

Churches in Cuba draw new converts

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HAVANA --

Twenty years ago, when Catholic priest Ramon Suarez celebrated Mass at a small church in rural Cuba, only a handful of parishioners showed up for services.

Cuba's official policy of atheism had a lot to do with the spotty attendance, along with intense social pressure that left most people afraid that attending services might get them in trouble, or at least reported to authorities.

These days, churches in Cuba regularly draw packed sanctuaries on Sundays, with membership growing in the country's dominant Roman Catholic denomination, along with Protestant and Evangelical sects.

Even Santeria, Cuba's Afro-Caribbean religion that slaves created by mixing African beliefs with those of their Catholic Spanish masters, has seen a revival in Cuba.

Religious leaders here say dramatic changes in the past decade have firmly re-established the church as an important part of the lives of many Cubans. It seems that religion will play an increasing role in Cuban society in the future as longtime leader Fidel Castro, 80 and ailing, eventually gives way to a new generation.

"Our role in Cuba is growing daily, and relations with the government are improving daily, too," said the Rev. Juan Ramon, pastor of Havana's Holy Trinity Episcopal Church. "But it's like a turtle, not a rabbit. We must be patient."

Cuba's religious revival began in the late 1980s as change and finally collapse swept its longtime patron, the Soviet Union. The loss of \$6 billion in annual Soviet subsidies crippled Cuba's economy and also led to a questioning of the Soviet model, which, among other things, outlawed organized religion.

In 1994, Cuba's Communist Party issued a statement saying that religious believers could be members of the party, a move that ended much of the social pressure against attending church.

But in a nation that was predominantly Roman Catholic since its founding as a Spanish colony, the most dramatic catalyst to Cuba's spiritual reawakening was Pope John Paul II's historic visit in 1998.

"There was a euphoric explosion among the people," said Suarez, who is now a monsignor and chancellor of the Archbishopric of Havana. "All over the island there was an intense religious phenomenon. Before that, less than 1 percent of Cuban society was baptized, but since then it has grown to 50 percent or more in places."

Ramon has also seen his Episcopal flock grow dramatically, from a dozen or so in the 1970s and 1980s to membership of more than 500 and average attendance of well over 100 on most Sundays.

"Religious devotion and spirituality never left the people," he said. "It was winter and everything looked dead, but it wasn't dead. The flowers come back and the birds sing when spring comes. And that has happened in Cuba. It is a good time for the church here."

But while most Cubans no longer fear that going to church might get them in trouble, Cuba is still ruled by the Communist Party. Dissent is stifled, and most church leaders are careful not to cross the line from a social gospel centering on the needs of the people into the arena of politics.

While Cuban state television carried live coverage of Pope John Paul II's funeral and the Vatican's selection of a new pope, Catholic leaders have been pressing to broadcast their weekly services.

"So far we have not been allowed, but little by little we are making progress," Father Suarez said.

There are also examples of what some allege is outright repression.

Last year, an outspoken government critic and Evangelical pastor, Carlos Lamelas, was jailed for a time on charges of human smuggling. Lamelas was eventually tried and acquitted, but critics say his case is an example of the pressure the Cuban state puts on pastors who stray too far into the realm of politics.

Recent news reports also cited the closing of a regional Catholic magazine in the western city of Pinar del Rio. The magazine occasionally ran articles critical of the government and its editor, a layman, reportedly was demoted from his job in a state-run business.

Suarez said the magazine's problem was a lack of resources, as printing supplies are often difficult to obtain in Cuba. He also said the bishop in Pinar del Rio recently retired and his replacement prefers a less political approach than his predecessor. No Catholic officials ordered or asked the magazine to close, he said.

Cuba's churches have also felt the effects of the tightening of the U.S. embargo against the island. During the Clinton administration, religious, educational and cultural groups from America were encouraged to visit Cuba, and thousands did so, often bringing supplies and helping to repair dilapidated churches.

Those visits have been severely curtailed under the Bush administration, which has tightened the embargo in an effort to put more pressure on the Cuban government.

Within Cuba, though, religious leaders say the changes in the past decade have been positive.

"We have 900 priests, and I get at least 7 to 10 people a day coming to seek my help," said Juan Carreras, 72, a Havana Santeria priest. "Even during the bad years, many people kept coming to see their priests in a hidden way. Now it is open again, and the interest is growing."