

Table of Contents

- ***Cuban government reverse decision to expropriate Church***
 - ***Reverend Carballeda released from prison***
-

Cuban government reverse decision to expropriate Church

CSW (22.12.2015) - National Communist Party officials in Cuba informed the Maranatha First Baptist Church, Holguin on 21 December that the decision to expropriate the church property has been reversed. Instead, government officers told the denominational and church leadership that they will begin the process of allowing the church to build a more adequate structure on the property to accommodate the large congregation.

The church's pastor, Reverend Amado Ramírez Oliveros, was first informed by local government officials in May that the property in central Holguin City, which has belonged to the church since 1947, was being confiscated by the government. After an outpouring of public international support for the church, government officials informed the church in July that they would review the decision.

In a statement to CSW, Reverend Ramírez Oliveros said, "I should recognize that the environment on the part of the authorities was very good, after a few comments and statements, they officially communicated that our Temple will not be confiscated and they have begun the process to legalize the reconstruction of the building, a new building, something for which our congregation has always dreamed and not just for the sake of it but because of the objective realities that the Church has dealt with over these many years. We thank everyone for their support and prayers over these months."

The expropriation of the church property is part of a larger wave of church confiscations this year in Cuba, following the implementation of Legal Decree 322 in January 2015. The new regulation gives government officials the power to confiscate property with little recourse for appeal.

Church leaders from the Methodist and Assemblies of God denominations, which, together with the East and West Baptist Conventions, comprise the three largest Protestant denominations on the island, told CSW that many of their churches have been targeted. A total of 15 Methodist church properties have been expropriated by the government. The churches were converted into a 'permanent tenant of the state' while around 1,000 churches linked to the Assemblies of God have been declared illegal. The authorities have designated 100 of those for forced closure or demolition in the provinces of Contramaestre, Santiago and Guantanamo.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas, said, "We were overjoyed to learn that the Cuban government has rescinded its decision to expropriate the Maranatha First Baptist Church property and that it has gone a step further to grant the long awaited permission to rebuild the church. We call on the government to take similar action in the cases of the Methodist and Assemblies of God churches and to modify Legal Decree 322 so that it is not as open to abuse or used to target church properties. We continue to urge the United States and the European Union to ensure that religious freedom and other human rights are a central part of any dialogue with the Cuban government."

Reverend Carballeda released from prison

CSW (02.09.2015) - Reverend Jesús Noel Carballeda, a 45 year-old Cuban pastor of an unregistered church in Havana who had been imprisoned for six months for holding unauthorised religious services, was released on 31 August.

Reverend Carballeda was detained in early February and imprisoned in the Valle Grande prison in San Antonio de los Baños outside of Havana. He does not appear to have been tried, but while in prison he was informed by government officials that he would be held for six months as punishment for his continued unauthorised religious activity.

Reverend Carballeda was previously imprisoned in 2000 for four months after militant communist neighbours filed legal complaints about church services he held in his family home in Marianao, Havana. Following his imprisonment, he was put on probation and made to check in with the authorities on a regular basis. While he was barred from holding any religious activity in the family home he continued to lead his church, holding services in parks, rented halls and other private homes.

Reverend Carballeda's church is linked to the Apostolic Movement, a fast growing network of protestant churches which the Cuban government has refused to register. Because the religious group is unregistered, all of the affiliated church's activities are technically illegal and they are unable to apply for permits for a designated place of worship. In March, Reverend Carballeda's wife told CSW: "We do not want to bother anyone. We just need a place to worship. We are forced to meet in the open air, in parks or rented rooms as [the authorities] will not give us legal recognition."

The detention of Reverend Carballeda is part of a larger crackdown on religious freedom in Cuba over the past few years. In 2014, CSW documented 220 separate cases of religious freedom violations, up from 185 in 2013 and 120 in 2012. Unregistered religious groups have been a particular target of government repression, with religious leaders reporting harassment, fines and threats of confiscation or destruction of property. The case of Reverend Yiorvis Bravo Denis, a leader in the Apostolic Movement whose home was arbitrarily expropriated by the government in 2013, has been filed with the Inter-American Human Rights Commission, petitioning for precautionary measures.

CSW's Special Ambassador Stuart Windsor said, "While we welcome the release of Reverend Carballeda, we note that he was only released after serving a full six-month sentence for the supposed crime of holding unauthorised peaceful religious services. As Cuba prepares for the visit of the Pope this month, we continue to call on the Cuban government to bring legal matters related to religious activities and groups under regular legal mechanisms and remove the Office of Religious Affairs from its position of authority over all religious groups and activities. We urge the government to cease its harassment of all religious groups, both registered and unregistered, and to allow religious groups who wish to register and to operate legally to do so."
