

Isolating Cuba: Bush seeks church support for regime change

by [Rich Preheim](#) in the [September 7, 2004](#) issue

The U.S. government is trying to enlist churches and church organizations in a diplomatic assault against Fidel Castro, arguing that churches “can play an indispensable role in the transition to a free Cuba” and can help prevent “the return of totalitarianism.” Religious leaders and observers fear the new policies could undermine church work in and travel to the communist nation, and also hurt the Cuban people themselves.

The State Department on July 1 implemented recommendations generated by the U.S. Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba. That group was created by President Bush last fall to explore ways to foster “regime change” on the island. The wide-ranging 458-page report, released May 6, addresses issues such as human services, the economy, governmental structures, environmental protection and travel restrictions.

The report highlights a number of contributions that U.S. and Cuban churches and church groups could make in, for example, relief efforts, drug-abuse prevention, health care, housing and education. Religious organizations are identified as part of a “comprehensive civic program” that can build “a culture of shared democratic ideals and citizenship skills.” U.S.-supported relief programs should “encourage the democratic transition by empowering Cuban churches” and other institutions. Religious groups are identified as one of seven “foundations for action in Cuba’s transformation.”

Church leaders have greeted the report with concern and skepticism. Elizer Valentin-Castanos, director for human and religious rights for the United Methodist Church, said it represents an “attempt of the government . . . to use the churches to achieve its goal of regime change” in Cuba. “The State Department is hoping that churches will follow the same agenda as the State Department,” he said. “That’s not where we are.”

It is too early to know the full impact of the guidelines on church work, but some church leaders say their activity has already been affected. In late May, just three weeks after the commission issued its report, a cross-cultural study group from Mennonite-affiliated Goshen College was expelled by the Cuban government. The 21-student group had arrived April 28 and was scheduled to stay three months. Instead it finished its term in Costa Rica.

The group was not given an explanation for Cuba's action, but Goshen professor and team leader Keith Graber Miller said, "The links between the U.S. rhetoric and our departure were clearly made for us" by colleagues in Cuba. Since then, a number of colleges have canceled similar visits, since the new policies stipulate that such studies be no shorter than a semester. According to the Center for Cross-Cultural Study, only one school, Sarah Lawrence College in Bronxville, New York, is planning to send students to the island this fall.

The Florida Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church postponed sending two "get-acquainted" delegations to Cuba. The conference sends 20-30 such delegations a year. About 170 Florida congregations have sister relationships with Cuban Methodist congregations. Larry Rankin, the conference's director of mission outreach, said charter flight service had been disrupted and a July delegation received "meticulous" scrutiny from Cuban immigration officials. "My guess is tensions arise when the Cuban government is reacting to certain things that are happening here," Rankin said.

Further ramifications of the new policies may include favoritism for organizations on the right wing of the political and theological spectrum. In addition to virtually eliminating educational travel, the new policies crack down on Americans taking goods and money into the country. That could produce roadblocks for U.S. churches that have opposed the U.S. embargo on Cuba, but have maintained decades-long relationships with Cuban Christians. Philip Schmidt, Cuban program assistant for the Latin American Working Group, a coalition of more than 60 religious, humanitarian and policy organizations, said the U.S. government is "being more restrictive and a lot less trusting of religious institutions."

For example, the Christian Reformed Church, which does not advocate Castro's ouster, had its U.S. government-issued license to travel to Cuba renewed on July 1, but with a new provision barring visitors from making in-country purchases for Cubans.

The National Council of Churches is concerned about what will happen after its license expires next year, according to Fred Morris, the organization's director for Latin American and Caribbean relations. The NCC has long challenged the federal government's Cuba policies, most recently with a letter denouncing the new measures sent to Secretary of State Colin Powell, who chaired the Commission for Assistance to a Free Cuba. "They certainly don't like it when we make public a letter to Colin Powell," Morris said.

A particular sticking point for the commission is the Cuban Council of Churches, which it describes as "fully identified with the regime and is controlled by Castro supporters." The commission recommends that work be done not with the council but only with individual Cuban denominations and organizations. The NCC maintains contact with the CCC, and hosted a delegation of council leaders last month. Schmidt asks: "If a church has high-ranking officials in the Cuban Council of Churches, will [representatives from the denomination's U.S. counterpart] be able to go?"

Tony Kireopolous, NCC associate general secretary for international affairs, defended relations with the CCC. "It is true that the Cuban Council of Churches does have a connection with the government," he said, but added: "There is a vibrant faith community there. . . . If we can get the Christian message out and work with Christians in other contexts, we will do so."

The Christian Reformed Church in Cuba has benefited from its CCC membership, according to Luis Pellecer, Latin America secretary for the U.S.-based Christian Reformed Church's World Missions. "Instead of fighting the government, the church is just being the church, helping people in need," he said. "That has given them the opportunity and the freedom to really minister to their communities."

The new policies may cast all religious groups working in Cuba as proponents of regime change in the eyes of the Castro government. "It's definitely going to affect how the Cuban government looks at all church groups," said Daryl Yoder-Bontrager, Latin American and Caribbean co-director for the Mennonite Central Committee. For a religious organization to take a stand against Castro would jeopardize the Cubans with and to whom they minister, according to Rankin. For that reason, the Florida Annual Conference does not take official positions on Cuba. "It puts our partners, our colleagues in a very precarious position," he said.

The White House claims the new measures will encourage “the Cuban people to secure the blessings of democracy for themselves and their children.” Others question the benefits. Kireopoulos identified a “pastoral concern”: the policies limit visits to family members living in Cuba and restrict the amount of material assistance Americans can provide. “We feel [the measures] will actually deny much-needed assistance to the Cuban people, weaken Cuban civil society organizations and lead to an increase of tension between the U.S. and Cuba,” the NCC said in a statement.

Ecclesial opposition to the measures has not been limited to traditionally liberal church groups. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops also stated its opposition, and its Cuban counterpart warned of the dangers to “the poorest families in our midst.” Said Richard Cizik, vice president for governmental affairs for the National Association of Evangelicals: “I’m not sure the policy of isolating Cuba has worked. . . . The more engagement you can provide, the better.”

For the Cuban people, the new measures create fears that go much deeper, given the context of current events and recent history. “The last time they heard the U.S. talk about regime change, bombs started falling in Iraq,” Miller said. “A number of our associates there genuinely wondered if Cuba would be next.”