

briefing

Cuba

Religious freedom in Cuba

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1. Executive Summary

Cuba has yet to ratify the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights despite signing both, to much fanfare, in 2008. While there have been a few positive developments in regard to religious liberty for a small number of religious groups, they are not reflective of any overall improvement in the general religious liberty situation. Instead, over the past two years there has been a sharp increase in reported violations of religious freedom, including harassment and imprisonment of church leaders and the forced closure, confiscation or destruction of church buildings. These violations have been systematically carried out across the country suggesting that they are part of government policy and not isolated abuses by local or provincial authorities.

Church leaders who have openly called on the government to respect religious freedom or criticised government interference in internal church matters, those who have refused to work on behalf of the government (as informers or by publicly endorsing government initiatives), and church groups which refuse to register have been targeted for particularly severe harassment. The six-year sentence handed down in July 2009 to one pastor, the most lengthy prison sentence given to a religious leader in decades, and the ongoing political persecution of another major church leader who resisted government pressure on the organisation he led, gives great cause for concern. All of this indicates that, rather than moving toward a more open society, the government under the leadership of Raul Castro still views religious organisations, and in particular their leaders, as potentially dangerous and as a result continues to attempt to exert as much control as possible over their activities.

2. Recommendations

2.1. To the Cuban Government

CSW calls upon the Cuban Government:

- To respect and uphold Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the UN and to ratify and fully implement all provisions of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Cultural and Social Rights (ICECSR);
- To ensure that local authorities, including Communist Party leaders, are aware of the provisions included in the ICCPR and the ICECSR, and that they are implemented at the local level;
- As a member of the Human Rights Council, to uphold the highest standards in the promotion and protection of human rights, including those relating to religious freedom;
- To grant access to human rights rapporteurs from international and non-governmental organisations to visit the country in order to examine and report on human rights within the country;
- To safeguard the freedom of all Cubans to assemble and worship according to their professed religion;
- To allow churches, religious denominations, and denominational groupings to operate autonomously without pressure or interference from government officials;

- To loosen state controls and to streamline procedures concerning the registration of churches, and the building and renovation of church buildings;
- To withdraw Directive 43 and Resolution 46, which impose severe restrictions on all house churches, to legalise and provide legal protection for all house churches in Cuba, to re-open those churches which have been closed under the legislation and to guarantee freedom for Cuban pastors to carry out their work without harassment, threats or government pressure;
- To return all recently confiscated church properties to their denomination for continued use as a place of religious activity and to make reparations for church buildings which have been destroyed;
- To end discrimination based on denomination in reference to government benefits including permission for renovations and building projects, exit and entry visas, and vehicle licences, and to legacies and the right of individuals to leave their property to the church or denomination of their choice;
- To guarantee protection from discrimination on the basis of one's religion in the workplace, school and all other social and political spheres;
- To bring to an end government support of any religious group over other religious groups, and to ensure equal access for all groups to the media;
- To guarantee all prisoners, whether criminal or political, their basic human rights including religious rights;
- To end the use of government informants in churches and seminaries;
- To immediately free Pastor Omar Gude Pérez and to drop criminal proceedings against Reverend Roberto Rodriguez and members of his family.

2.2. To the European Union and member states

- That the Common Position on Cuba be maintained and renewed until significant improvements are made;
- That the European Union (EU) raise religious freedom as regularly as possible in its dialogues with the Cuban authorities, including the Minister of Religious Affairs, and encourage the Cuban Government to take seriously the recommendations listed above;
- That the EU representations in Havana, including the Commission Delegation and the embassies of member states, maintain an open dialogue with religious leaders from all denominations and religious groups, while taking into consideration the political sensitivities under which many religious leaders must work;
- That the EU encourage the Cuban Government to grant invitations to UN special thematic rapporteurs such as those focused on torture and freedom of expression and opinion;
- That the EU continue to seek ways of engaging with members of Cuban civil society, offering support when appropriate;

- That the EU continue to establish and maintain contact with the families of political prisoners and to raise its concerns regarding continued violation of the prisoners' rights, including denial of religious rights, with the Cuban authorities.

2.3. To the United Nations

- As Cuba continues to play a role in the UN Human Rights Council, the UN must insist that Cuba ratify and fully implement the treaties to which it has signed up, including the ICCPR. In addition, Cuba should be urged to extend invitations to the UN thematic rapporteurs with mandates on human rights defenders, torture, independence of the judiciary, and arbitrary detention to visit Cuba.

3. Religious freedom and Cuban law

The Cuban Constitution sets out specific and basic guarantees regarding religious liberty. However these freedoms are qualified and limited by the insistence that the maintenance of socialism and communism takes precedence over all other rights. This is reflected in the government's obsession with controlling every aspect of Cuban society through a myriad of laws and regulations covering everything from housing, movement within the country, building and renovation permits, and registration requirements to exit permits and permissible activities for foreign visitors.

The government requires that churches and other religious groups register at their provincial office of the Registry of Associations, which is a part of the Ministry of Justice. In theory, registration allows churches and religious leaders to receive foreign visitors, buy religious materials and meet in approved houses of worship. However, churches report that the registration process is often made extremely difficult, is at times impossible, and that once registered they still encounter legal difficulties. There are approximately 54 state-registered denominations or church groups. More than half of these are members of the Cuban Council of Churches (CCC), which, historically, has received some privileges in return for its support of the government.

Article 8 of the Cuban Constitution states that, "*The State recognises, respects, and guarantees religious liberty*" and Article 55 of the Cuban Constitution goes even further saying:

The State, which recognises, respects, and guarantees freedom of conscience and religion, also recognises, respects, and guarantees the freedom of every citizen to change religious beliefs or not to have any, and to profess, within the confines of the law, the religious worship of his/her preference. The law regulates the relationship of the State with religious institutions.

This is very much in line with international standards on religious liberty. However, the rights guaranteed in Articles 8 and 55 are later qualified in Article 62 of the Constitution which states that "*no recognised liberty may be exercised against the existence and aims of the socialist State and the nation's determination to build socialism and communism...*" This places the protection of the existence and aims, as well the construction, of a socialist and communist state above fundamental human rights, including those related to religious liberty.

