

# The Adventist Church in Cuba and the Miracle of 1978

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One of the darkest moments that the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Cuba experienced after the triumph of the Revolution was when it suffered a most unjust and devastating tax imposition by the State. This plunged the Church and many of its members into one of the most critical economic situations of its history!<sup>1</sup>

## Historical Context

In March 1978, Pastor Alejandro Delgado had just been elected president of what was designated at that time as the National Conference.<sup>2</sup> He was the one who had to face this difficult challenge. The destiny of the Adventist Church in Cuba hung by a thread.

The atmosphere in Cuba in 1978 was unfavorable for all churches. The redrafted constitution of 1976 clearly showed the socialist and Marxist character of the Cuban government and stated, basically, that only through socialism and communism would humanity be liberated from all forms of exploitation (slavery, servitude, and capitalism) and could the whole dignity of the human being be reached.<sup>3</sup> Practically speaking, any other worldview was considered unacceptable. The concept of socialism and communism in those days was limited to that put forth in the Soviet manuals of the Stalinist era, in which the Marxist-Leninist view was presented as a victorious doctrine—something like a religion, a dogmatic body of laws and postulates that were inviolable and controlled by the communist party bureaucracy.

This new constitution, replacing that of 1940, stated that the government recognized, respected, and guaranteed religious freedom. However, Article 54 established limitations on that religious freedom, making it illegal and punishable to hold any religious belief that opposed belief in the Revolution, government education, the obligation to work, and the obligation to defend the country by bearing arms. It also required that respect be given to the symbols of the country and that all other duties established by the new constitution be fulfilled.<sup>4</sup> This canceled out the possibilities of being a conscientious objector or keeping the Sabbath.

Article 54 also defined the educational point of view of the new constitution, stating that the State educated people in the “scientific, materialistic concept of the universe.” Thus, materialism was defined as scientific, and religion was labeled the “opiate of the people,” an outdated concept based on the exploitation of man by other men. These statements created a basis for labeling Christians as unscientific, uncultured, and outdated. The idea was that, through education and through other less noble means, Christians could be lifted up and converted into scientific Marxist-Leninists. It was taught, and many apparently eventually came to believe, that religious worldviews were destined to disappear through revolutionary action and scientific progress.<sup>5</sup> This way of thinking translated into discrimination and intolerance of religions that became widespread.

The churches, which had a different vision of human liberty, were seen as allies of imperialism, treated as domestic enemies, and accused of “ideological divergence.” During this time, many pastors, including conference presidents Pedro de Armas and Alejandro Delgado, were imprisoned for the slightest accusations, and Christian youth were taken to the concentration camps of the UMAP—the military units formed to force people to work in agricultural fields. Later, the youth were forced to join regular military units and put in military prisons, accused of insubordination or treason. Also, faithful women were tried and jailed because their children did not go to school on Sabbath. Thousands of pages could be written about the trials and the courage of members and pastors who were mistreated and sent to prison.

By the 1970s, the churches had been defaced and reduced to worship gathering places only. Their schools, clinics, communication centers, and other community service buildings had been seized or closed down. The Adventist Church wasn't the only victim of the new mandated way of thinking. In 1976 the Jehovah's Witness Church and the Berean Mission Baptist Church had been banned, and their properties were all confiscated. In 1980, when the government permitted many Cubans to leave, the government established offices for the registration of Adventists, Gideonites, and Jehovah's Witnesses. After many threats and insults, they were expelled from the country as scum and antisocial. Even the Catholics and the Baptists, the Christian groups who had been on the island the longest, were not exempt from the trials that all churches suffered. In addition, the Adventist Church in Cuba was accused of a fiscal crime.

## Legal Context

A State financial committee was created sometime between 1976 and 1977, and its task was to supervise the economic and financial activities of the organizations of the government as well as businesses and other organizations in the country. This committee, in turn, received a declaration previously sent out by the National Bank of Cuba in which the Adventist Church was accused of not paying a tax debt. The Church had previously appealed this tax, but the appeal was now denied in totality. On March 6, 1978, the Church secretary-treasurer, Arturo Broche, was told that the Church had to pay \$343,572.32 Cuban pesos (CUP) within 15 days. He was informed that the existence of the Church was at stake if it did not pay the full amount within that time.

There was an intentional threat and flawed reasoning behind this decree. Within the same document, the Church was treated as a “legal entity,” but it was also requested to pay a tax set by law for self-employed workers; that specific law had been abolished in 1967. Religious organizations in Cuba had always been exempt from paying taxes.<sup>6</sup> At that time, pastors were required to pay a monthly tax of ten pesos as they were considered “unclassified workers.” The Church had not been notified that it had other fiscal obligations.

In order to justify imposing this tax on the Church, two legal documents were retroactively applied. The first was law 998/62, which enforced taxes on personal income and payment to the social security system (required of private businesses). This law was applicable from 1962 until the first semester of 1967. The second was law 1213/67 (created for financial entities), which was applicable from the second semester of 1967 until 1975.

