

## **Cuba's other Christians: Island's Protestant population climbing**

By IRA RIFKIN

c.1998 Religion News Service

1/15/98

UNDATED -- Lois Kroehler can remember what it was like for Protestants in Cuba in the late 1950s: Roman Catholics would cross the street rather than walk past the Presbyterian-affiliated school she ran in Cardenas, about 90 miles east of Havana.

"The local Catholic priest taught that Protestants were the devil and that the people should not send their children to our school," said Kroehler, an American who has spent more than 40 years in Cuba as a Presbyterian missionary.

Protestants were a distinct minority in overwhelmingly Catholic, pre-Castro Cuba when Kroehler, fresh out of the University of Nebraska, followed her religious inclinations and moved to the Caribbean island nation, where she has lived ever since.

It's a different story today.

The Cuba Pope John Paul II will visit for five days beginning Wednesday (Jan. 21) is now the Western Hemisphere's only Spanish-speaking nation in which the number of practicing Protestants comes close to equaling the number of practicing Catholics.

Moreover, Cuba's Protestant churches are growing at a faster rate than the island's Catholic Church, which suffers from an acute shortage of priests and bore the brunt of Fidel Castro's past anti-religion policies.

"We're not talking about Mexico or Peru here," said Mario Antonio Ramos, a Cuban-born Southern Baptist pastor who now lives in Miami. "Cuba has lots of American influences and a tradition of religious diversity that has proved fertile for Protestant evangelism."

Like its Latin American neighbors, Cuba has a long history of Catholic religious association, dating from the 16th-century arrival of Spanish colonizers. And despite almost four decades of Cuban Marxism and, at times, severe persecution, the Cuban Catholic Church remains the nation's largest single entity not under government control.

But institutional breadth aside, the Catholic Church's religious hold over Cubans is limited. While about 40 percent of Cuba's 11 million people are baptized Catholics, only about 400,000 attend services at the island's 650 Catholic churches and 200 "casas de mision," or prayer houses.

Moreover, many of those baptized as Catholics are closer to the Afro-Cuban folk religion Santeria than they are the church.

"For many Santeria followers, Catholic baptism is a requirement. But that doesn't really make them Catholic," said Andres Perez y Mena, an expert on Afro-Cuban religion who teaches at Long Island University in Brooklyn, N.Y.

Santeria -- "the way of the saints" in Spanish -- combines the worship of traditional African deities with the adoration of Catholic saints. The deities were given saint's names by Cuba's slave population to fool their Spanish colonial masters who imposed Catholic conversion on them.

As many as 3 million Cubans are involved in Santeria, according to some estimates. Santeria, which is home-centered and has no institutional structure, involves ritual animal sacrifice -- usually using chickens or goats -- and physical and psychological healing ceremonies.

Meanwhile, more than 300,000 Cubans belong to the nation's 54 Protestant denominations, who operate some 1,666 churches and hundreds of home-based congregations, said the Rev. Pablo Oden Marichal, an Episcopal priest and national coordinator of the Cuban Council of Churches. More than 700 of the churches have been established since 1992, when the Cuban government jettisoned its official "atheist" status and relabeled the nation "secular."

"The evangelical churches (as Protestant churches are generally referred to in Cuba and elsewhere in Latin America) are growing very rapidly, much faster than the Catholic Church," Marichal said.

"While the Catholics are concentrated in the cities, evangelical churches are everywhere in Cuba. Even in remote mountain areas. So people looking for religion see us where they do not see Catholic priests or churches."

Cuba's Protestant churches also command a higher degree of theological loyalty than does the Cuban Catholic Church. The influence on them of Santeria and other Afro-Cuban religious beliefs is much less obvious.

"The Protestants in Cuba are very Protestant, just like they are in Georgia or Alabama," said Ramos, who is also acting dean of Miami's South Florida Center for Theological Studies.

Protestantism arrived in Cuba during the mid-18th century, brought there by American missionaries and later by returning Cuban political exiles who plotted the end of Spanish rule from safe havens in the United States.

Today, Cuba's Protestant leadership is largely homegrown, with virtually all pastors being Cuban. That's in contrast to the Cuban Catholic Church, more than half of whose about 290 priests are foreign born.

Cuba's Protestant leaders -- under the aegis of the Cuban Council of Churches -- will meet with the pope during his upcoming visit. The session is scheduled for the morning of Jan. 25, just prior to what promises to be the best-attended Mass of the papal visit. That Mass is set for Havana's Revolution Square on the pope's last day in Cuba.

Baptists -- about 70,000 strong -- constitute the largest Protestant grouping in Cuba. Seventh-day Adventists, Methodists, Presbyterians and Episcopalians are among the larger Protestant groups.

Pentecostal groups, such as the Assemblies of God, and charismatic movements within the mainline denominations are a mainstay of Cuban Protestantism today.

"Cuban culture is Caribbean," said Harvard Divinity School professor Harvey Cox. "It's emotional and has a strong African component imported by the slaves. Pentecostal faith is experiential, communitarian, healing and body-involving. It fits right in with the Caribbean character."

Both Catholic and Protestant leaders in Cuba talk today of the nation's new interest in religion as an alternative to Cuba's faltering Marxist ideology and the despair over the poverty gripping the island.

But observers of the Cuban religious scene say the ranks of the nation's Protestant churches also have grown since the 1959 revolution that established Castro's rule simply because, like the revolution, they, too, presented an alternative to a discredited Catholic Church.

While the Protestant churches were also persecuted during the early years of Castro's rule, they faced fewer adversities than did the Catholic Church, which was heavily identified with the deposed government of Fulgencio Batista and actively opposed Castro's attempts to nationalize the private sector.

"The church set itself up against the government out of fear of communism," said Anthony Stevens-Arroyo, president of the Program for the Analysis of Religion Among Latinos (PARAL) at the City University of New York. "It overestimated its power and paid a price."

Much of the Catholic Church's base of support -- upper- and middle-class white Cubans -- were among the first Cubans to flee the island for the United States and elsewhere.

Protestants, on the other hand, "were more sympathetic with the revolution because they were never in power," explained the Rev. Oscar Boliolo, Latin America and Caribbean director for the New York-based National Council of Churches.

"With the revolution, Protestants felt they gained a voice in Cuban society, as limited as it may be."

Perez y Mena said Cuban Protestants remain closer to the Castro government than practicing Catholics and more likely to "participate in the search for Christian-based socialism" in Cuba.

"Their activism is what's keeping some social projects alive," he said.

The government has rewarded the Protestant churches by allowing the Cuban Council of Churches to broadcast on state radio at Christmas and Easter. Catholics have been denied that privilege, although Havana Cardinal Jaime Ortega was allowed to make an unprecedented appearance Tuesday (Jan 13) on state television, a concession made as part of the papal visit.

###