A clause in the Cuban Penal Code, specifically, Chapter IV, Article 206, further limits the rights laid out in Article 55 of the Constitution. The clause, called *Abuse of Liberty of Worship*, allows for imprisonment of three months to one year for anyone who "*having abused the freedom of creed guaranteed to all by the Constitution, places religious beliefs in conflict with the aims of education, the duties of labour, defending the nation in arms, the reverence of its symbols or any other stipulations whatsoever contained in the Constitution, ...*" Human Rights Watch has

noted that “*This provision, which is defined as a crime against public order, allows the state to penalize a broad range of religious activities that would not endanger public order.*”¹

3.1. Restrictions on movement

Pastors in Cuba report that a Ministry of Housing regulation which bars institutions from permanently transferring staff from city to city² is also being extended to stop denominations from transferring pastors to different churches. This effectively means that a pastor and their family are prevented from registering their new place of residence, if transferred, for example to a church which has lost its pastor due to death or retirement. This is the case even when the new place of residence is the pastoral house and is on church property. In Cuba of course, this inability to reregister has implications for almost every aspect of life, including the receipt of government rations, participation in elections, and applications for travel and exit visas. In order to do any of these things, pastors who have been refused the right to reregister must travel to wherever they are officially registered and submit paperwork there.

While most denominations continue the practice of assigning and transferring pastors to new locations, many of these pastors and their families struggle with the bureaucracy, paperwork, and travel created by their inability to re-register their place of residence. One pastor, for example, now ministering in Central Cuba and who had previously overseen a church in the Guantanamo region, is still registered in his first place of ministry, where he worked over a decade ago in a particularly remote area of the country. His applications for exit visas over the past three years, when invited to special events abroad, have not been denied outright. Instead they have been made impossible to obtain because of the logistical difficulties he faces in having to apply through his first place of ministry rather than the region of the country where he now lives.

3.2. Restrictive legislation regarding North Americans

Another regulation which came into effect on 22 February 2008 is specifically targeted at residents of the United States.³ The regulation specifies that any citizen or resident of the US who visits Cuba with a religious waiver from the US Treasury Department must also apply for a Cuban religious visa and may not travel to Cuba on a tourist visa. Many denominations in Cuba have strong links to their US-based counterparts and Cuban church leaders are concerned that the scope of the regulation gives it the potential to limit severely their interaction with US associates.

In addition, the regulation further stipulates that anyone travelling on a tourist visa must engage in tourist activities only and should not participate in any religious activities. The regulations do not make clear in which religious activities it would be unacceptable for a visitor on a tourist visa to participate. This has led to concern among Cuban church leaders that it could be applied even to simply attending a church service. Many church leaders across the island, from both registered and unregistered churches, report that it has already been made clear to them by local authorities that they should strongly discourage, if not prohibit altogether, the attendance of foreigners at religious services. They are deeply concerned that this regulation may formalise the exclusion of foreigners from religious activities.

¹ Human Rights Watch. “*Cuba’s Repressive Machinery – Chapter III, Impediments to Human Rights in Cuban Law.*” 1999. <http://www.hrw.org/legacy/reports/1999/cuba/index.htm#TopOfPage>

² Ministry of Housing officials confirmed the existence of this regulation and said that it was put in place in order to prohibit as much as possible the movement of Cubans from rural areas to the cities where there are more opportunities in terms of housing and employment.

³ Although the regulation refers to “North Americans” it only applies to those visiting with a US Treasury Department issued religious waiver, which would not be relevant to anyone other than US residents. See Appendix II.

3.3. Restrictive legislation relating to house churches

A government directive issued in April 2005, and implemented in September that same year, severely curtailed religious freedom in Cuba by imposing complicated and repressive restrictions on all unofficial churches in that country. The legislation, *Directive 43 and Resolution 46*, announced in the wake of Pope John Paul II's funeral, requires that all house churches (in Cuba the term can be applied to any building not officially designated for religious worship but used for religious purposes) to register with the authorities. This continues to cause concern among church leaders as house churches which have attempted to register with local authorities prior and subsequent to the enactment of the 2005 legislation have experienced prohibitive complications in the process.

The directive states that two house churches of the same denomination will not be allowed to exist within two kilometres of one another. It further stipulates that detailed information – including the number of worshippers, dates and times of services, and the names and ages of all inhabitants of the house in which services are held – must be provided to the authorities.

Once authorisation is granted, the legislation plainly states that the authorities will supervise the operation of meetings. The directive then goes on to explain that if the authorities, in the course of their observation, find that the requirements for the functioning of a house church are not being met, they can suspend meetings in the house for one year or more. If a complaint is registered against a church, it can be shut down permanently and attendees can be subject to imprisonment.

The new legislation also explicitly prohibits non-Cubans from participating, which includes simply being present, in a religious service without first seeking official permission. Foreigners are prohibited altogether from involvement with house churches in mountainous regions. Any violation of this clause will result in 1000 CUC fines (the equivalent of 1000 US dollars), a huge sum for Cubans, who earn on average less than \$20 per month. The fine will be applied to both the foreign person in question and to the church leader responsible and the house church will be shut down.

Lastly, even if a house church receives authorisation to operate, it must stay within the limits imposed by the authorities. Rooms within the house that have not been approved may not be used by the house church, nor may the church members meet on the roof, a common practice in Cuba both because of the heat and because of a general lack of space. The law gives the authorities the right to dictate how many people may meet in any given house church, which effectively puts a stop on any church growth.

4. General discrimination on the basis of religion

Despite a 1991 regulation which allowed Christians to join the Cuban Communist Party (CCP) and outlawed discrimination on the basis of religion, systematic discrimination against Christians persists. This is, in part, because of the refusal of most Christians to join the CCP for reasons of conscience, coupled with the fact that CCP membership continues to be key to professional and academic advancement in Cuba. Contacts in Cuba report that it is common for Christians to be passed over for promotion, excluded from important meetings and activities, demoted and/or transferred to undesirable locations because, as Christians and as non-members of the CCP, they are considered to be “untrustworthy”.⁴

⁴ Cuban authorities often point to the fact that there are three Protestant leaders in the National Assembly as evidence that Christians in Cuba do not face discrimination. It should be noted however that the three deputies in question, Pastor Ofelia Ortega Suárez, Pastor Raul Suarez Ramos, and the Rev. Pablo Oden Marichal, are all high ranking leaders within the Cuban Council of Churches and are often vocal supporters of the government's policies. It should also be noted that there are no Catholic clergy or lay-leaders, nor are there any members of Protestant denominations that are not part of the CCC in the National Assembly.

Cubans report that discrimination and harassment are particularly strong when directed against Cubans who formally leave the CCP after converting to Christianity. Some church leaders report that new members of their congregations who have chosen to leave the CCP have been approached by party officials who threatened them with potential negative repercussions for them and/or for family members. In one example, in the central part of the country, two women, both of whom had previously been active members of the local CCP, renounced their membership prior to their baptisms. They were approached by the local CCP leadership and were warned of the possible repercussions of their actions. They were threatened with the loss of their jobs as well as the likely negative implications for the future studies of their children.

