

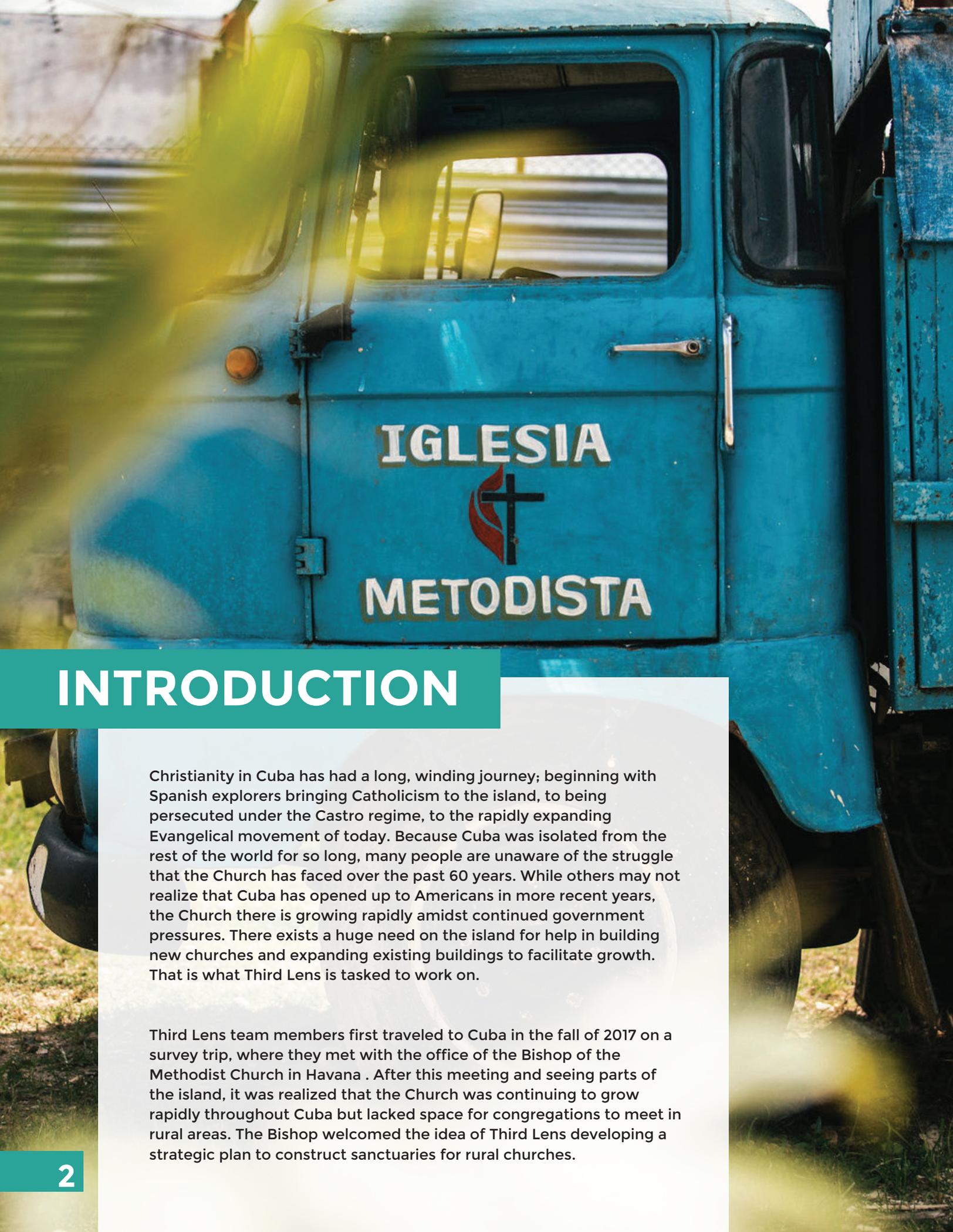


CUBAN MISSIONARY CHURCHES

Building over 100 churches in the next 3 years

PHASE I: PILOT PROGRAM



A close-up photograph of the side of a blue truck. The door is the central focus, featuring the text 'IGLESIA' at the top and 'METODISTA' at the bottom in white, bold, sans-serif capital letters. Between the two words is a black cross with a red flame-like shape on its left side. The truck's body shows signs of wear and tear, with some rust and faded paint. The background is blurred, suggesting an outdoor setting with greenery and a fence.

