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Dr. Hebert Palomino Helps Spread Baptist Faith in Communist Cuba

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Office of University Communications

November 25, 2013

Written By: Alyssa Gutierrez, GWU Office of University Communications Intern

School of Divinity Professor Serves by Teaching and Preparing New Pastors

BOILING SPRINGS, N.C. – Although the Cold War ended over 22 years ago, a long-standing view against religious practice is finally beginning to thaw in the island nation of Cuba, due in part to the efforts of one Gardner-Webb University professor.

For several years now, Dr. Hebert Palomino has been teaching and preparing Cuban citizens to become pastors, and has taken over 10 trips in the past several years to the capitol city of Havana to offer his services and the help spread the Word. While the prevailing religion in the country before the Communist takeover was Catholicism, the nation, who became almost totally secularized, is now hungry for the Gospel and has seen a rise in Baptist affiliated churches and congregations.

In 1959, when Fidel Castro and his communist regime completely took over Cuba, the Marxist-Leninist ideology took over as well and a restriction was put on all religious practice. Cuba adopted a policy of promoting atheism and any Christianity practice was considered backwards, reactionary, ignorant and superstitious. The ‘Committees for the Defense of the Revolution’ even declared, “It is not good for your children to go to church.” They backed up that claim by releasing studies that linked religion to mental illness. Since the new communist government assumed that anybody who joined the party would accept the policy and doctrine, all believers were persecuted. New parents were so afraid to burden their children with the discrimination that most of them decided to not baptize their children as Christians at all.

The Cuban constitution was amended in 1992 and made any discrimination based on religious belief illegal. Palomino, a Colombian native, became involved several years ago after he was invited to participate in a series of conferences for the pastors of Western Cuba.

“The main concern at that moment was the compassion fatigue, stress, and in some cases a close burnout in several of the pastors because of the fast church growth,” said Palomino. “Not long afterwards, the Baptist seminary at La Havana, in conjunction with the Western Baptist Convention, saw the need to prepare several leaders in the area of pastoral care and counseling. They knocked on some doors and a donor provided the funds for this project.”

With the help of the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary and other Christian counselors, Palomino has helped shape the curriculum at the Theological Seminary of Western Cuba at La Havana.

“Initially, we started with 40 potential students and after the first module, 20 candidates were carefully selected to continue in the program,” Palomino added. “Close to 15 graduated this past July!”

The new pastors are all Cubans and represent varied backgrounds including medical doctors, psychologists, special education teachers and worship ministers. The average age of these new ministers is 27 years, and Palomino believes that they represent “a new generation of Christian workers.”

While Palomino is proud of all the progress, he believes that if the embargo with the United States, which has been enforced for almost 55 years, was lifted both the country and the Baptist faith would flourish even more.

“Personally I saw how that embargo has affected the health of our brothers and sisters because medicines were not available, food was limited, not to mention clothes and so on,” said Palomino. “Without getting too political, all I would ask is, ‘What would Jesus do?’”

While the political situation may not change anytime soon, Palomino focuses on what he can do to help and feels a sense of satisfaction with the work he has been doing. When in Cuba, Palomino also spends a lot of time participating in religious gatherings that his former students operate, giving him a unique and rewarding experience every time he goes.

“The Cuban people are hungry for the Gospel and I reaffirm that pastoral care and counseling is one of the key ways to reach Cubans for Christ,” said Palomino. “Being able to see students put into practice what they have learned makes each trip exciting.”

Palomino believes that his work in Cuba has helped show his students at the GWU School of Divinity how to care for people deeply in spite of their nationality, color or social position. He hopes one day his GWU students will be able to travel with him to Cuba and to other countries that are growing fast in their faith but still have a long way to go.

“It’s my goal in the Lord, to encourage, challenge, stimulate, affirm and show my students that this world is smaller than we think,” Palomino reflected. “It’s a changing dynamic world which is inviting us to engage and make a difference with our caring presence. I hope to take my students one day, in spite of the language barrier, to experience that care is much more than mastering a language; it is making His presence known.”

Palomino will be the distinguished speaker at the University Advent Service at Dimensions on Tuesday, Dec. 3 at 9:25 a.m., in the Tucker Student Center. The Gardner-Webb University’s Dimensions programs are free and open to the public. The goal of Dimensions

is to enhance the spiritual, intellectual and cultural life at the University and also to promote a sense of community. More information is available by calling 704-406-4277.