At the same time, however, there have been some improvements in this area over the past few years. Restrictions on members of the Cuban security agencies including the military and the police have reportedly been somewhat relaxed. In the past, members of the Cuban security agencies were banned from participation in any religious activity and were not allowed to have Bibles in their possession, but, according to reports over the past few years from Cuban Christians, this is no longer the case. However, there are still some reports of young Christians carrying out their compulsory military service being singled out for intense harassment or forced to undergo particularly gruelling exercises.

5. Building restrictions

Since the 1959 Revolution, the government has only permitted the construction of a handful of new churches across the country. This, together with the fact that it is technically illegal to organise religious activities in buildings not officially registered for religious use, mean that many Christian communities, particularly those in more remote rural areas, do not have a place to meet for church services. In light of the rapid church growth in terms of numbers of practicing Christians in Cuba over the past twenty years, this constitutes a serious religious liberty violation in that it prohibits many Cuban Christians from freely exercising their right to meet together for worship.

Most of the churches that were built prior to the Revolution have been allowed to continue to function as places of religious activity. Any changes to the structure including expansions and/or repairs and renovations, however, may only be carried out with the permission of the Office of Religious Affairs, under the direction of Caridad Diego. These authorisations are rarely granted, either because they are formally denied or because government officials simply fail to respond. In practice, this means that many church buildings are far too small to accommodate their congregations or they are now structurally unsound, because the government has not allowed necessary repairs to take place. In some cases, church buildings have become so unsafe that they have been closed by the government.

6. House churches

During the 1990s, the shortage of space designated for religious activity, coupled together with rapid growth in all denominations, led to the widespread use of 'house churches.' The term 'house church,' is fairly broad; while it can refer to structures that are still primarily used as family homes but are also used on certain days for church services, it also can be applied to homes that are no longer lived in and are solely dedicated to religious activities. In addition, in Cuba the term also includes buildings that were constructed without official permission to be used for religious activities.

The size of individual house churches varies greatly. Some have only a handful of regular attendees while others number in the hundreds. It is impossible to know for certain the exact number of house churches on the island; however, church leaders inside Cuba put the number at anywhere between 10,000 and 15,000.

Very few house churches have been granted formal authorisation to carry out religious activity. In Cuba, where freedom of assembly and association are still severely restricted, this carries obvious risks. Although throughout the 1990s the authorities appeared to tolerate house churches for the most part, their rapid multiplication appears to have caused some alarm within the communist leadership. The 2005 legislation, discussed above, appeared to be aimed at clamping down on the movement and controlling it as much as possible. While the regulations have not been applied across the board, some churches have unfortunately been destroyed or threatened with closure. In addition, there has been a sharp increase in reports of government harassment of church leaders and congregations attached to house churches.

In one example, around thirty informal “Houses of Reflection” were established in one large urban area by Roman Catholic lay leaders after the visit of Pope John Paul II in 1998. However, over the past decade, the owners of the homes were subjected to a campaign of discreet but systematic intimidation, with local representatives from the CCP or the Committees for the Defence of the Revolution (CDR) regularly visiting their homes and urging them to think about the possible repercussions for them and particularly for their children should they continue to allow their homes to be used for religious activity. Although subtle, these tactics were highly effective, and in 2007 the last two remaining Houses of Reflection shut their doors, ostensibly “voluntarily”.

7. Church closures

Over the last few years, a number of churches across the country have been threatened with closure or have been shut down. These were, for the most part, churches in areas where few foreign tourists visit and where communication with the outside world can be extremely difficult. In one example in late April 2008, an unregistered Pentecostal church in the municipality of Arroyo Naranjo, Havana Province, was shut down by government officials. The church, which had been operating for seventeen years and numbered around 70 members, was attached to the home of the pastor, the Reverend Ernesto Oliva. The pastor stated that he had been fined between 600 and 1500 pesos⁵ on numerous occasions and had had repeated interviews with government officials who were unhappy with the presence of the church. Attempts by church members to officially register the church were met with repeated delays and other obstacles. The pastor indicated that, despite the risk of government retaliation, the church members planned to resume meetings in another location if the registration process did not move forward.

A second church in another part of the country reported being threatened with closure the same month. The Cristo Resurrección y Vida Eterna Assemblies of God (AOG) church in Morón, Ciego de Avila Province, was threatened with closure following the church’s sponsorship of an event for neighbourhood children. Local authorities accused the church of organising a parade without the legal permits. They informed church leaders that they would not be permitted to hold services and that the church might be shut down completely. Marlenis Grillo, the Municipal Communist Party Representative for Religious Affairs, and Omar Martinez, the Provincial Communist Party Representative for Religious Affairs, reiterated the threat in a meeting with the church pastor and an AOG denominational leader.

In a third case, in March 2008, local authorities interrupted a wedding ceremony being held in a house church in Limones, Rodas Municipality, Cienfuegos Province. They demanded that the celebration be stopped and threatened to close the house church for holding an illegal

⁵ This would be approximately 25 to 55 US dollars, or the equivalent of two to five months average monthly salaries in Cuba.

religious service. When the Methodist pastor officiating the service, Raudel Leiva, explained to the delegate that it was in fact a wedding, the government official replied that it was not a wedding as the people present were singing hymns and praying. Local Christians reported that, two weeks earlier, the same official had demolished a wall in the house of a Christian couple, stating that the construction was illegal.

The majority of the cases involved the only church of a particular denomination in the community or, in some cases, the only church at all. In one example, the pastor overseeing an unregistered church of around twenty members, the only church in the community, was told that the church constituted a “security risk” and would have to close. The community is located relatively near to, but not on, a military base, and the authorities were unable or unwilling to explain to the pastor in what way the church jeopardised the security of the military base.

8. Destruction of church properties

Since the implementation of the 2005 legislation on house churches, there have also been reports of the threatened and actual destruction of church buildings, in addition to the forced closure of house churches. In 2008 at least one church was destroyed by the authorities. In mid-June, government officials knocked down all the walls of a legally registered Baptist church in central Cuba, leaving only the frame standing. The church had requested government permission to repair the roof after one of the supporting beams was damaged. Instead of granting permission, however, the government imposed a fine on the church. One week before the demolition, local religious affairs officials visited the church and asked the pastor and the other religious leaders not “to make it into a problem,” advising them to trust in a government solution. The building was subsequently demolished.

