

# Studying the faith with Cuban church leaders

Titus Guenther

**H**ow does the Christian church pass on the faith to those born into the church and to newcomers? It is one thing to face this challenge when the church has an established tradition and the means to build and run schools to train leaders. It is quite another when churches are new and materially poor and face restrictions on their religious activities, as in Cuba. They are often forced to seek help from sister churches abroad in order to equip their leaders.

**How does the Evangelical Missionary Church in Cuba pass on the faith? Above all, through dynamic testimony in word and life. But its pastors also seek tools that can help them interpret the Bible in a way that will unify the IEM's growing number of congregations.**

While the Cuban churches may be poor and challenged in some areas, they are rich in others. Their vitality is not unlike that of the early church (cf. Acts 2:47b). The legally recognized Methodist church of Cuba, for example, in 2001 reported a great revival and doubling of its membership during the previous two years. Many North Atlantic churches, in contrast, are in decline or barely holding onto their numbers.

But vitality and growth are not limited to the twenty-four denominations of the Cuban

Council of Churches which enjoy legal standing. A similar Christian dynamism is found in the Iglesia Evangélica Misionera (IEM or Evangelical Missionary Church) of Cuba, still without legal recognition in 2002. During a seminar with the pastors of this church, our five-person Mennonite Church Canada delegation witnessed their vitality.

Many adherents of the IEM left older churches, usually Baptist or Pentecostal, because they were not allowed adequate participation in congregational life, either as active lay people or as women leaders. Although initially a “non-incorporated” church, the IEM is now actively seeking legal standing, which in

Cuba is no simple matter. A church qualifies only if it has international church connections, its own confession of faith, and its own constitution and bylaws.

Our four-day workshop with eighteen IEM pastors was held January 8–11, 2002, in Havana. Many could only afford the trip from their homes in eastern Cuba thanks to the generosity of a fellow pastor with an old Toyota jeep. The group was mixed in terms of race, gender, and education; ages varied from single young adults to grandparents. Present from Winnipeg, Manitoba, were Robert J. (Jack) Suderman and I, who co-led the sessions, and Irene Suderman, Karen Loewen Guenther, and Arthur Driedger. The sessions focused on the Spanish translation of the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*,<sup>1</sup> which Jack had given the pastors at a workshop in October 2000.

The IEM has a longer history in Jamaica and the Dominican Republic, but began in Cuba only in 1997. The pastors are each responsible for one or more congregations, including new outposts. Their goal is astoundingly simple: they strive to double their church membership every year. They are almost on track: beginning with 88 members in 1997, the IEM at the time of our visit boasted 1,115 members, and its leaders projected it would reach 2,500 in 2002.<sup>2</sup>

Our sessions took place in a Catholic retreat center, rented for the occasion with assistance from Mennonite Church Canada. Simple but delicious meals were served at the center, and the pastors were housed there. We met in the living room of what had been a private home. We had no chalkboard or flipchart paper, and no overhead projector. Jack and I had prepared some printed handouts and brought some pens and notebooks to hand out.

The enthusiastic participation of those present at the study sessions more than made up for the scarcity of writing materials. We were not allowed to sing or conduct formal worship services, because the retreat center was not a designated place of worship, and the communist state restricts these activities to such places. This restriction proved to be a challenge; our daily opening devotionals had to be limited to Scripture reading, reflection, and prayer. During the breaks, the pastors could not always suppress the urge to make music with guitar and voice, and the owners of the center had to remind them to keep it down.

We started the workshop by showing the rootedness of the Christian confession in the life and ministry of Jesus and the early church. Asked what challenges they commonly encounter, the pastors mentioned that their congregations suffer from sectarianism; believers often do not live what they preach; many separate body and soul; many believe in a prosperity gospel; and congregations have problems with individualism, competition, and rivalry. The pastors asserted that the Bible offers them valuable tools to deal with these issues.

Together we examined the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* for doctrines that might speak to their concerns. The Cubans worked in small groups and reflected on whether various articles could provide guidance in dealing with their churches' challenges. We invited small groups to dramatize their interpretations of articles of the confession, such as the one on church discipline. This approach led to animated discussion and elicited good questions about the purpose and nature of church discipline in the light of the "rule of Christ" in Matthew 18.