IGLESIA
METODISTA

INTRODUCTION

Christianity in Cuba has had a long, winding journey; beginning with Spanish explorers bringing Catholicism to the island, to being persecuted under the Castro regime, to the rapidly expanding Evangelical movement of today. Because Cuba was isolated from the rest of the world for so long, many people are unaware of the struggle that the Church has faced over the past 60 years. While others may not realize that Cuba has opened up to Americans in more recent years, the Church there is growing rapidly amidst continued government pressures. There exists a huge need on the island for help in building new churches and expanding existing buildings to facilitate growth. That is what Third Lens is tasked to work on.

Third Lens team members first traveled to Cuba in the fall of 2017 on a survey trip, where they met with the office of the Bishop of the Methodist Church in Havana. After this meeting and seeing parts of the island, it was realized that the Church was continuing to grow rapidly throughout Cuba but lacked space for congregations to meet in rural areas. The Bishop welcomed the idea of Third Lens developing a strategic plan to construct sanctuaries for rural churches.



PRE CASTRO YEARS:

Prior to The Revolution of 1959, Cuba was a predominantly Catholic nation. This dates back to the island's early colonial years when Spanish missionaries and settlers brought Catholicism to the island; and much like other Spanish colonies, Catholicism spread throughout the population and became the predominant religion. Throughout the years and especially into the 20th century, the Catholic Church in Cuba was associated with the island's wealthier citizens. There were over 150 Catholic schools on the island but no public education system. The fact that only Catholics with money could receive an education fueled a class division between the wealthy and the poor.



CHRISTIANITY UNDER CASTRO:

Fidel Castro began his coup in 1957 and overthrew the former dictator, Batista, in 1959; beginning his 47 year reign as the nation's dictator. In 1960, Castro nationalized the island's businesses and began talks with the Soviet Union. One year later, he instituted a one-party government system and implemented socialism into all aspects of Cuban life; Cuba was now officially a communist state.

As a Marxist-Leninist leader, Castro was opposed to religion and declared Cuba to be an atheist government. He forbade any public congregations, set restrictions on church building and maintenance, and persecuted clergy. Churches were no longer allowed to build new facilities and could not purchase materials for the upkeep of their existing buildings. There were also restrictions on where churches could be located and how much land they could use. Any small churches that were allowed to meet, or any underground worship groups that gathered secretly, were often infiltrated by government spies and information was collected on all attendees; putting a possible risk on attending any gathering.

Restrictions were also set in place for individuals. If you were a believer of any faith, you were prohibited from party membership. This meant that you were forbidden from holding a government job and you were no longer in good standing with the authorities. The idea was that if the people no longer had a place to worship together, then they would eventually lose their faith and religion in Cuba would cease to exist.

The Cuban government also saw the Church as a threat to their authority, which led to continual persecution. Before Castro took power, the Catholic Church took a strong anti-communist stance.

The fact was, that since Cuban Catholics historically were wealthier and better educated, they held a high power in the country. This created a huge threat to Castro's new government that he had to eliminate. The influence Priests had over their congregations was also seen as a threat because they could use their influence to incite rebellion within their congregations. For this reason, throughout the 1960's, hundreds of Cuban religious leaders were arrested and sent to labor camps or deported. During this time, the Church was also blamed for multiple attempts to overthrow the government. Castro also nationalized, without compensation, the over 150 Catholic schools on the island to provide for his newly established public education system.

Although most schools were converted, if they did not they were closed, as it was seen as a better alternative to the Church having an influence on education, despite the fact that Fidel, himself, attended a private Catholic school in his youth. The persecution of Christians, not only occurred in the early days of the communists' rule but continues to endure today.



FALL OF THE SOVIET UNION:

Cuba remained a strong ally of the Soviet Union and relied on the USSR for economic support and trade. When the Soviet Union fell in 1991, Cuba lost an important economic backer. For this reason, Fidel was forced to loosen his restrictions on trade with outside nations and reach out to new trade partners to keep the nation's economy running. He began working with Venezuela and Columbia, often trading medical personnel and supplies in exchange for oil. The decision by Castro to open up more to outside trade meant the need for internal changes, or at least the appearance of internal changes.

To appear less authoritarian to outside trade partners, the Cuban government made some big changes. In 1992, the government dropped its official stand on atheism. It also amended the Cuban constitution and created Article 42, prohibiting religious discrimination, at least officially. Under this new legislation, small places of worship were allowed and small church services could be held. This opened the door for an underground Evangelical revival and home church movement. At the time, only about 2% of the Cuban population attended services because, although the government tried to hide it,

it was still extremely difficult for churches and religious organizations to operate in the country without persecution. Also, even though Article 42 had been passed, society over the past three decades had grown to be very anti-Christian and anti-religion; so Christians continued to be discriminated against, despite the government's "official" stance.