The officials imposed a second fine on the church and threatened to come back to demolish the rest. However, a few days later the authorities returned to the church, cancelled the second fine and told the pastor that he would be allowed to rebuild the church. However, no financial or material reparation was provided to rebuild the demolished building.

9. Confiscation of church properties

Over the past few years, CSW has received a number of reports regarding the arbitrary confiscation or threats of confiscation of church property. In July 2008, a pastor in Pilon, Granma Province, reported that government authorities were threatening to confiscate the church building. The unregistered Methodist church (a member of the CCC), which counts around 150 members, has been meeting for seven years. However, last year, officials from the National Institute for Housing demanded that the pastor, Adalberto Ramirez Ramirez, stop holding religious services and told him that, if he did not comply, the building would be confiscated by the CCP.

In June 2008, a church leader was evicted from his home which was then confiscated by the government. Pastor Yogli Gonzalez Perez, of the Pentecostal Congregational Church (a member of the CCC) and his family, including a four year old child, were forcibly evicted from his home in Santiago de Cuba. According to the pastor, police forced their way into the house, which legally belonged to him and where he had lived with his family for fifteen years, and confiscated all of his belongings. The house was sealed and they have been unable to return. He believes this is a case of religious persecution.

A number of cases previously reported by CSW have yet to be resolved. In the province of Las Tunas, in 2006, a relatively spacious, well-maintained building which served both as a church and pastoral house in the centre of town was forcibly confiscated by the government to be used as a television station. The pastor and his family, who had lived in the property for twelve years, were re-housed in an underdeveloped area of town in a cramped house in

poor condition. No compensation has been made for the loss of the church itself; in fact, the family has been told that, as their new home belongs to the Ministry of Housing, it cannot be used for any religious activities. Despite numerous complaints and appeals to local and municipal CCP and government officials, the family and church have not received any redress.

A Baptist church in Eastern Cuba is currently in a similar situation. In this case, the church, which had been renovated and maintained by church members, was seized by local authorities in 2006 who declared it would be used as a school. No compensation was made, and the doors to the building were all sealed. The church, at the time, was overseen by a seminary student who reportedly had a nervous breakdown as a result of the experience. Interestingly, the church remains empty as local teachers have apparently refused to work in a building confiscated from a Christian group. Church members are forced to meet in the home of a family, who have generously dedicated one room of their house to be used as a place of worship.

In a positive move, however, one church property confiscated by the authorities was returned to the church group after the case received international attention. The church had been seized in 2005, and, as in the case of the Baptist church mentioned above, local authorities indicated it would be used as a school. According to church leaders, however, they were told by the authorities that international intervention was responsible for its return. They are now able to meet freely and use the property for religious activity.

10. Harassment of church leaders

Over the past two years, there have been worrying increases both in reports and in the severity of harassment of religious leaders. Severe harassment seems to have been reserved for Protestant church leaders who have been publicly outspoken on issues related to religious freedom. Leaders of fast-growing independent churches and church groups have also been targeted. Two national Protestant leaders were subjected to criminal proceedings in 2008 and 2009.

Catholic priests and lay leaders have also been the victims of harassment. One of the most serious examples is that of Father José Conrado, based at the Santa Teresita del Niño church in Santiago, who has been targeted by local authorities for a number of years. Both his church and his home have been the subject of repeated robberies, and in the past year he has been prevented on at least one occasion from meeting with foreign visitors. Other Catholic lay leaders who have spoken out publicly on issues related to religious freedom and human rights have also reported harassment in various forms, including loud music being played day and night and vandalism of their homes.

10.1. Pastor Omar Gude Pérez and the Apostolic Movement

Pastor Omar Gude Pérez was detained in May 2008 in Camaguey and initially charged with human trafficking. Gude Pérez is a leader of the Apostolic Movement, an unregistered nationwide group of churches which has been particularly targeted by the government over the past few years.⁶ After eleven months in prison, the human trafficking charges were thrown out by a judge due to lack of evidence.

⁶ On 20 November 2007, the Church of the Apostles, part of the Apostolic Movement in the Abel Santamaria neighbourhood of Santiago, was razed to the ground by government officials. All of the church's belongings and the pastor's home were confiscated by the government. See page 7 of CSW's 2008 report on religious liberty in Cuba <http://dynamic.csw.org.uk/article.asp?t=report&id=93> for more information.

The state then charged him with “falsification of documents” and “illicit economic activity.” In July 2009 he was found guilty of the first charge⁷ and sentenced to six years in prison. Following the verdict, the government threatened to confiscate the family home, which, they told his wife, was in retaliation for her communicating with international human rights organisations. CSW believes that Gude Pérez has been targeted because of his leadership of the Apostolic Movement – the rapid growth of this movement over the past few years across the country, the leaders’ refusal to register, and the network’s independence from other traditional denominations seem to be at the root of the government persecution.

According to other prisoners in the facility where he is being held, Gude Pérez is being held separately and is being treated as a political prisoner. He has also been prevented from taking part in the work scheme offered to prisoners to help them to provide some income for their families. The unrelated new charges against Gude Pérez, after courts threw out the original charge, as well as the disproportionate sentence handed down for an easily rectified administrative problem seem to confirm that this is a matter of government persecution.

More than 30 other church leaders from the Apostolic Movement were also detained and briefly imprisoned on two separate occasions in 2009. Pastor Bernardo de Quesada Salomon and his wife Damaris Marin were arrested on 19 May while attempting to travel to Camaguey to observe the court hearing of Gude Pérez. A number of other pastors from the same denomination in different parts of the country also reported being arrested and threatened with charges of “social dangerousness” in the days preceding the court hearing, in what they also believe was an attempt to stop them from attending the trial. On 3 June around 30 pastors from the Apostolic Movement were arrested in Santa Cruz del Sur, Camaguey. The pastors said that they believe the government was trying to stop them from attending a denominational meeting of about 200 church leaders, organised by de Quesada Salomon.⁸

Pastor Tomaza Victoria Ayala Zeller, also of the Apostolic Movement and pastor of the Apostolic Church in the Leningrado Agricultural Cooperative in Central Elia, Las Tunas province, and her family were evicted from their home on 22 May 2009. They were originally told that the house, which also served as the church, would be confiscated in July 2008, despite the fact that Ayala Zeller and her husband Jorge Zeller Leal had lived there for almost 30 years and were the legal owners. When they were finally evicted, the authorities served them documents which prohibit Ayala Zeller from holding any religious services and the police chief threatened to imprison Zeller Leal for “dangerousness.” The authorities also forcibly closed Zeller Leal’s carpentry shop, leaving the family homeless and with no source of income.

