

NOTEBOOK

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LIFESTYLE

Building on a legacy

CUBA'S CHURCHES ARE GROWING AHEAD OF U.S. NORMALIZATION **by Nat Belz**

➔ Log on to Airbnb and you can land a pretty nice *casa particular*, or house rental, in Cuba—something you couldn't have

done a month ago. And you can use your MasterCard.

The trumpets of embargo removal were sounded by the United States when

President Barack Obama announced his intent to normalize relations last December, and the walls of embargo around this island paradise are starting to crumble.

But truer trumpets sounded nearly 60 years ago, when visionaries like Paul Northrup did what seemed too pragmatic to Americans doing business

in Cuba at the time: He registered his new church in Sancti Spiritus with the Batista government. Later, when Fidel Castro overthrew Batista, it and other registered churches were grandfathered in by the new regime, giving it legal status to operate openly. As a result, Northrup's church, Iglesia Las Buenas Nuevas, has grown into an evangelical denomination of 75 brick-and-mortar churches and more than 300 house churches around Cuba,

Cristobal Tan on top of the Sancti Spiritus church overlooking the town.

according to Northrup's son John.

On Easter morning, the newly remodeled and expanded Sancti Spiritus church was full to the rafters, as always. The worship band was jamming. But the real excitement came in the evening as the sounds of Christian praise and worship rang out for the first time in the Cultural Plaza, right in the middle of the charming 500-year-old

location of our city and our nation."

Tan recalled Psalm 33 ("blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD"), telling the crowd, "This blessing is... due first to God and then to those who sowed with tears, holding up the banner of the gospel when there was no possibility of enjoying what our generation enjoys today."

As the Easter celebration continued into the night,

central Cuba. Cuba's past was slow-paced but colorful. It still is today.

It's tempting for a visiting American to think Cuba may need only a few economic tweaks to update the mid-century postcard for more visitors to see. Charming, isn't it, that mule and cart

Christians gather for an Easter Sunday evening celebration at the Cultural Plaza in Sancti Spiritus, Cuba.



university town in central Cuba. At least 2,000 Cubans clamored into the square for the outdoor event.

Cristobal Tan, pastor of the church Northrup planted in 1953, said the event was "a great blessing" as residents surrounding Cultural Plaza "heard the name of Jesus Christ glorified."

Tan said the program called for him to give a benediction after thanking local authorities who allowed the event. When that time came, "I simply said that although I had been asked to close the ceremony, we understand that there is no need to close this type of celebration. Rather, we are to continue in every park, in every street, in every public

Tan said it was important also to honor "the elders of our congregations who could not join with us—those same elders who through their many faithful prayers and tears made it possible for us to publicly praise the name of our God."

Traveling among the seven churches Paul Northrup planted in the 1950s, a visitor can see almost exactly what he saw: On the tree-lined country roads where GM and Ford once tested their new models, those same bright cars—now antiques patched together with Bondo filler and European engines—roll through the black-soil farmland of

clopping through town? Yet that farmer would give up his cart in a minute for a decent tractor. Appealing, this pace of life! Yet locals say it's actually deadening and impoverishing.

But as the Easter event in Sancti Spiritus shows, the Cuban church can do quite well on its own. Buenas Nuevas and many churches are stretching at their seams.

Earlier this year, Tan and 200 other Cuban pastors hitchhiked and crowded onto buses to gather for a week at a rural Methodist campground to worship and compare notes on their future. Their stories reveal the special breed of churchman it's taken to survive the

Castro years in Cuba. Tan typifies the Cuban tent-making pastor. He's an ophthalmologist who until recently (when he became a full-time pastor) divided his time between two callings—*con la fe orando, y el mazo dando*, he and other pastors say, meaning "with your faith working and hammer pounding."

When Americans ask, "Is there an opening now for the gospel in Cuba?" it's an understandable question, but an opening for whom? There may be ways for Americans to help, but well-meaning Americans should proceed with caution before importing their own brand of evangelical life, before "fixing" Cuba and its churches.

American church groups eager to take advantage of normalization will no doubt be well-received because of a pent-up Cuban eagerness for anything new. But will that lead to lasting growth for the gospel and the church? In letters Paul Northrup wrote from Cuba 10 years before his death, he noted, "Cuban Christians are more dedicated to Christ because the risk of serving him is greater."

Now as the risk lessens and the economic opportunities increase, so do the choices for how Cubans will spend their time and newfound resources, said Tan. And it will take a special breed to know when to charge ahead or to back off, when to speak boldly in public as Tan did on Easter Sunday. ☉

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