a prostitute & a foreigner negotiating with officers at the Office of Foreign Immigration so that he could stay the night at her home instead of going to a hotel.

It's hard to tell how eastern Cuba would react if there is a hardening of those flexible practices.

-Blacks appear to have less opportunities for advancement in fields such as nursing or tourism. This implies a much more difficult time for blacks following any type of transition (or evolution as the Cubans call it) to a more market oriented economy.

-Breaking the law has become a way of life. One pastor told me that he was breaking the law 5 minutes after waking up every morning. The pastor has a farmer friend that gives him some milk.

Even when there is a legal structure; it's sometimes only a front for other less-legal activity. (i.e.) A "Paladar" in Santiago has a secret room with additional 12 chairs, (12 more than its legal!)-And the owner told me that she sends all her profits to Miami.

These people are obviously so concerned about their apparent "lack of ethics", that they share their story with a perfect stranger. Probably just to get some sympathy.

-What happens to a people that seem to have lost all hope?- Popular words in Santiago de Cuba are "En Santiago ya no le hechan la culpa a nadie, ya perdieron toda la esperanza!" (In Santiago none bothers to blame anyone any more..They just lost all of their hope).

-And of course, after 40-years, the social mentality reigns. Particularly when it comes to "sharing", and to "equality". (i.e.) At the La Victoria Restaurant near Mariel, I could not get served at noon because that's when the workers are supposed to have their lunch-Including the waitresses!

#### **CLOSING: WHAT'S IN THE FUTURE?**

We could facilitate and help the church in Cuba do its work. We should teach, provide resources, open doors, train trainers, and educate them on world and church events that have taken place in the last 40 or so years.

Cooperation between the protestant denominations, para-church groups and the Catholic Church, in an ecumenical initiative could provide them with the type of assistance that could take them to the next level.