The Evangelical movement in the 1990's was mostly through home churches, due to continued political pressures and dire economic circumstances. Since new construction of sanctuaries was still not permitted, pastors would open up their own homes for worship. This also meant the government would have a harder time keeping tabs on Christians and resulted in very close-knit congregations. The downside was that oftentimes there were upwards of 30-40 people crammed wall-to-wall in a tiny, one-bedroom house or apartment. This limited the number of people who could come to worship and hindered each church's potential growth. These home churches are still thriving throughout the country as more Cubans are turning back to their Christian roots.

EASING OF REGULATIONS:

Fidel Castro's reign ended officially in 2008, and his brother Raul took power. Raul held less anti-Christian or anti-American ideals than his brother, and under his leadership, there has been easing of religious restrictions in Cuba since he took power. The most well known change came in 2011, when Raul began restoring United States diplomacy. As a result, he has also loosened the government's grip on the Church, albeit minimally. In the past three years, the government has eased restrictions on churches ability to purchase building materials and supplies, as well as allowing construction of new churches. Each church property must be owned by an individual, as the Church is still forbidden from owning new real estate, and these new multi-purpose churches were required to be registered so that the government can monitor attendees. The new legislation still came with the restriction that new churches have to be built with 50% residential components. Each church property must be owned by an individual, as the Church is still forbidden from owning new real estate, and these new multi-purpose churches had to be registered so that the government could monitor attendees. There are also still limits on how many churches can be built, as well as how much land they can occupy.

CURRENT CONDITIONS:

Thanks to the new regulations, church attendance is on the rise and, as of now, approximately 5% of the Cuban population openly identifies as Evangelical Christians. There are 433 Methodist churches on the island, up from 400 last year and hundreds more mission churches and cell groups with congregations of up to 30 members. While church attendance is growing and more Cubans are attending public worship services, the Church is struggling to keep up with growing facility demands. There are simply not enough churches on the island to keep up. Existing churches on the island are struggling to accommodate their respective congregations. The average Cuban church has large groups of people crowded into the pastor's small, one-bedroom home or peering through the windows in order to worship. These churches are struggling to grow their community reach because there just isn't enough room to accommodate large services, since heat and rain often keep congregations indoors. The rural mission churches have the space to accommodate new buildings, but lack the resources to construct on their own.



OPPORTUNITY:

After visiting Cuba several times last year and speaking with the Bishop's office, we realized Christianity was rapidly spreading throughout the country, but lacked the financial resources to keep up with the growth. The thriving, healthy Methodist Church specifically, needs to build over 100 new rural churches to support its congregations and pastors, and asked Third Lens to partner with the conference to develop a strategic plan therein. Third Lens has designed plans for a 20 ft. x 20 ft. outdoor pavilion that can be customized to meet the individual needs of each congregation. Each building could accommodate 40- 50 people, nearly twice the capacity of existing home churches. The estimated cost of each pavilion church is \$4,500 fully installed. The average household earns less than \$100 per month from their government service job. The economics make it challenging for the local Church to internally fund building programs without assistance from the global Church. There is an immense opportunity to spread the Gospel in Cuba by helping build churches for existing congregations and growing mission churches throughout the rural countryside. With the lifting of banking barriers, the American Church can support the thriving Church in Cuba.

THE GAME PLAN:

Third lens has received a preliminary list of 17 churches in need of immediate assistance. We plan to launch this phase of construction as a pilot program. The intent is to develop a larger scale plan for the logistical implementation and execution of all mission church needs for the Methodist Church. Sourcing of materials is very difficult in the communist system and will require developing new relationships and material channels.

The first step of the pilot program requires two survey trips. The first trip will be to visit each site to collect necessary data and meet each pastor. This information will be used to finalize design and implementation plans. The second trip will be to help capture the story of the Cuban Church through video and photography. David White, a renowned photographer from Nashville, has agreed to build a team to share the individual and communal stories of 3-4 select locations. These images will be used to share with interested parties through a fundraising film, as well as digital and print materials. The budget for the pilot program is \$15,000 (see the attached pro forma).

Once the survey trips are completed, Third Lens' team will create individual development and fundraising plans for each location. The plans will include final design, budgets and site specific logistics. Third lens will then distribute the packages to charities and fundraising partners. Churches, Sunday school classes and families have expressed interest in supporting one or more sites.

Once each site is fully funded and construction is ready to commence, Third Lens will remotely coordinate the local procurement and assembly of each pavilion utilizing easy to follow instructions; much like the instruction manual for the bookshelf you bought at IKEA and assembled at home. The churches will be required to pour the concrete pad before building materials are delivered to the site. Once the foundation is set, the congregation will be tasked with assembly. Upon completion, these churches will be able to minister to larger groups and eventually plant new mission churches and cell groups out of themselves.