Finally, Pastor Mario Alvarez who, alongside Pastors Gude Pérez and Bernardo de Quesada Salomon, is one of the principle leaders of the Apostolic Movement and who oversees a large church of around 800 members in Havana has also been the target of government pressure. In late 2008, a church service was disrupted by youths in street clothes who entered the building and proceeded to shout loudly and to hit and kick worshippers. Rather than investigating the crime, a few days later government authorities visited the church and told Alvarez that if this happened again his church would be shut down. In July 2009, Alexi Perez, a church leader close to Alvarez who oversees around 100 members in the church,

⁷ A number of years ago, Gude Pérez legally changed his name in order to take his step-father’s surname as his own. His family has the documents to show that the procedure was carried out according to the law. Despite this, the name change was the basis for the state’s case against him.

⁸ Other pastors associated with the Apostolic Movement who reported being harassed and threatened with imprisonment by government officials in 2009 include: Pastor Eran Pérez of Mir; Pastor Yúnior Sáenz from Uñas, Holguín; Pastor Alexis Medino from Santiago de Cuba; Pastor Leostel Escalona from Mamanatuabo, Central Azucarero Violeta, Ciego de Ávila; and Pastor Luís Yoel Barbuena of Guáimaro, Camaguey, who was arrested and threatened with four years’ imprisonment for using audio equipment not registered with the government in a church service on 20 May.

was arrested and imprisoned. He was at first charged with illicit economic activity but these charges were later changed to “illegal reception of materials,” an apparent reference to building materials Perez bought and used to build houses in an effort to provide for his family.⁹ Perez has apparently come under pressure to implicate Alvarez and this seems to be the main reason for his arrest and imprisonment.

10.2. Reverend Roberto Rodriguez

The second major religious leader to be targeted over the past year for criminal proceedings is Reverend Roberto Rodriguez, who was until recently the national president of the Interdenominational Fellowship of Evangelical Pastors and Ministers in Cuba (CIMPEC). Reverend Rodriguez has been summoned to appear in court four times since the end of December 2008 for the crime of “threatening behaviour”. On the first three occasions the court suspended the proceedings without giving a reason; Rodriguez was too ill to attend the fourth court hearing.

The criminal charges against Rodriguez followed the public withdrawal of CIMPEC from the CCC, in September 2008, under his leadership. At the time, CIMPEC published an open letter outlining their reasons for withdrawing from the CCC in which they cited consistent and illegal interference in internal CIMPEC affairs by the CCC leadership, with government support, over the past year.¹⁰ The government refused to recognise CIMPEC’s withdrawal from the CCC and, in October 2008, stripped Rodriguez of his position as president of CIMPEC in the government Registry of Associations. This was condemned as unconstitutional by the members of CIMPEC as it was done without their involvement or approval.

In April 2009, after failing to respond to three requests from the legitimate CIMPEC leadership to convene a national assembly, the government organised its own CIMPEC conference, excluding the elected national leadership, in Havana in order to choose new leaders. Hundreds of members of CIMPEC confirmed that they had not been invited to participate in the meeting and the national office published an open letter denouncing the event as a sham.

The legal case against Rodriguez, who is over 70 and in poor health, is still open, putting him under considerable stress. His family has also been targeted and were forced to move from their family home in Placetas after prolonged and intense physical harassment by their neighbours, carried out with the tacit support of local authorities. The harassment culminated in a physical attack on Rodriguez’s daughter-in-law, Gilianys Meneses Rodriguez, carried out in public, which resulted in her suffering a miscarriage. Incredibly, the authorities found her guilty of disturbing the public order at a trial on 17 August 2009 and fined her the equivalent of twice the average monthly salary. Her husband, Rodriguez’s son Pastor Eric Gabriel Rodriguez del Toro, was tried in December 2008 on the same charges as his father and was been sentenced to one year probation with the possibility of imprisonment if he “re-offends”.

10.3. Retaliation for “non-cooperation”

Pastors of all Protestant denominations and Catholic priests report heavy pressure from government officials to expel members of their congregations who are engaged in what is deemed to be political activity. This includes those involved in independent journalism, running an independent library, and human rights activism. These pressure tactics are also extended to members of the families of political activists and/or prisoners. A number of the

⁹ These were identical to the charges levied against political activist Darsi Ferrer who was arrested and imprisoned the same month.

¹⁰ See Appendix III.

wives of men imprisoned in the 2003 crackdown have told CSW that they were asked to decrease their participation or leave their churches altogether after church leaders came under pressure from the authorities. Pastors have also confirmed to CSW that they have been threatened with the closure of their church if they do not comply with these demands.

Grassroots church leaders across the island also consistently report that local authorities and/or CCP officials regularly approach them to seek their public support for government and CCP initiatives. Church leaders who have refused on the grounds that the church should not be used for political purposes have found themselves the target of campaigns of harassment. One pastor with young children in Central Cuba reported that at a school meeting for parents the local authorities singled him out publicly to ask if he would enrol his children in the Pioneers, a Communist youth organisation. When he indicated that he would not, he was approached privately by local CCP officials who pushed him to enrol his children, in the hopes that other parents from the church would follow suit. After refusing a second time, the pastor and his family found their house (which also serves as the local church) repeatedly vandalised, they received anonymous threats over the telephone, and most seriously were the targets of an “Act of Repudiation” which occurred when visitors from a church in Havana were in their home for a celebration marking the 50th anniversary of the church. Party militants surrounded the home for hours, breaking down their front gate, while shouting slogans and obscenities and throwing stones.

Another church leader from Central Cuba reported a similar experience after being approached on numerous occasions as local officials sought his public support for various CCP projects, including photos with him and local authorities together to be published in the State newspaper. When he refused again on the grounds that the church should not be used to advance political agendas, he also became the target of harassment by local authorities and CCP militants. At one point, he reported, he was approached by a local CCP leader and was told the harassment would stop if he would consent to act as a government informer and would report on the activities of the members of his church. When he again refused, the harassment grew more intense. He reported that he received veiled death threats, and at one point the family received a meal, supposedly donated by a member of the church, which was laced with shards of glass. At another point he found that the church vehicle had been tampered with in a way that could have caused a serious accident had it gone unnoticed.

10.4. Refusal of exit visas and government permits

Church leaders from all denominations also report that they continue to encounter difficulties in applying for exit visas or permits for church vehicles. Many complain that the denial of these permissions is usually linked to a perception that the church leader in question is “uncooperative” in some way. They also say that the arbitrary denial of these permissions is extremely difficult, if not, at times, impossible to appeal.