When asked whether the convictions expressed in the confession are in agreement with their church's teaching and practice, the leaders said they did not have a formal confession. But they said they might adopt it for their church, if Mennonites did not mind.<sup>3</sup> Andrés Olivares, director of the group, noted that "this book has become the primary text for our pastors. It is profound, it is biblical, it helps us in our search to shape a biblical theology that has integrity."<sup>4</sup>

In one session we examined how Christian teaching is passed on through the church's music. The group analyzed the theological content of some of the popular choruses their congregations sing. Many are Scripture passages set to music, which provide biblical edification. Others seemed to contain questionable lyrics: "I have a dagger of gold" is an upbeat song that describes in vivid detail how the Christian does battle with Satan, brutally killing him and sending him to the grave. The song finishes exultantly, "This is one funeral I am not going to miss." One pastor noted that his congregation had removed all choruses that focus on the devil. The group talked about whether a chorus describing the Holy Spirit as a "white dove" might have racist overtones.<sup>5</sup>

We spent evenings viewing brief Spanish-language videos on Mennonite Central Committee's diverse programs around the world, the Restorative Justice Ministry in North America, SEMILLA's basic theology courses in Central America, the Indian-Mennonite Mission-Settlement Program in Paraguay, and the multifaceted work of the Methodist Church of Chile, including its public witness during the Pinochet years. The participants were delighted, because the films gave them a window on how churches in other parts of the world live, and how these groups face many of the issues the IEM faces in Cuba. We left several videos with them.

The informal times after classes and during meals were more than breaks. The Cuban leaders asked questions of clarification, shared stories of how they came to faith, how they came to perform faith healings, and how God had heard their prayers and provided for them and their families amid their material poverty.

As a side benefit, this workshop provided the pastors with the opportunity to learn to know each other better. They do not have the chance to get together often, because they have not had churchwide conferences and travel is costly. Most of them earn only about \$10 (U.S.) a month—not enough to supplement the government food ration, much less to travel to conferences. Most of them cannot dream of acquiring a car, but instead hope to someday have a mountain bike (which in Cuba costs about \$110 [U.S.]—eleven months' wages!). According to Eliseo Salomon, who is giving up his career as a medical doctor in order to be a pastor, bicycles would enable pastors to do evangelistic outreach over a greater area.

It was a joy to work with these committed church leaders, who could have so much to complain about, but instead show much joy and warm hospitality. Several pastors talked about pursuing theological training but would need financial assistance to do so. The leaders expressed interest in running workshops annually, in order to build lasting connections between the IEM and MC Canada.

After our visit to Cuba, Andrés Olivares sent this evaluation to Christian Witness Council: "This workshop has been key. As pastors, we feel edified, comforted, and capacitated. Thank you for the gift of your Confession of Faith, which we have studied

and [which] allows us to deepen our understanding of biblical truth. Please express our profound gratitude to your Council for this valuable work in our emerging church. We trust that these workshop experiences at this level can continue.”<sup>6</sup>

How do churches like the IEM pass on the faith? Above all, through their dynamic testimony in word and life. But these pastors feel the need for additional tools that can help them interpret the Bible for their situation in a way that will unify their church’s growing number of congregations. Clearly, a dialogical partnership could greatly benefit both their denomination and ours.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Pr., 1995.

<sup>2</sup> See “Canadian Church Strengthens Its Cuban Connections,” *Canadian Mennonite* (11 February 2002), 14.

<sup>3</sup> During their subsequent visit with these pastors in 2003, Sudermans learned that IEM had in fact adopted the Mennonite confession as their own, with certain adaptations.

<sup>4</sup> “Canadian Church Strengthens Its Cuban Connections,” 14.

<sup>5</sup> Ezekiel and Marta, black pastors, related with sadness questions they faced while in seminary in Cuba: “‘Is it true,’ Ezekiel was asked, ‘that the black race is cursed by God, sent to Africa to suffer, and is outside the grace of God?’ This, they said, is the formal position of the seminary Ezekiel is attending” (ibid.).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. After we returned from Cuba, one university student, who had heard overwhelmingly positive reports about the workshops, was moved to write me a letter about how difficult it is to be a Christian student in a secular setting. She also admonished North American students to value the privilege of being able to study in a Christian university.

## About the author

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