The tax the Church was requested to pay was set at 25 percent of all salaries and benefits, including vehicle depreciation and assistance for travel expenses, among other things. The strongest argument set forth by the State was the claim that it was not receiving the required contributions to the social security system. However, in practice, as pastors were considered unclassified workers, they had no right to receive social security benefits. The question then was, why should pastors pay a tax into a system that would not benefit them?

To this day, in spite of many meetings with authorities, the law does not recognize the right of pastors to receive social security benefits, since they are still considered unclassified workers. Nevertheless, after persistent arguments presented by Dr. Gilberto A. Corrales Aguilar, the Cuban Union’s legal advisor, the situation came under study because the Church continued to pay a tax of 25 percent of its payroll without receiving any benefits. Dr. Corrales stated that the Church was not a financial entity, which was the entity required by law to pay this tax. He, therefore, presented a written request to the Ministry of Finances and Prices to reconsider this point, as well as the matter of the pastors’ right to receive social security benefits.<sup>7</sup>

## Winds of Change

The situation in the country is changing. The Cuban government has started a process that they call “a rectification of errors and negative behaviors.” The authorities are more approachable and seem to be more willing to communicate.

By 1985, the Cuban leader admitted honestly that there was a certain form of discrimination in the country against Christians.<sup>8</sup> He stated that it was not intentional or deliberate or an official program, but he did recognize that it existed, and he added that he believed that the government needed to get past that stage. Five years later, in April 1990, Fidel Castro met with the leaders of the Protestant and Evangelical churches and with the Jewish community. This made the relations between the State and the Church more amenable, and there is a more favorable disposition toward communication.

The request sent to the Ministry of Finance by Dr. Corrales was considered, and Decree VP-1-91 was issued, stating that the Adventist Church would only have to pay ten percent tax on the payroll for the administrators and those with similar jobs as determined by the assessor in the Labor Department. Even though this still denied pastors the right to receive social security benefits, it did eliminate the onerous 25 percent tax on the entire payroll of the Church, and it gave the opportunity for administrative personnel and a selected group of workers to enter the social security system. Doing away with law 1213/67 and replacing it with the new law outlining the fiscal responsibilities of the Church gives a glimmer of hope that, in the future, pastors will gain the right to receive social security benefits.

## Confronting the Impossible

The total amount of tax the Adventist Church was expected to pay in March 1978 was far beyond its ability to pay. According to the records of the Cuba Union Conference, on March 1, 1978, the total in the church's bank account was \$83,914.67 CUP. Before the end of the month, they were expected to pay an amount of over \$343,572.32 CUP. If this amount was not paid on time, the properties of the Church would be confiscated, and the churches would be closed.<sup>9</sup>

The future of the Church was at stake, and it was necessary to take immediate action. The leaders of the Church met to form a strategy, and emergency actions were taken. A national week of fasting and prayer for the Adventist Church was declared. The pay of conference employees was suspended. The field workers and retirees would donate what was equal to their pay for the month of March, and all other church members were encouraged to do the same. All the funds that the churches had laid aside for their local expenses were to be sent to the conference office. A plea was sent out for a great offering to be taken to help pay off the tax debt.

At the same time, Pastor Delgado sent a letter to Francisco García Valle, president of the State finance committee. The letter stated the impossibility of making this payment and requested that the church be allowed to pay the fine in ten payments over a ten-month period. This request was denied. A race against time began. Letters were carried by hand to all of the churches in the country asking for everyone's help. Faithful members carrying these letters arrived at the churches with this sad news, weeping with utter helplessness. The church members decided to gather up every last cent they could.

Never was there a greater display of unity, dedication, and selflessness. Young people who were about to marry postponed their wedding and gave the church everything they had set aside for that event. Other members sold their vehicles and gave all the proceeds to the Church. Children did the same with their toys. Members who were very poor surprised everyone by what they gave, and others gave up their whole pay check for the month. Members asked friends and neighbors, and many of them sympathized with the Church and, without being members, gave valuable offerings. All of these gifts were gathered together and sent by private channels that the conference had set up. No difference was made between tithe and offerings. The churches waited

impatiently to hear the results.

The moment that the message from the conference president was read in local churches is etched in the members' memories. "Goal reached and surpassed" was the news.<sup>10</sup> It was a moment of overwhelming emotions. Some members cried with happiness, and there was a very loud "Amen" throughout the Church. Many exclaimed "Glory to God!" and "Allelujah!" There was even some applause. After all, the churches would not be closed but would open their doors again the following Sabbath.

The Church and many of its members faced a critical financial crisis, but the leaders who crafted the plan to solve it were surprised by the unity and the loyalty of the members. The Church emerged from this trial even stronger than before. The moment that seemed to be the darkest for the Church in Cuba ended up being, by the grace of God, the most glorious.

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## NOTES

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  5. José Herminio Cortés, *Nunca Pierdas La Esperanza* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 2009), 8.
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  9. José Herminio Cortés, *El Triunfo de la Esperanza* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 2017), 81.
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