10.5. Pressure to silence critical voices

Over the past five years, it also appears that the government has put increased pressure on denominational bodies to silence critical voices within their midst. This was highlighted in the 2006 case of Pastor Carlos Lamelas who was removed from his position as leader of the Church of God denomination, a member of the CCC, despite almost unanimous support.¹¹ The following year, the majority of churches within the denomination threw their support behind Lamelas and effectively created a new Church of God group, outside of the CCC.

¹¹ Pastor Lamelas was then imprisoned for four months and put on trial in December 2006 on charges of “human trafficking.” The court found him innocent of these charges after the state prosecutor admitted that there was no evidence against him.

At least two other leaders in CCC denominations fled the country and received asylum abroad after coming under fire for making calls for increased religious freedom. One, a pastor from the Episcopalian denomination, came under intense pressure from the leadership of the denomination after she made critical comments to other pastors regarding government interference in internal leadership elections.

There have also been reports of defamation in state run media of entire religious groups who have openly called for more religious freedom. In April 2008, CSW received reports that a local publication in Matanzas, sponsored by the state, had published statements alleging that the withdrawal of the Methodists from the Ecumenical Seminary in Matanzas was carried out in collusion with President Bush's plan to "destabilise Cuba". This is especially alarming as many of the human rights and democracy activists currently imprisoned also stand accused of acting as mercenaries on behalf of the United States government to destabilise the country. Such accusations against church groups in state media serve both to intimidate and to stigmatise these groups in wider Cuban society.

10.6. Government informants

The use of government informants in churches and seminaries continues to be a problem. Church leaders from all denominations assume that there are government planted informants in their congregations. As a result, many church leaders practice a form of self-censorship, being careful not to say anything that might possibly be construed as anti-Castro or counter-revolutionary in their sermons and teaching. It has been pointed out repeatedly that religious leaders, as the only non-Communist Party members officially permitted to speak more or less publicly to groups of people in Cuba, are automatically viewed as a potential danger. However, a few pastors seem to believe that in some parts of the country this practice has been scaled down in recent years because of the high incidence of government planted informants genuinely converting to the Christian faith.

11. Government interference in and denial of right to worship

There were regular reports of the government preventing Cubans from exercising their right to worship. In the vast majority of these cases the victims were Cuban men and women who are perceived by the government to be political activists. In February 2008 dozens of Catholic human rights defenders¹² were arrested, interrogated, and threatened by state security agents who banned them from participating in the masses celebrated by Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Vatican Secretary, in Santiago de Cuba and Guantanamo on 23 and 24 February. In May 2008, Carlos Hernandez Rodriguez, the national vice-president of the Opposition Movement for a New Republic, reported that he had been arrested by the police in Santiago de las Vegas in order to prevent him from attending mass. Later the same year, in September, Ricardo Ruben Barreto Fuentes and Francisco Sá Fuster, were barred from participating in a monthly religious service dedicated to prayers for the liberation of FARC kidnapping victims in Colombia at La Merced Catholic Church in Old Havana. In January 2009, eleven people¹³ were violently arrested and incarcerated in the Dragones y Zulueta Police Station in Old Havana in order to prevent them from attending a special mass, celebrated on the eighth day of each month, for political prisoners in Cuba. Five more were arrested and detained for the same reason in April.¹⁴

¹² Including Ana Belkis Ferrer Garcia, Belkis Cantillo Ramirez, Mercedes Elias Rivero, Raiza Mustafa Elias, Lisa Maria Lebeque Gilart, Elina Rosa Gual, Gerardo Sanchez Ortega, Yorledis Dubalon Guiber, Rolando Rodriguez Lovaina, Abel Lopez Perez, Keiber Rodriguez Fernandez, Noelmis Sevilla Terrero, Rene Dominguez Palmel, Raunel Vinajera Estive, Yordis Garcia Fournier, and Raul F Caballero Rodriguez.

¹³ Arturo Montgomery Alonso McKeever, Mercedes Evelin Alvarez Garcia, Joel Artiaga Cuello, Alejandro Jose Botella del Valle, Alexander Gonzalez Ferrales, Luis Jesus Gutierrez, Zoila Hernandez Diaz, Maria Hotensia Milian Pedroso, Jose Antonio Moreira Laffita, Isable Ramos Martinez, and Yunier Reina Hernandez.

¹⁴ Joel Artiaga Coello, Jose Diaz Silva, Carlos Manuel Hernandez Reyes, Victor Rodriguez Menendez, and Julia Isabel Sabon Garcia.

Protestant human rights activists were also targeted for government harassment. On 20 March 2008, around 60 government security agents, including members of the State Security, paramilitary group Association of the Combatants of the Cuban Revolution, and the Committees for Defence of the Revolution (CDR), surrounded the First Baptist Church of Santa Clara, “La Trinidad,” during a church service. A number of political activists, including former political prisoners and families of current prisoners, attend the church and the service that day was dedicated to prayer for all political prisoners on the island.

The church has reported an increased government presence at church functions in an apparent attempt to intimidate the church leadership and the congregation. Two months after the first incident, in May 2008, over 150 state security agents and members of the paramilitary group Rapid Response Brigade were sent to observe an open-air celebration sponsored by the same church, marking the end of the country-wide Baptist campaign “Fifty Days of Prayer for Cuba”. Those attending the celebration stated that they believed the government presence was due to the participation of at least fifteen pro-democracy and human rights activists who are members of the Baptist church or other denominations that were involved in the event.

12. Distribution of religious materials

Christian leaders continue to complain of a scarcity of Bibles and of other religious literature. The lack of Bibles is most acute in rural areas but also appears to be a significant problem in the cities. Based on reports received by CSW, it appears to be a major problem for all denominations, including Catholics and Protestants both in and outside of the CCC.

The shortage is apparently a result of severe government restrictions on the import of Bibles and other religious materials. The restrictions, for example, stipulate that within Protestant denominations all religious literature, including Bibles, must be imported into the country under the auspices of the CCC, despite the fact that it represents only a minority of Protestant Christians. Catholics also report difficulties in the import of Bibles and, at one point, were also apparently obliged to work with the CCC to bring Bibles into the country.

13. Access to the media

Unless they receive specific authorisation, Cuban and joint enterprises may not sell computers, facsimile machines, photocopiers, or other equipment to any church except at official (artificially high) retail prices. In addition, many religious organisations are denied internet access. This establishes a virtual state monopoly on printed media – those church organisations and other independent organisations which do have access to a printing press are heavily monitored. Many observers speculate that the closure of the Centre for Religious and Civic Formation in Pinar del Rio and the shutting down of the publications *Vitral* (Pinar del Rio) and *Bifronte* (Holguin) was the result of intense pressure from the government on the church hierarchy. There continues to be heavy government pressure on the editing of Catholic publications.

Church leaders of all denominations also continue to express their unhappiness at the continued lack of access to the media by religious groups. This is exacerbated by a widely held perception that the state media gives ready access to Afro-Cuban religions under the pretext that their activities are cultural rather than religious. There were some notable exceptions to the general lack of access to the media over the past year, including the granting of periodic broadcasts to the CCC. In addition, the Catholic Church was given a fifteen minute television slot on 25 December in order to air the Cardinal’s Christmas Mass. However, church groups are still not afforded the right to set up radio or television programmes.

14. Religious rights of political prisoners

In 2008, for the first time in 50 years, five Catholic bishops celebrated Christmas Mass in Combinado del Este, Cuba's largest prison. However, on a more general level, the religious rights of political prisoners continue to be systematically violated. Prisoners still report being denied the right to pastoral visits and the right to meet together with other prisoners for worship, prayer and study. Many also report the repeated confiscation of their Bibles and other religious literature, sometimes as punishment and at other times for no apparent reason at all. This situation is detailed in another CSW report, "Religious freedom violations in Cuban prisons", published on 18 March 2008.

15. Conclusion

There is no question that there is a degree of respect for religious freedom in Cuba and most churches and denominations enjoy a certain amount of freedom to worship and meet together with others of the same faith. However, while the Cuban Government should be encouraged to continue to allow these freedoms, serious violations happening simultaneously across the country cannot be disregarded.

Although there have been some isolated improvements since the release of CSW's last report on religious freedom in May 2006, these have usually taken place in response to international pressure on particular cases. Generally, religious freedom in Cuba has continued to deteriorate over the past two years, and this has been most evident in a sharp increase in reports of government interference, at times overt, in internal church and/or denominational issues. The arrest and imprisonment of multiple church leaders, including Omar Gude Pérez and Alexi Perez, and the legal harassment of Reverend Roberto Rodriguez, were an alarming development and set an extremely worrying precedent. Legislation passed in 2005 aimed at clamping down on house churches remains in place, and, while not applied uniformly, CSW has received an increased number of reports over the past two years of the demolition and/or confiscation of church property and of the arrests and harassment of church leaders. Some of the most serious and consistent violations of religious freedom occur in Cuban prisons, where Christian political prisoners are repeatedly denied the fundamental religious rights set out in the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners. In a related issue, political activists and their family members, including spouses of political prisoners, are repeatedly denied the right to worship.

Church leaders inside Cuba agree that an antagonistic approach towards the Cuban Government by international groups on this issue will most likely be counterproductive. Any advocacy action taken should be extremely careful to avoid exaggerating or over-dramatising the situation. At the same time, positive results in certain cases over the past two years indicate that the Cuban Government does sometimes respond positively when firmly confronted on specific abuses. It is crucial that the international community continues to consistently raise religious freedom, both in general terms and on specific cases, with the Cuban Government.

16. APPENDIX I – Index of acronyms and translations

- AOG – Assemblies of God (*Asambleas de Dios*)
- CIMPEC –Interdenominational Fellowship of Ministers and Pastors in Cuba (*Confraternidad Interdenominacional de Ministros y Pastores en Cuba*)
- CCC – Cuban Council of Churches (*Consejo de Iglesias de Cuba*)
- CCP – Cuban Communist Party (*Partido Comunista de Cuba*)
- CDR - Committees for Defence of the Revolution (*Comités para la Defensa de la Revolución*)
- CUC – Cuban Convertible Peso
- ICCPR - International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
- ICECSR - International Covenant on Economic, Cultural and Social Rights
- SET – Evangelical Theological Seminary (*Seminario Evangélico de Teología*)

17. APPENDIX II – Restrictions on North Americans who travel to Cuba for religious purposes

MINISTRY FOR FOREIGN RELATIONS
CIRCULAR DACCRE NO. 2/2008

TITLE: REGARDING NORTH AMERICAN CITIZENS AND FOREIGN, NON-CUBAN, CITIZENS RESIDENT IN THE UNITED STATES, WHO APPLY TO TRAVEL TO CUBA FOR RELIGIOUS PURPOSES

We inform you that the following decisions have been adopted in relation to North-American citizens and foreign, non-Cuban citizens who are resident in the United States who apply to travel to Cuba for religious purposes.

1. North-American citizens and foreign, non-Cuban citizens who are traveling with a religious license granted by the United States government will not be permitted to enter Cuba with a Tourist Card.
2. North-American citizens and foreign, non-Cuban citizens who are traveling with a religious license granted by the United States government should obtain the corresponding religious visa.
3. The religious institution which will be hosting the visitor to Cuba should apply to the corresponding Cuba authorities for the religious visa.
4. The Tourist Card is only and exclusively for tourism, the required visa should be applied for to engage in any other activities.

This circular will go into force on 22 February 2008.

Given in the City of Havana, on the 23rd of January of 2008, “Year 50 of the Revolution”.

Carlos R. Zamora
Director
DACCRE

18. APPENDIX III – Official letter from CIMPEC announcing its withdrawal from the Cuban Council of Churches¹⁵

Wednesday, September 10, 2008

The Fellowship of Cuban Pastors and Ministers (CIMPEC) leaves the Cuban Council of Churches (CCC)

“That all of you may be one... so that the world may believe.” John 17:21

National Directors of the CCC

Brothers and sisters,

CIMPEC is, via this letter, announcing its decision to withdraw its membership of the Cuban Council of Churches.

The reasons for this decision are attached.

Respectfully,
The National Directors of CIMPEC

CIMPEC Declaration

In this Document CIMPEC declares:

That in just three years, (October 2002-December 2005) CIMPEC celebrated fifteen events, ten on the national level and five on the regional level, which brought together pastors (male and female) from the majority of the provinces. They were, fundamentally, theological workshops. We are not including activities which took place on the local level. We also developed programmes to benefit the pastors (male and female). They distributed books, hymnals, a digital and printed CIMPEC card, and they published literary works by various authors, members of CIMPEC. It was, in every sense, the best period of time in CIMPEC's history. As it developed its programmes, CIMPEC did not lose any part of its principal objectives – those hundreds of participants and the people responsible for organising the events can testify to that.

However, apart from some setbacks caused by ex-national executives of CIMPEC, our work rhythm was not interrupted; however, it was very affected by the fact that the permits and visas needed for our activities were no longer approved, most fundamentally for the celebration of our General Assembly and Elections. In Document RNA (15-10-06) it says “...regarding the requests presented to this Directorate to celebrate the General Assembly of CIMPEC (it refers to previous requests made before this date) ...we communicate our decision not to authorise any request by the Assembly.”

In all of this, some saw an insurmountable crisis. With the exit of the ex-executives who had already abandoned their responsibilities, the situation normalised. Two of them were expelled from their denominations for serious reasons, which are recorded in the minutes of the expulsion sent by their Churches. With their bad behaviour, these persons caused great damage to CIMPEC. One of them, our ex-treasurer, refused to sign retirement cheques, and

¹⁵ Translated from the original Spanish document which can be read here: ____

those who were most affected were our elderly pastors. Thanks to God, CIMPEC did not disappear or disintegrate because of him.

The vacant spots were immediately filled up until the celebration of our Assembly through a generally accepted and wholly legal procedure. Because of the organisational structure of CIMPEC, our National Directorate was not overly affected, and, in addition, the provincial delegates are *ex-officio* of the Executive Committee. Overcoming this hurdle, for which CIMPEC was not responsible, everything remained stable, the best proof of this is that we continued working, untiringly, although we had to deal with some major obstacles.

However, some people say that CIMPEC is in crisis. It is very unfortunate that some employees of the Cuban Council of Churches have adopted this story without any questions. Both the previous president and the current president of the CCC have echoed these commentaries. The first said, in front of witnesses, "CIMPEC is disintegrating." Lacking even the most minimal sense of justice, and not even attempting to keep up appearances, they were not interested, nor did they take the time to understand the reasoning behind the actions of our National Directors, which were all normal and correct. These statements, from the mouths of the highest church leaders, contributed to the generating of disinformation and a climate of hostility aimed at CIMPEC and our national leadership.

The fact that CIMPEC continued to be very active, above all in the central and western provinces, is a matter of public record. We have not been able to organise large events, which many pastors would like to do, but we were able to carry out local activities – through which we were able to meet together. All of this leaves those who want to create an artificial crisis in CIMPEC without any arguments. We wonder, "What is the purpose of this campaign aimed at discrediting CIMPEC? Who would benefit from all of this?"

Despite this created atmosphere, CIMPEC has continued to meet all of its commitments regarding representation to the CCC, sending without change its delegates to the Assemblies and, with few exceptions, to the meetings of the Directing Board. This proves that it has continued to be active. In the CCC study assembly, in 2007 in Havana City, and as a gesture of good will, the delegates (presidents) of Sancti Spiritus, Havana Province and Havana City participated alongside the National Director of CIMPEC. In total, there were no less than fifteen members of CIMPEC present. This gesture was not even taken into consideration. Why wouldn't the CCC directors take advantage of this opportunity to look at, firsthand, the state of CIMPEC, something which all of the leaders present suggested to them?

In addition, CIMPEC sent its delegates to the electoral assembly of the CCC in March 2008. At that meeting, the current president of the CCC requested the votes of our delegates for his candidacy. In addition, at the Nominating Committee's meeting, our delegate received a request for CIMPEC to sponsor a particular candidate whose church did not have legal status.

Only one month later, during the first Directing Board, the recently elected president of the CCC attempted to include in the agenda, without asking, the theme of the "crisis" of CIMPEC – this was done without the knowledge or the approval of CIMPEC's National Directors. Our delegates, who were present in this meeting, succeeded in persuading him not to do this.

At the CIMPEC meeting, held on 30 May 2008 in the Justice Ministry of RNA and the OAR, the current president of the CIC was invited; he did not hide his hostility against CIMPEC and treated the National President in a very disrespectful manner.

In that meeting, he tried to revise and redefine some of the articles of our existing Regulations, approved in 1976, which are legally *Cosa Juzgada* (inviolable and sacred). He wanted to legally bind CIMPEC to the denominations and, of course, to the CCC. In this way, he wanted to open the way to make it easier for another “organisation” to come to the “aid” of CIMPEC and for future and possible interference in our General Assembly and elections. This would be unacceptable.

The character of CIMPEC, as its name indicates, is inter-denominational. Ministers and pastors (both male and female) can only be members of CIMPEC in a personal capacity. The relationship between CIMPEC and the denominations can only be informal, and, as a matter of fact, the relationships between CIMPEC and the denominations have always been the very best. The doors of all the churches in our country have always been open to CIMPEC. For our part, we will do all we can that it always remain so.

During the meeting, the president of the CCC, attempting to prove that the Council had “rights” over CIMPEC, used the insolent and surprising argument that, in the past, the CCC and CIMPEC offices had been located in the same building (calle 6 e/11 y 13, Vedado, Havana City). What this totally absurd argument actually demonstrated was that he was not there to help CIMPEC but rather he was treating an independent organisation as if it were a department of the CCC.

The CIMPEC delegate from Camaguey had also been invited to this meeting but not by our national directorship. The CCC president said that, as that man could not attend, a legal representative of the Council would take his place. These surprising words were said before the meeting in the Reception area of the building and in the presence of various CIMPEC leaders who were there. Despite the fierce insistence of the CCC president, the substitute was not admitted to the meeting. This was a serious interference in the internal matters of an independent institution.

Such unfriendly and anti-ecumenical actions are unacceptable. It would not be honourable nor honouring before God and men, to keep quiet about these acts. An institution like CIMPEC, whose members, now that CIMPEC is operating without a bank account, have made great efforts to keep it alive and active and, with their love offerings and sacrifices, are helping the retirement of our elderly pastors, deserves respect from everyone

These actions are also in contravention of the CCC Statutes:

“The Cuban Council of Churches does not have any authority over its members to decide questions about doctrine, government or worship.” (Part IV, Article 6, Clause g, Statutes)

In Conclusion:

Because of all the arbitrary acts and irregularities already mentioned and, above all, for the survival of CIMPEC as an independent institution, CIMPEC has decided to withdraw its membership from the Council of Churches, as this is optional and voluntary.

CIMPEC is the only organisation of ministers and pastors (male and female) of its kind in Cuba. A CIMPEC that is subordinated (or absorbed) in some way to other Institutions would no longer be CIMPEC and it would not be able to carry out its commitments effectively, because CIMPEC must continue to be of everyone and for everyone.

This is a painful decision because CIMPEC has for many years had dear and honourable friends and brothers and sisters linked to the CCC, but we have been forced to do this.

We receive Grace and Divine Mercy. We will continue to emphasise CIMPEC's objectives, strengthening fellowship between the servants of God of all confessions - training, planting and recovering values in our pastoral body, to the benefit of the Work of God and to our Country, where He has put us to serve.

National Directorate of CIMPEC
September 5, 2008